

The Big-Town Round Up

by William MacLeod Raine

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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CHAPTER XIII Continued

"Slim" Jim reached for the door hastily.

A strong, sinewy hand fell on his arm and tightened, slightly twisting the flesh as the fingers sank deeper.

Collins let out a yell. "Gawd! Don't do that. You're killin' me."

"Beg yore pardon. An accident. If I get annoyed I'm liable to hurt without meanin' to," apologized Clay, suavely. "I'll come right down to brass tacks, Mr. Collins. You're through with Annie Millikan. Understand?"

"Say, vot tell's this stuff you're pipin' to? Who d'you tink youse are?"

"Never you mind who I am. You'll keep away from Annie from now on—absolutely. If you bother her—if anything happens to her—well, you go and take a good long look at Durand before you make any mistakes."

"You touch me an' I'll croak you, See!" hissed Collins.

"A gun-play?" asked Clay pleasantly. "Say, there's a shootin'-gallery round the corner. Come along. I wanta show you somethin'."

"Aw, go to h—!"

The sinewy hand moved again toward the neck muscles of the gunman. Collins changed his mind hurriedly.

"All right. I'll come," he growled. Clay tossed a dollar down on the counter, took a .22 and aimed at the row of ducks sailing across the gallery pool. Each duck went down as it appeared. He picked up a second rifle and knocked over seven or eight mice as they scampered across the target screen. With a third gun he snuffed the flaming eye from the right to the left side of the face that grinned at him, then with another shot sent it back again. He snatched a few clay pipes by way of variety. To finish off with, he scored six center shots in a target and rang a bell each time. Not one single bullet had failed to reach its mark.

The New York gunman had never seen such speed and accuracy. He was impressed in spite of the insolent sneer that still curled his lip.

"Got a six-shooter—a forty-five?" asked Clay of the owner of the gallery.

"No."

"Sorry. I'm not much with a rifle, but I'm a good average shot with a six-gun. I kinda take it natural." They turned and walked back to the cab. Collins fell into the Bowery strut.

"Tryin' to throw a scare into me," he argued feebly.

"Me? Oh, no. You mentioned soft music and the preacher. Mebbe so. But it's liable to be for you if you monkey with the buzz-saw. I'm no gun sharp, but no man who can't empty a revolver in a shade better than two seconds and put every bullet inside the rim of a cup at fifteen yards wants to throw lead at me. You see, I hang up my hat in Arizona. I grew up with a six-gun by my side."

"I should worry. This is little old New York, not Arizona," the gangster answered.

"That's what yore boss Durand thought. What has it brought him but trouble? Lemme give you something to chew on. New York's the biggest city of the biggest, freest country on God's green footstool. You little sewer rats pull wires and think you run it. Get wise, you poor locoed gink. You run it about as much as that fly on the wheel of yore taxi drives the engine. Durand's the whole works by his way of it, but when some one calls his bluff see where he gets off."

"He ain't through with you yet," growled "Slim" Jim, sulkily.

"Mebbe not, but you—you're through with Annie." Clay caught him by the shoulder and swung him round. His eyes bored chilly into the other man. "Don't you forget to remember not to forget that. Let her alone. Don't go near her or play any tricks to hurt her. Lay off for good. If you don't—well, you'll pay heavy. I'll be on the job personal to collect."

Clay swung away and strode down the street, light-heeled and lithe, the sap of vital youth in every rippling muscle.

"Slim" Jim watched him, snarling hatred. If ever he got a good chance at him it would be certain for the guy from Arizona, he swore savagely.

CHAPTER XIV

Johnnie Says He is Much Obligated. Beatrice, just back from riding with Bromfield, stood on the steps in front of the grilled door and stripped the gloves from her hands.

"I'm on fire with impatience, Bee," he told her. "I can hardly wait for that three weeks to pass. The days drag when I'm not with you."

He was standing a step or two below her, a graceful, well-groomed figure of ease, an altogether desirable catch in the matrimonial market. His dark hair, parted in the middle, was beginning to thin, and tiny crow's-feet radiated from the eyes, but he retained the light, slim figure of youth. It ought not to be hard to love Clarendon Bromfield, his fiancée reflected. Yet he disappointingly failed to stir her pulses.

She smiled with friendly derision. "Poor Clary! You don't look like a Vesuvius ready to erupt. You have such remarkable self-control."

His smile met hers. "I can't go up and down the street ringing a bell like a town crier and shouting it out to everybody I meet."

Round the corner of the house a voice was lifted in tuneless song.

Oh, I'm goin' home Bull-whackin' for to spurn; I ain't got a nickel. And I don't give a dern. 'Tis when I meet a pretty girl, You bet I will or try, I'll make her my little wife, Root hog or die.

"You see Johnnie isn't ashamed to shout out his good intentions," she said.

"Johnnie isn't engaged to the love-lest creature under heaven. He doesn't have to lie awake nights for fear the skies will fall and blot him out before his day of bliss."

Beatrice dropped a little curtsy. She held out her hand in dismissal. "Till tomorrow, Clary."

As Bromfield turned away, Johnnie came round a corner of the house, dragging a garden hose. He was attacking another stanza of the song:

There's hard times on old Bitter Creek That never can be beat. It was root hog or die Under every wagon sheet. We cleared up all the Indians, Drank . . .

The puncher stopped abruptly at sight of his mistress.

"What did you drink that has made you so happy this morning, Johnnie?" she asked lightly.

The cowpuncher's secret burst from him. "I done got married, Miss Beatrice."

"You—what?"

"I up and got married day before yesterday," he beamed.

"And who's the happy girl?"

"Kitty Mason. We jes' walked to the church round the corner. Clay, he stood up with us and give the bride away. It's me 'n' her for Arizona poco pronto."

Beatrice felt a queer joyous lift inside her as of some weight that had gone. In a single breath Johnnie had blown away the mists of misunderstanding that for weeks had clouded her vision. Her heart went out to Clay with a rush of warm emotion. The friend she had distrusted was all she had ever believed him. He was more—a man too staunch to desert under pressure any one who had even a slight claim on him.

"I want to meet her. Will you bring her to see me this afternoon, Johnnie?" she asked.

His face was one glad grin. "I sure will. Y'betcha, by jollies."

He did. To Beatrice, busy writing a letter, came Jenkins some hours later. "A young person—to see you, Miss Whitford." He said it with a manner so apologetic that it stressed his opinion of the social status of the visitor.

"What kind of a person?"

"A young woman, Miss. From the country. I tye it."

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"She didn't give you a card?"

"No, Miss. She came with the person Mr. Whitford took on to 'elp with the work houtside."

"Oh! Show them both up. And have tea sent in, Jenkins."

Kitty's shy eyes lifted apprehensively to those of this slim young patrician so beautifully and simply gowned. Instantly her fears fled. Beatrice moved swiftly to her with both hands outstretched.

"I'm so glad to meet you."

She kissed the young wife with unaccustomed tenderness. For the Colorado girl had about her a certain modesty that was disarming, an appeal of helplessness Beatrice could not resist.

Kitty, in the arms of her hostess, wept a few tears. She had been under a strain in anticipating the ordeal of meeting Johnnie's mistress, and she had discovered her to be a very sweet, warm-hearted girl.

As for Johnnie, he had a miserably happy half-hour. He had brought his hat in with him and he did not know how to dispose of it. What he did do was to keep it revolving in his hands. This had to be abandoned when Miss Whitford handed him a quite unnecessary cup of tea and a superfluous plate of toasted English muffins. He wished his hands had not been so big and red and freckled. Also he had an uncomfortable suspicion that his tow hair was tousled and unbecoming in spite of his attempts at home to plaster it down.

He declined sugar and cream because for some reason it seemed easier to say "No'm" than "Yes," though he always took both with tea. And he disgraced himself by scalding his tongue and failing to suppress the pain. Finally the plate, with his muffin, carefully balanced on his knee, from some devilish caprice plunged over the precipice to the carpet and the bit of china broke.

Whereupon Kitty gently reproved him, as was her wifely duty.

"I ain't no society fellow," the distressed puncher explained to his hostess, tiny beads of perspiration on his forehead.

Beatrice had already guessed as much, but she did not admit it to Johnnie. She and Kitty smiled at each other in that common superiority which their sex gives them to any mere man upon such an occasion. For Mrs. John Green, though afternoon tea was to her an alien custom, took to it as a duck to water.

Miss Whitford handed Johnnie an envelope. "Would it be too much trouble for you to take a letter to Mr. Lindsay?" she asked very casually as they rose to go.

The bridegroom said he was much obliged and he would be plumb tickled to take a message to Clay.

When Clay read the note his blood glowed. It was a characteristic two-line apology:

I've been a horrid little prig. Clay (so the letter ran). Won't you come over tomorrow and go riding with me? BEATRICE.

Clay Whitford had been telling Clay the story of how a young cowpuncher had snatched Beatrice from under the hoofs of a charging steer. His daughter and the Arizona man listened without comment.

"I've always thought I'd like to explain to that young man I didn't mean to insult him by offering money for saving Bee. But you see he didn't give me any chance. I never did learn his name," concluded the mining man.

"And of course we'd like him to know that we appreciate what he did for me," Beatrice added. She looked at Clay, and a pulse beat in her soft throat.

"I reckon he knows that," Lindsay suggested. "You must 'a' thought him mighty rude for to break away like you say he did."

"We couldn't understand it till afterward. Mr. Bromfield had slipped him a fifty-dollar bill and naturally he resented it." Miss Whitford's face bubbled with reminiscent mirth. She looked a question at Clay. "What do you suppose that impudent young scoundrel did with the fifty?"

"Got drunk on it most likely."

"He fed it to his horse. Clary was furious."

"He would be," said the cattleman dryly, in spite of the best intentions to be generous to his successful rival.

"But I reckon I know why yore grandstand friend in chaps pulled such a play. In Arizona you can't square such things with money. So far as I can make out the puncher didn't do anything to write home about, but he didn't want pay for it anyhow."

"Of course, Bromfield doesn't understand the West," said Whitford. "I wouldn't like that young puncher half so well if he'd taken the money."

"He didn't need to spoil a perfectly good fifty-dollar bill, though," admitted Clay.

"Yes, he did," denied Beatrice. "That was his protest against Clarendon's misjudgment of him. I've always thought it perfectly splendid in its insolence. Some day I'm going to tell him so."

"It happened in your corner of Arizona, Lindsay. If you ever find out who the chap was I wish you'd let us know," Whitford said.

"I'll remember."

"If you young people are going riding—"

"We'd better get started. Quite right, Dad. We're off. Clarendon will probably call up. Tell him I'll be in about four-thirty."

She pinched her father's ear, kissed him on one ruddy cheek, then on the other, and joined Clay at the door.

"They were friends again, had been for almost half an hour, even though they had not yet been alone together,

but their friendship was to hold reservations now. The shadow of Clarendon Bromfield rode between them. They were a little stiff with each other, not so casual as they had been. A consciousness of sex had obtruded into the old boyish camaraderie.

After a brisk canter they drew their horses together for a walk.

Beatrice broke the ice of their commonplaces. She looked directly at him, her cheeks flushing. "I don't know how you're going to forgive me, Clay. I've been awfully small and priggish. I hate to think I'm ungenerous, but that's just what I've been."

"Let's forget it," he said gently.

"No, I don't want to forget—not till I've told you how humble I feel today. I might have trusted you. Why didn't I? It would have been easy for me to have taken your little friend in and made things right for her. That's what I ought to have done. But, instead of that—Oh, I hate myself for the way I acted."

Her troubled smile, grave and sweet, touched him closely. It was in his horoscope that the spell of this young Diana must be upon him.

He put his hand on hers as it rested on the pommel of the saddle and gave it a slight pressure. "You're a good scout, lit' pardner."

But it was Beatrice's way to step up to punishment and take what was coming. As a little girl, while still almost a baby, she had once walked up to her mother, eyes flashing with spirit, and pronounced judgment on herself. "I've tum to be spanked. I broke Clary's doll an' I'm glad of it, mean old fink. So there!" Now she was not going to let the subject drop until she had freed her soul.

"No, Clay, I've been a poor sportsman. When my friend needed me I failed him. It hurts me, because—oh, you know. When the test came I wasn't there. One hates to be a quitter."

Her humility distressed him, though he loved the spirit of her apology.

"It's all right, Bee. Don't you worry. All friends misunderstand each other, but the real ones clear things up."

She had not yet told him the whole truth and she meant to make clean confession.

"I've been a miserable little fool." She stopped with a little catch of the breath, flamed red, and plunged on. Her level eyes never flinched from his.

"I've got to out with it, Clay. You won't misunderstand, I know. I was jealous. I wanted to keep your friendship to myself—didn't want to share it with another girl. That's how mean I am."

A warm smile lit his face. "I've sure enough found my friend again this morn'g."

Her smile met his. Then, lest barriers fall too fast between them, she put her horse to a gallop.

As they moved into the park a short-legged automobile leaped past them with

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