

The Big-Town Round Up

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CHAPTER X Continued
His easy smile taunted her. "Oh, no, you don't. You just think you think it. Now, I'm goin' to light a shuck. I'll be sayin' good-by, Miss Beatrice, until you send for me."
"And that will be never," she flung at him.
He rose, bowed and walked out of the room.
The street door closed behind him, Beatrice bit her lip to keep from breaking down before she reached her room.

CHAPTER XI
A Lady Wears a Ring.
Clarendon Bromfield got the shock of his life that evening. Beatrice proposed to him. It was at the Roberson dinner-dance, in the Palm room, within sight but not within hearing of a dozen other guests.

She camouflaged what she was doing with occasional smiles and ripples of laughter intended to deceive the others present, but her heart was pounding sixty miles an hour.
Bromfield was not easily disconcerted. He prided himself on his aplomb. But for once he was amazed.
"I beg your pardon."
Miss Whitford laced her fingers round her knee and repeated. Her eyes were hard and brilliant as diamonds.

"I was wondering when you are going to ask me again to marry you." Since she had given a good deal of feminine diplomacy to the task of keeping him at a reasonable distance, Bromfield was naturally surprised.
"That's certainly a leading question," he parried. "What are you up to, Bee? Are you spoofing me?"
"I'm proposing to you," she explained, with a flirt of her hand and an engaging smile toward a man and a girl who had just come into the Palm room. "I don't suppose I do it very well, because I haven't had your experience. But I'm doing the best I can."

"His lids narrowed a trifle. "Do you mean that you've changed your mind?" "Have you?" she asked, quickly, with a sidelong slant of eyes at him.
"I'm still very much at your service, Bee."
"Does that mean you still think you want me?"
"I don't think. I know it."
"Then you're on," she told him with a little nod. "Thank you, kind sir."
Bromfield drew a deep breath. "By Jove, you're a good little sport, Bee."



"I Was Wondering When You Were Going to Ask Me Again to Marry You." I think I'll get up and give three ringing cheers.
"I'd like to see you do that," she mocked.
"Of course you know I'm the happiest man in the world," he said, with well-ordered composure.
"You're not exactly what I'd call a rapturous lover, Clary. But I'm not, either, for that matter, so I dare say we'll hit it off very well."
"I'm a good deal harder hit than I've ever let on, dear girl. And I'm going to make you very happy. That's a promise."

Nevertheless he watched her warily, behind a manner of graceful eagerness. A suspicious little thought was filtering through the back of his mind. "What the deuce has got into the girl? Has she been quarreling with that bouncer from Arizona?"
"I'm glad of that. I'll try to make you a good wife, even if— She let the sentence die off unfinished.
"May I tell everybody how happy I am?"

"If you like," she agreed.
"A short engagement," he ventured.
"Yes," she nodded. "And take me away for a while. I'm tired of New York, I think."
"I'll take you to a place where the paths are primrose-strewn and where nightingales sing," he promised, rashly. She smiled incredulously, a wise old little smile that had no right on her young face.
The report of the engagement spread at once. Bromfield took care of that. The evening of the day the hunt heard of the engagement he told his friend about it while Kitty was in the kitchen.

"Miss Beatrice she's wearin' a new ring," he said by way of breaking the news gently.
Clay turned his head slowly and looked at Johnnie.
"Bromfield?" he asked.
"Yep. That's the story."
"The ring was on the left hand?"
"Yep."

Clay made no comment. His friend knew enough to say no more to him. Presently the cattleman went out. It was in the small hours of the morning when he returned. He had been tramping the streets to get the fever out of his blood.
But Johnnie, discussed with Kitty at length this new development, just as he had discussed with her the fact that Clay no longer went to see the Whitfords. Kitty made a shrewd guess at the cause of division. She had already long since drawn from the cowpuncher the story of how Miss Beatrice had rejected his proposal that she take an interest in her.
"They must 'a' quarreled—likely about me being here. I'm sorry you told her."
"I don't reckon that's it. Miss Beatrice she's got too good judgment for that."
"I ought to go away. I'm only bringing Mr. Lindsay trouble. If he just could hear from his friends in Arizona about that place he's trying to get me, I'd go right off."

He looked at her wistfully. Kitty had begun to bloom again. Her cheeks were taking on their old rounded contour and occasionally dimples of delight flashed into them. Already the marks of her six-weeks' misery among the submerged derelicts of the city were beginning to be wiped from her mind like the memory of a bad dream from which she had awakened. Love was a craving of her sad, sensuous nature. She wanted to live in the sun, among smiles and laughter. She was like a kitten in her desire to be petted, made much of and admired. Almost anybody who liked her could win a place in her affection.
Johnnie's case was not so hopeless as he imagined it.

Over their good-night smoke Clay gave a warning. "Keep yore eyes open, Johnnie. I was trailed to the house today by one of the fellows with Durand the night I called on him. It spells trouble. I reckon the Paches are going to leave the reservation again."
"Say, Clay, ain't you gettin' homesick for the whinin' of a rawhide? What's the matter with us hittin' the dust for good old Tucson? I'd sure like to chase cowtails again."
"You can go, Johnnie. I'm not ready yet—quite. And when I go it won't be because of any rattlesnake in the grass."
"Whadyou mean I can go? If this Jerry Durand's trying to get you I'll be there followin' yore dust, old scout."
"There's more than one way to skin a cat. Mebbe the fellow means to strike at me through you or Kitty. I've a mind to put you both on a train for the B-in-a-Blox ranch."
"You can put the lit' girl on a train. You can't put me on none less'n you go too," answered his shadow, stoutly.
"Then see you don't get drawn into any quarrels while you and Kitty are away from the house. Stick to the lighted streets. I think I'll speak to her about not lettin' any strange man talk to her. I think she had better not go out unless one of us is with her."
"Suits me. And don't you take any chances, old-timer. That goes double. I'm the cautious guy in this outfit, not you."
Within twenty-four hours Clay heard some one pounding wildly on the outer door of the apartment and the voice of the cautious guy imploring haste.
"Lemme in, Clay. Hurry! Hurry!" he shouted.

Lindsay was at the door in four strides, but he did not need to see the stricken woe of his friend's face to guess what had occurred. For Johnnie and Kitty had started together to see a picture play two hours earlier.
"They done took Kitty—in an auto," he gasped. "Right before my eyes. Claimed a lady had fainted."
"Who took her?"
"I dunno. Some men. Turned the trick slick, me never lettin' a hand."

"Ain't I a heluva man?"
"Hold yore hawkes, son. Don't get excited. Begin at the beginnin' and tell me all about it," Clay told him, quietly.
"We was comin' home an' I took Kitty into that Red Star drug store for to get her some ice cream. Well, right after that I heard a man say how the lady had fainted—"
"What lady?"
"The lady in the machine."
"Were you in the drug store?"
"No. We'd jes' come out when this here automobile drew up an' a man jumped out hollerin' the lady had fainted and would I bring a glass o' water from the drug store. Course I got a jump on me and Kitty she moved up closer to the car to help if she could. When I got back to the walk with the water the man was hoppin' back into the car. It was already movin'. He slammed the door shut and it went up the street like greased lightning."
"Get the number?"
"No, I—I plumb forgot to look."
Clay slipped a revolver under his belt. He slid into a street coat. Then he got police headquarters on the wire and notified the office of what had taken place.

It had come on to rain and beneath the street lights the asphalt shone like a river. The storm had driven most people indoors, but as the westerner drew near the drug store Clay saw with relief a taxicab draw up outside. Its driver, crouched in his seat behind the waterproof apron as far back as possible from the rain, promptly accepted Lindsay as a fare.
"Back in a minute," Clay told him, and passed into the drug store.
The abduction was still being discussed. He pushed home questions as to identification. One of the men in



"What's the Big Idea in Calling Me From Me Job in the Rush Hours?"

the drug store had caught a flash of the car number. He was sure the first four figures were 3967. The fifth he did not remember. The car was dark blue and it looked like a taxi. This information Clay got the officer of the store to forward to the police.
He did not wait to give it personally, but joined Johnnie in the cab. The address he gave to the driver with the waterproof hat pulled down over his head was that of a certain place of amusement known as Heath's Palace of Wonders. A woman he wanted to consult was wont to sit behind a window there at the receipt of customs.

Miss Annie Millikan's pert smile beamed through the window at Clay when he stepped up.
"Hello, Mr. Flat-Worker," she sang out. "How many?"
Clay explained that his business was serious. "I've got to see you alone—now," he added.
"If you gotta you gotta." The girl called an usher, who found a second usher to take her place.
Annie walked down the street a few steps beside Clay.
"What's the big idea in callin' me from me job in the rush hours?" she asked.
Clay told his story.
"Some of Jerry's strong-arm work," she commented.
"Must be. Can you help me?"
Annie looked straight at him, a humorous little quirk to her mouth. "Say, what're you askin' me to do—crow down my steady?"
Annie was pretty, and inevitably she had lovers. One of these was "Slim" Jim Collins, confidential follower of Jerry Durand. He was a crook, and she knew it. But some quality in him—his good looks, perhaps, or his game-ness—fascinated her in spite of herself. She avoided him, even while she found herself pleased to go to Coney with an escort so well dressed and so glibly confident. Another of her admirers was a policeman, Tim Muldoon by name, the same one that had rescued Clay from the savagery of Durand outside the Sea Siren. Tim she liked. But for all his Irish ardor he was wary. He had never asked her to marry him. She thought she knew the reason. He did not want for a wife a woman who had been "Slim" Jim's girl.

Clay had come to Annie Millikan now because of what she had told him about "Slim" Jim. This man was one of Durand's stand-bys. If there was any underground work to be done it was odds-on chance that he would be in charge of it.
"I'm askin' you to stand by a poor girl that's in trouble," he said in answer to her question. "You wouldn't let Durand spoil her life if you could stop it?"

"Well, what's my cue? Where do I come in on this rescue-the-beautiful heroine act?"
"When did you see 'Slim' Jim last?"
"I might 'a' seen him this afternoon an' I might not," she said cautiously, looking at him from under a broad hat-brim. "Say, what's the lay-out? Are you framin' Jim for up the river?"
"I'm tryin' to save Kitty."
"Because she's your girl. Where do I come in at? What's there in it for me to get rappin' me friend?" demanded Annie sharply.
"She's not my girl," explained Clay. Then, with that sure instinct that sometimes guided him, he added, "The young lady—I'm in love with her. She's become engaged to another man."
Miss Millikan looked at him, frankly incredulous. "For the love o' Mike, where's her eyes? Don't she know a real man when she sees one? I'll say she don't."
A flush beat into Annie's cheeks. She went off swiftly at a tangent.
"Wouldn't it give a fellow a jar? This guy Jim Collins slips it to me confidential that he's off the crooked stuff. Nothin' doin' a-tall in gorilla work. He kids me that he's quit goin' out on the spud and porchclimbin' don't look good to him no more. A four-room flat, a little wife, an' the straight road for 'Slim' Jim. I fall for it, though I'd ort to be hep to men. An' he dates me up tonight for the chauffeurs' ball."
"But you didn't go?"
"No; he sidesteps it this aft with a fairy tale about drivin' a rich old dame out to Yonkers. All the time he was figurin' on pinchin' this girl for Jerry. He's a rotten crook."
"What color is 'Slim' Jim's car?"
"A dirty blue. Why?"
"That was the car."
Annie lifted her hands in a little gesture of despair. "I'm dead sick of this game. What's there in it? I live straight and eat in a beanery. No lobster palaces in mine. Look at me cheap duds. And Tim gives me the over like I was a street cat. What sort of a chance did I ever have, with toughs and gunmen for me friends?"
"You've got yore chance now, Annie. Tim will hop off that fence he's on and light a runnin' straight for you if he thinks you've ditched 'Slim' Jim. You don't owe Jerry Durand anything, anyhow. Where would he have Kitty taken? You can give a guess."
She had made her decision before she spoke. "Gimme paper and a pencil."
On Clay's notebook she scrawled hurriedly an address.
"Jim'd croak me if he knew I'd given this," she said, looking straight at the cattleman.
"He'll never know—and I'll never forget it, Annie."
Clay left her and turned to the driver. From the slip of paper in his hand he read aloud an address.
As Clay slammed the door shut and the car moved forward he had an impression of something gone wrong, of a cog in his plans slipped somewhere. For Annie, standing in the rain under a sputtering misty street light, showed a face stricken with fear.
Her dilated eyes were fixed on the driver of the taxicab.

Others were employed for less reputable purposes.
His overcoat buttoned to his neck, Clay walked without hesitation up the steps of the one numbered 243. He rang the bell and waited, his right hand in the pocket of his overcoat.
The door opened cautiously a few inches and a pair of close-set eyes in a wrinkled face glimped Clay.
"Whadya want?"
"The old man sent me with a message," answered the Arizonan promptly. "Got everything ready for the girl?"
"Say, who the h—l are youse?"
"One of Slim's friends. Listen, we got the kid—picked her up at a drug store."
"I don't know watcher fairy tale's about."
Clay put his foot against the door to prevent it from being closed and drew his hand from the overcoat pocket. In the hand nestled a blue-nosed persuader.
Unless the eyes peering into the night were bad barometers of their owner's inner state, he was in a panic of fear.
"Love o' Gawd, d-don't shoot!" he

chattered. "I ain't nobody but the caretaker."
He backed slowly away, followed by Lindsay. The barrel of the thirty-eight held his eyes fascinated. By the light of his flash Clay discovered the man to be a chalk-faced little inconsequent.
"Say, don't point that at me," the old fellow implored.
"Are you alone?"
"You know it."
"Is Jerry comin' himself with the others?"
"They don't none of them tell me nothin'. I'm nobody. I'm only Joey."
"Unload what you know. Quick. I'm in a hurry."
The man began a rambling, whining tale.
The Arizonan learned that a room had been prepared on the second floor for a woman. Slim had made the arrangements. Joe had heard Durand's name mentioned, but knew nothing of the plans.
"I'll look the house over. Move along in front of me and don't make any mistakes. This six-gun is liable to permeate yore anatomy with lead."
The cattleman examined the first floor with an especial view to the exits. He might have to leave in a hurry. If so, he wanted to know where he was going. The plan of the second story was another point he featured as he passed swiftly from room to room. From the laundry in the basement he had brought up a coil of clothes-line. With this he tied Joe hand and foot. After gagging him, he left the man locked in a small rear room and took the key with him.
Clay knew that he was in a precarious situation. If Durand returned with Kitty and captured him here he was lost. The man would make no more mistakes. Certainly he would leave no evidence against him except that of his own tools. The intruder would probably not be killed openly. He would either simply disappear or he would be murdered with witnesses framed to show self-defense. The cattleman was as much outside the law as the criminals were. He had no legal business in this house. But one thing was fixed in his mind. He would be no inactive victim. If they got him at all it would be only after a fighting finish.

To Clay, standing at the head of the stairs, came a sound that stiffened him to a tense wariness. A key was being turned in the lock of the street door below. He moved back into the deeper shadows as the door swung open.
Two men entered. One of them cursed softly as he stumbled against a chair in the dark hall.
"Where's that rat Joe?" he demanded in a subdued voice.
Then came a click of the lock. The sound of the street rain ceased. Clay knew that the door had been closed and that he was shut in with two desperate criminals.
What have they done with Kitty? Why was she not with them? He asked himself that question even as he slipped back into a room that opened to the left.
He groped his way through the darkness, for he dared not flash his light to guide him. His fingers found the edge of a desk. Round that he circled toward a closet he remembered having noted. His arm brushed the



closet door. Next moment he was inside and had closed it softly behind him.
And none too soon. For into the room came the gunmen almost on his heels.
"Jerry'll raise h—l," a heavy voice was saying as they entered the room. "And that ain't all. We'll land in stir if we don't look out. We just ducked a bad fall. The bulls pretty near had us that time we poled our nose out from the park at Seventy-second street."
Some one pressed a button and the room leaped to light. Through the open crack of the closed door Clay recognized Gorilla Dave. The second of the gunmen was out of range of his vision.
From the sound of creaking furniture Clay judged that the unseen man had sat down heavily. "It was that blowout queered us. And say—how came the bulls so hot on our trail? Who rapped to 'em?"
"Must 'n' been that boob wit' the goll. He got busy quick. Well, Jerry, won't have to save the cops this time. We made our getaway all right," said Dave.
"Say, where's Joey?"
"Pulled a sneak likely. What's it matter? Listen! What's that?"
Some one was coming up the stairs. The men in the room moved cautiously to the door. The hall light was switched on.
"Lo, Jerry," Gorilla Dave called softly.
He closed the room door and the sound of the voices was shut off instantly.
The uninvited guest dared not step out of the closet to listen, for at any instant the men might re-enter. He crouched in his hiding place, the thirty-eight in his hand.
The minutes dragged interminably. More than once Clay almost made up his mind to steal out to learn what the men were doing. But his judgment told him he must avoid a brush with so many if possible.
The door opened again.
"Now beat it and do as I say if you know what's good for you," a bullying voice was ordering.
The owner of the voice came in and slammed the door behind him. He sat down at the desk, his back to the closet. Through the chink Clay saw that the man was Jerry Durand.
From his vest pocket he took a fat black cigar, struck a match and lit it. He slumped down in the swivel chair. It took no seat to divine that his mind was busy working out a problem.
Clay stepped softly from his place of refuge, but not so noiselessly that the gangman did not detect his presence. Jerry swung round in the chair and leaped up with catlike activity. He stood without moving, poised on the balls of his feet, his deep-set eyes narrowed to shining slits. It was in his thought to hurl himself headlong on the man holding steadily the menacing revolver.
"Don't you! I've got the dead wood on you," said the Arizonan, a trenchant sardonic in his speech. "I'll shoot you down sure as h—l's hot."
Durand's face wore an ugly look of impotent malice, but his throat was dry as a lime kiln. He could not estimate the danger that confronted him nor what lay back of the man's presence.
"What you doin' here?" he demanded. "Makin' my party call," retorted Clay easily.
Jerry cursed him with a low, savage stream of profanity. The gangman enraged was not a sight pleasing to see.
"I reckon heaven, h—l, and high water couldn't keep you from cussin' now. Relieve yore mind proper, Mr. Durand. Then we'll talk business," murmured Clay in the low, easy drawl that never suggested weakness.
The ex-prize-fighter's flow of language dried up. He felt silent and stood swallowing his furious rage. It had come home to him that this narrow-flanked young fellow with the close-gripped jaw and the cool, steady eyes was entirely unmoved by his threats.
"Quite through effervescing?" asked Clay contemptuously.
The gang leader made no answer. He chose to nurse his venom silently.
"Where's Kitty Mason?"
"Still no answer."
"I asked you what you've done with Kitty Mason?"
"That's my business."
"By G—d, you'll tell, or I'll tear it out of you!"
Clay backed to the door, found the key, transferred it to the inner side of the lock, turned it, and put it in his pocket.
The cornered gangman took a chance. He ducked for the shelter of the desk, tore open a drawer and snatched out an automatic.
Simultaneously the cowpuncher pressed the button beside the door and plunged the room in darkness. He side-stepped swiftly and without noise.
A flash of lightning split the blackness.
Clay dropped to his knees and crawled away. Another bolt, with its accompanying roar, flamed out.
Still the westerner did not fire in answer, though he knew just where the target for his bullet was. A plan had come to him. In the blackness of that room one might empty his revolver and not score a hit. To wait was to take a chance of being potted, but he did not want the death of even such a ruffian as Durand on his soul.
The crash of the automatic and the rattle of glass filled the room. Jerry, blazing away at some fancied sound, had shattered the window.

CHAPTER XII
Two Men in a Locked Room.
Some sixth sense of safety—one that comes to many men who live in the outdoors on the untamed frontier—warned Clay that all was not well. The machine had swung to the right and was facing from the wind instead of into it. Clay was not very well acquainted with New York, but he did know this was not the direction in which he wanted to go.
Lindsay opened the door and swung out on the running board. "We're goin' wrong. Stop the car!" he ordered.
The man at the wheel did not turn. He speeded up.
His fare wasted no time in remonstrances. A moment, and the chauffeur threw on the brake sharply. His reason was a good one. The blue nose of a revolver was jammed hard against his ribs. He had looked round once to find out what it was prodding him. That was enough to convince him he had better stop.
Under the brake the back wheels skidded and brought up against the curb. Clay, hanging on by one hand, was flung hard to the sidewalk. The cab teetered, regained its equilibrium, gathered impetus with a snort, and leaped forward again.
As the cattleman clambered to his feet he caught one full view of the chauffeur's triumphant, vindictive face. He had seen it before, at a reception especially arranged for him by Jerry Durand one memorable night. It belonged to the more talkative of the two gunmen he had surprised at the pretended poker game. He knew, too, without being told that this man and "Slim" Jim Collins were one and the same. The memory of Annie's stricken face carried this conviction home to him.
The rain pelted down as he moved toward the brighter lighted street that intersected the one where he had been dropped. The lights of a saloon caught his eye at the corner. He went in, got police headquarters on the wire, and learned that a car answering the description of the one used by his abductor had been headed into Central park by officers and that the downtown exits were being watched.
Presently he picked up another taxi. He hesitated whether to go to the address Annie had given him or to join the chase uptown. Reluctantly, he decided to visit the hour.
Clay paid his driver and looked at the house numbers as he moved up the street he wanted. Many of the residences were used to keep lodgers

TO BE CONTINUED