

The Big-Town Round Up

by William MacLeod Raine

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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CHAPTER XX, Continued.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars to let me alone."

"That'd be a thousand and fifty you had given me, wouldn't it?" returned Lindsay gayly.

Tears of vexation stood in Bromfield's eyes. "All right. Let me go. I'll be fair to Whitford and arrange a deal with him."

"Get the stockholders who're with you on the phone and tell 'em to vote their stock as Whitford thinks best. Get Whitford and tell him the fight's off."

"If I do, will you let me go?"

"If you don't we'll return to the previous question—the annual meeting of the Bromfield Punishment company, Limited."

Bromfield got busy with the telephone.

When he had finished, Clay strolled over to a bookcase, cast his eyes over the shelves, and took out a book. It was "David Harum." He found an easy-chair, threw a leg over one arm, and presently began to chuckle.

"Are you going to keep me here all day?" asked his host sulkily.

"Only till about four o'clock. We're paired, you and me, so we'll both stay away from the election. Why don't you pick a good book and enjoy yourself? There's a lot of A I read in that case over there. It'll sure improve your mind."

Clarendon ground his teeth impotently.

His guest continued to grin over the good stories of the old horse-trader. When he closed the book at last, he had finished it. His watch told him that it was twenty minutes to five. Bromfield's man was at the door trying to get in. He met Lindsay going out.

"No, I can't stay to tea today, Mr. Bromfield," the Arizona man was saying, a gleam of mirth in his eyes. "No use urging me. Honest, I've really got to be going. Had a fine time, didn't we? So long."

Bromfield used bad language.

CHAPTER XXI

In Central Park.

Johnnie burst into the kitchen beaming. "We're gonna p'int for the hills, Kitty. Clay he's had a letter callin' him home."

"When are you going?"

"Thursday. Ain't that great?"

She nodded, absently. Her mind was on another task already. "Johnnie, I'm going to ask Miss Whitford here for dinner tonight."

"Say, you certainly got the best notions, honeybug," he shouted.

"Do you think she'll come?"

"Sure she'll come."

"I'll fix up the bestest dinner ever was, and maybe—"

Her conclusion wandered off into the realm of unvoiced hopes, but her husband knew what it was as well as if she had phrased it.

When Clay came home that evening he stopped abruptly at the door. The lady of his dreams was setting the table in the dining-room and chatting gayly with an invisible Kitty in the kitchen.

The delicate fragrance of the girl's personality went to Clay's head like wine as he stepped forward and shook hands. To see her engaged in this intimate household task at his own table quickened his pulse and sent a glow through him.

"You didn't know you had invited me to dinner, did you?" she said, little flags a-flutter in her cheeks.

They had a gay dinner, and afterward a pleasant hour before Clay took her home.

Neither of them was in a hurry. They walked through Central park in the kindly darkness, each acutely sensitive to the other's presence.

Her gaiety and pliancy had given place to a gentle shyness. Clay let the burden of conversation fall upon her. He knew that he had come to his hour of hours and his soul was wrapped in gravity.

"She too sensed what was coming, and the sex instinct in her was on tiptoe in flight. She was throbbing with excitement. Her whole being longed to hear what he had to tell her. Yet she dodged for a way of escape. Silences were too significant, too full-pulsed. She made herself talk. It did not much matter about what."

"Why didn't you tell us that it was Mr. Bromfield who struck down that man Collins? Why did you let us think you did it?" she queried.

"Well, folks in New York don't know me. What was the use of gettin' him in bad?"

"You know that wasn't the reason. You did it because—" She stopped in the midst of the sentence. It had occurred to her that this subject was more dangerous even than silence.

"I did it because he was the man you were goin' to marry," he said.

They moved side by side through the shadows. In the faint light he could make out the fine line of her exquisite throat. After a moment she spoke. "You're a good friend, Clay. It was a big thing to do. I don't know anybody else except Dad that would have done it for me."

"You don't know anybody else that loves you as much as I do."

It was out at last, quietly and without any dramatics. A flash of soft eyes darted at him, then veiled the shining tenderness beneath long lashes.

"I've had an attack of common sense," he went on, and in his voice was a strength both audacious and patient. "I thought at first I couldn't hope to win you because of your fortune and what it had done for you. Even when I knew you liked me I felt it wouldn't be fair for me to ask you. I couldn't offer you the advantages you'd had. But I've changed my mind. I've been watching what money does to yore friends. It makes them soft. They flutter around like butterflies. They're paupers—a good many of them—because they don't pay their way. A man's a tramp if he doesn't saw wood for his breakfast. I don't want you to get like that, and if you stay here long enough you sure will. It's in my heart that if you'll come with me we'll live."

In the darkness she made a rustling movement toward him. A little sob welled up in her throat as her hands lifted to him. "Oh, Clay! I've fought against it. I didn't want to, but—I love you. Oh, I do love you!"

He took her lissom young body in his arms. Her lips lifted to his.

Presently they walked forward slowly. Clay had never seen her more lovely and radiant, though tears still clung to the outskirts of her joy.

"We're going to live—oh, every hour!" she cried to the stars, her lover's hand in hers.

Johnnie felt that Kitty's farewell dinner had gone very well. It was her first essay as a hostess, and all of them had enjoyed themselves. But, so far as he could see, it had not achieved the results for which they had been hoping.

Clay came home late and next morning was full of plans about leaving. "Two more days and we'll hit the trail for good old Tucson," he said cheerfully.

"Y'betcha, by jollies," agreed his bandy-legged shadow.

None the less Johnnie was distressed. He believed that his friend was concealing an aching heart beneath all this attention to impending details. As a Benedict he considered it his duty to help the rest of the world get married too. A bachelor was a boob. He didn't know what was best for him. Same way with a girl. Clay was fond of Miss Beatrice, and she thought a heap of him. You couldn't fool Johnnie. No, sirree! Well, then?

Mooning on the sad plight of these two friends who were too coy or too perverse to know what was best for them, Johnnie suddenly slapped himself a whack on the thigh. A brilliant idea had flashed into his cranium. It proceeded to grow until he was like to burst with it.

When Lindsay rose from breakfast he was mysteriously beckoned into another room. Johnnie outlined sketchily and with a good deal of hesitation what he had in mind. Clay's eyes danced with that spark of mischief his friends had learned to recognize as a danger signal.

"You're some sure-enough wizard, Johnnie," he admitted. "I expect you're right about girls not knowin' their own minds. You've had more experience with women than I have. If you say the proper thing to do is to abduct Miss Whitford and take her with us, why—"

"Onet in a while you got to play like you're gonna treat 'em rough," said Mr. Green sagely, blushing a trifle nevertheless.

"All right. I'll let you engineer this. I can make up my mind to it after I've milled it over. I can see you know what you're doin'."

The conspirators arranged details. Johnnie was the brains of the kidnapping. Clay bought the tickets and was to take charge of the prisoner after the train was reached. They decided it would be best to get a stateroom for the girl.

"We wanta make it as easy as we can for her," said Johnnie. "O' course it's all for her own good, but we don't figure to treat her noways but like the princess she is."

"Yes," agreed Clay humbly.

According to program, carefully arranged by Johnnie, Beatrice rode down to the train with him and Kitty in their taxicab. She went on board for the final good-by and chatted with them in their section.

The chief conspirator was as easy as a toad in a hot skillet. Now that

it had come down to the actual business of taking this young woman with them against her will, he began to weaken. His heart acted very strangely, but he had to go through with it. "Can I see you a minute in the next car, Miss Beatrice?" he asked, his voice quivering.

Miss Whitford lifted her eyebrows, but otherwise expressed no surprise. "Certainly, Johnnie."

He led the way down the aisle into the next sleeper and stopped at one of the staterooms. Shakingly he opened the door and stood aside for her to pass first.

"You want me to go in here?" she asked.

"Yes'm."

Beatrice stepped in. Johnnie followed.

Clay rose from the lounge and said, "Glad to see you, Miss Whitford."

"Did you bring me here to say good-by, Johnnie?" asked Beatrice.

The runt's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. His eyes appealed dumbly to Clay.

"Better explain to Miss Whitford," said Clay, passing the buck.

"It's for yore good, Miss Beatrice," stammered the villain who had brought her. "We—we—I done brought you here to travel home with us."

"You—what?"

Before her slender, outraged dignity Johnnie wilted. "Kitty, she—she can chaperoon you. It's all right, ma'am. I—we—I didn't go for to do nothin' that wasn't proper. We thought—"

"You mean that you brought me here expecting me to go along with you—without my consent—without a trunk—without—"

Clay took charge of the kidnapping. "Johnnie, if I were you I'd light a shuck back to the other car. I see I'll have to treat this lady rough as you advised."

Johnnie wanted to expostulate, to deny that he had ever given such counsel, to advise an abandonment of the whole project. But his nerve unexpectedly failed him. He glanced at Clay and fled.

He was called upon the carpet immediately on joining Kitty.

"What are you up to, Johnnie? I'm not going to have you make a goose of yourself if I can help it. And where's Mr. Lindsay? You said he'd meet us here."

"Clay, he's in the next car."

"You took Miss Beatrice in there to say good-by to him?"

"No—she—she's goin' along with us."

"Going along with us? What do you mean, Johnnie Green?"

He told her his story, not at all cheerfully. His bold plan looked very different now from what it had two days before.

Kitty rose with decision. "Well, of all the foolishness I ever heard, Johnnie, this is the limit. I'm going right to that poor girl. You've spoiled everything, between you. She'll hate Mr. Lindsay for the rest of her life. How could he be so stupid?"

Her husband followed her, crestfallen. He wanted to weep with chagrin. Beatrice opened the door of the stateroom. She had taken off her hat and Clay was hanging it on a hook.

"Come in," she said cordially, but faintly.

Kitty did not quite understand. The atmosphere was less electric than she had expected. She stopped, taken aback at certain impressions that began to register themselves on her brain.

"Johnnie was tellin' me—"

"About how he abducted me. Yes. Wasn't it dear of him?"

"But—"

"I've decided to make the best of it and go along."

"I—your father, Mr. Whitford—"

Kitty begged down.

Beatrice blushed. Little dimples came out with her smile. "I think I'd better let Clay explain."

"We were married two days ago, Kitty."

"What!" she shouted the runt.

"We intended to ask you both to the wedding, but when Johnnie proposed to abduct Miss Whitford, I thought it a pity not to let him. So we—"

Johnnie fell on him and beat him with both fists. "You daw-goned old scallawag! I never will help you git married again!" he shouted gleefully.

"Oh, Johnnie—Johnnie—you'll be the death of me!" cried Clay. "I'll never be a dull old world so long as you stay a bandit."

"Did you really advise him to beat me, Johnnie?" asked Beatrice sweetly. "I never would have guessed you were such a cave man."

Johnnie flamed to the roots of his hair. "Now, ma'am, if you're gonna believe that—"

Beatrice repented and offered him her hand.

"We'll not believe anything of you that isn't good, even if you did want to kidnap me," she said.

CHAPTER XXII

The New Day.

The slapping of the wind against the tent awakened Beatrice. She could hear it sighing gently through the branches of the live oaks. An outflung arm discovered Clay missing.

Her questing glance found him busy over the mesquite fire upon which he was cooking breakfast. She watched him move about, supple and light and strong, and her heart lifted with sheer joy of the mate she had chosen. He was such a man among men, this clear-eyed, bronzed husband of a week. He was so clean and simple and satisfying. As she closed the flaps she gave a deep sigh of content.

Every minute till she joined him was begrudged. For Beatrice had

learned the message of her heart. She knew that she was wholly and completely in love with what life had brought her.

And she was amazingly, radiantly happy. What did motor cars or wine suppers or Paris gowns matter? They were the trappings that attested her slavery. Here she moved beside her mate without fear or doubt in a world wonderful. Eye to eye, they spoke the truth to each other after the fashion of brave, simple souls.

Glowing from the ice-cold bath of water from a mountain stream, she stepped down the slope into a slant of sunshine to join Clay. He looked up from the fire and waved a spoon gayly at her. For he too was as jocund as the day which stood tiptoe on the misty mountain tops. They had come into the hills to spend their honeymoon alone together, and life spoke to him in accents wholly joyous.

The wind and sun caressed her. As she moved toward him, a breath of the morning flung the gown about her so that each step modeled anew the slender limbs.

Her husband watched the girl streaming down the slope. Love swift as old wine flooded his veins. He rose, caught her to him, and looked down into the deep, still eyes that were pools of happiness.

"Are you glad—glad all through, sweetheart?" he demanded.

A little laugh welled from her throat. She gave him a tender, mocking smile. "I hope heaven's like this," she whispered.

"You don't regret New York—not a single, hidden longing for it 'way down deep in yore heart?"

She shook her head. "I always wanted to be rescued from the environment that was stifling me, but I didn't know a way of escape till you came," she said.

"Then you knew it?"

"From the moment I saw you tie the janitor to the hitching-post. You remember I was waiting to go riding with Mr. Bromfield. Well, I was bored to death with correct clothes and manners and thinking. I knew just what he would say to me and how he would say it and what I would answer. Then you walked into the picture and took me back to nature."

"It was the hitching-post that did it, then?"

"The hitching-post began it, anyhow." She slipped her arms around his neck and held him fast. "Oh, Clay, isn't it just too good to be true?"

A ball of fire pushed up into the crotch between two mountain peaks and found them like a searchlight, filling their little valley with a golden glow.

"I Hope Heaven's Like This," She Whispered.

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[THE END]

Boeler, Crosby & Baskins, Attys.
NOTICE TO CREDITORS

Estate No. 1902 of Martha Koester, deceased in the County Court of Lincoln County, Nebraska.

The State of Nebraska, ss: Creditors of said estate will take notice that the time limited for presentation and filing of claims against said Estate is January 10, 1923, and for settlement of said Estate is September 7, 1923; that I will sit at the county court room in said County on October 10th, 1922, at 10 o'clock a. m. and on January 10th, 1923, at 10 o'clock a. m., to receive, examine, hear, allow, or adjust all claims and objections duly filed.

Dated September 7th, 1922.
WM. H. C. WOODHURST,
County Judge.

Boeler, Crosby & Baskins, Attys.
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Dated September 7th, 1922.
WM. H. C. WOODHURST,
County Judge.

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Dated September 7th, 1922.
WM. H. C. WOODHURST,
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Boeler, Crosby & Baskins, Attys.
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NOTICE OF FINAL REPORT

Estate No. 1854 of Mary Facka, deceased in the County Court of Lincoln County, Nebraska.

The State of Nebraska, to all persons interested in said Estate take notice that the Administrator has filed a final account and report of his administration and a petition for final settlement and discharge as such Administrator and for declaration of heirship and distribution of proceeds which have been set for hearing before said court on October 3d, 1922, at 10 o'clock a. m. when you may appear and contest the same.

Dated September 9th, 1922.
WM. H. C. WOODHURST,
County Judge.

Seal

NOTICE OF PETITION

Estate No. 1911 of August Sodickott, deceased in the County Court of Lincoln County, Nebraska.

The State of Nebraska: To all persons interested in said Estate take notice that a petition has been filed for the probating of said estate and appointment of Christian Sodickott as Administrator of said estate, which has been set for hearing herein on October 10th, 1922 at 10 o'clock a. m.

Dated September 16th, 1922.
WM. H. C. WOODHURST,
County Judge.

Seal

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