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CHAPTER XXIII.

An Unexpected Meeting.

Keith paused at the landing, looking down into the deserted office, almost tempted to return and force Hawley into a confession of his purpose. It was easy for him to conceive what would be the final result of this interview between the artistic gambler and Miss Maclaire. In spite of the vague suspicion of evil which the plainman had implanted within the woman's mind, the other possessed the advantage, and would certainly improve it. All conditions were decidedly in his favor. He merely needed to convince the girl that she was actually the party sought, and she would go forward, playing the game he desired, believing herself right, totally unconscious of any fraud. The very simplicity of it rendered the plot the more dangerous, the more difficult to expose. Hawley had surely been favored by fortune in discovering this stunner who chanced to resemble Hope so remarkably, and who, at the same time, was in such ignorance as to her own parentage. She would be ready to grasp at a straw, and, once persuaded as to her identity and legal rights, could henceforth be trusted implicitly as an ally.

Realizing all this, and comprehending also how easily Hawley would win her confidence and overcome his warning by denouncing him as a fugitive from justice charged with murder, the temptation to return and fight it out then and there became almost overpowering. He had no fear of Hawley; indeed, physical fear had scarcely a place in his composition, but he was not as yet sufficiently fortified with facts for the seeking of such an encounter. He could merely guess at the truth, unable to produce any proof with which to meet the gambler's certain denial.

A man came in through the office, and began climbing the stairs. He was almost at the landing before Keith recognized him or the other glanced up.

"Ah—seen her, I suppose?"

"Yes," returned Keith, not thinking it worth while to mention the lady's denial of having sent for him. "I have just come from there."

"—thought you'd be through by this time—fine looking girl, ain't she?—believe I'll run in and chat with her myself."

"I would advise you to select some other time, Doctor," said the younger, drily, "as the lady has a visitor at present."

"A visitor?" his face rosy, his shrewd eyes darkening. "Ah, indeed! Of the male sex?"

"I judge so—Black Bart' Hawley."

"Good Lord!" so started his voice broke. "Did he see you?"

"Rather; I backed him up against the wall with a gun while I made my adieu."

"But what brought him there? Are they acquainted?"

"Don't ask conundrums, Doctor. He may be your rival with the fair lady for all I know. If he is, my sympathies are all with you. Only I wouldn't try to see Miss Christie just now; I'd wait for a clearer field. Hawley is probably not in the best of humor."

Fairbairn stared into the face of the speaker, uncertain whether or not he was being laughed at.

"Reckon you're right," he acknowledged at last. "Tired, anyhow—been out all night—thought I'd like to see her again, though—finest looking woman I've met since I came West—remarkable eyes—well, I'll go along to bed—see you again to-morrow, Jack."

Keith watched the sturdy figure stamp heavily down the hall-way, loose boards creaking under his positive tread, and smiled to himself at the thought that he might have, indeed, become truly interested in the music hall singer. Somehow, the doctor did not harmonize with the conception of love, as it gradually into the picture. Still, stranger meetings had occurred, and Cupid does not ask permission before he plays pranks with hearts. Keith turned again toward the stairs, only to observe a woman slowly cross the office and commence the ascent. She was in the shadow, her face even more deeply shaded by her hat, yet he stared at her in amazement—surely, it was Miss Maclaire! Yet how could it be? He had left that person scarcely five minutes before in "28," and this stair-way was the only exit. His hand grasped the rail, his heart throbbing strangely, as a suspicion of the truth crossed his brain. Could this be Hope? Could it be that she was here also? As her foot touched the landing, she saw him, her eyes lighting up suddenly in recognition, a wave of color flooding her cheeks.

"Why, Captain Keith," she exclaimed, extending her gloved hand frankly, "you have been to my room, and were going away. I am so glad I came in time."

"I hardly thought to meet you," he replied, retaining her fingers in his grasp. "When did you reach Sheridan?"

"Only last night. I had no idea you

were here until Doctor Fairbairn chanced to mention your name. Then I at once begged him to tell you how exceedingly anxious I was to see you. You see, I was sure you would come if you only knew. I really thought you would be here this morning, and remained in my room waiting, but there were some things I actually had to have. I wasn't out ten minutes, so you mustn't think I sent you a message and then forgot."

The nature of the mistake was becoming apparent, and Keith's gray eyes smiled as they looked into the depths of the brown.

"Your message had rather an amusing result," he said, "as the doctor informed me that Miss Christie Maclaire was the one who desired my presence."

"Miss Maclaire!" her voice exhibiting startled surprise. "Why—why—oh, I did forget; I never told him differently. Why, it was most ridiculous." She laughed, white teeth gleaming between the parted red lips, yet not altogether happily. "Let me explain, Captain Keith, for really I have not been masquerading. Doctor Fairbairn and I arrived upon the same train last evening. He is such a funny man but was very nice, and offered to escort me to the hotel. I remember now that although he introduced himself, I never once thought to mention to him my name. The town was very rough last night—the company had paid off the graders I was told—and there was no carriage, so we were compelled to walk. I—I never saw such a mob of drunken men. One came reeling against me, and brushed aside my veil so as to see my face. The doctor struck him, and then the marshal came up—you know him, Bill Hickock—and the impudent fellow actually declared he knew me, that I was Christie Maclaire. I tried to explain, but they hurried me on through the crowd to the hotel, and I became confused, and forgot. Do you suppose they registered me by that name?"

"Quite likely; at least Fairbairn still believes it was the Christie whom he so gallantly escorted last night."

"How provoking!" her foot tapping the floor, a little wrinkle between her eyes. "It seems as though I couldn't escape that woman—does she—does she really know me?"

"At a little distance, yes," he admitted, "her form and face resemble yours very closely, but her hair is darker, her eyes have a different expression, and she must be five or six years older."

"Do—do you know her well?"

"No, indeed; I have seen her several times on the stage, but never met her until a few moments ago."

"A few moments ago! Do you mean she is here in this hotel?"

"Yes, Miss Hope, and that was what made the mistake in names so laughable. Fairbairn gave me your message, but as coming from Christie, I was, of course, greatly surprised, yet responded. The lady very promptly denied having sent for me, but as I was anxious to interview her myself, we managed to drift into conversation, and I must have passed a half hour there. I might have been there still, but for an interruption."

"Oh, indeed!" with rising infection. He glanced quickly about, reminded of the situation.

"Yes, Hawley came in, and I would prefer not to meet him here, or have him discover you were in Sheridan. Could we not go to your room? I have much to tell you."

Her questioning eyes left his face, and stared down over the rail. A heavily built man, with red moustache, leaned against the clerk's desk, his face toward them.

"Do you know that man?" she asked quickly. "He followed me all the time I was shopping. I—I believe he is the same one who jostled me in the crowd last night."

Keith leaned past her to get a better view, but the fellow turned, and eluded away.

"I only had a glimpse, but have no recollection of ever seeing him before. You heard no name?"

"Wild Bill!" called him either Scott, or Scotty—if this is the same man."

Keith's jaw set, the fighting light burning in his eyes. That was the name of the fellow rooming with Wiloughby, the one who seemed to be Hawley's special assistant. Was he here as a spy? His hands clinched on the rail. He was anxious to go down and wring the truth out of him, but instead, he compelled his eyes to smile, turning back to the girl.

"A mere accident probably; but about my request? May I talk with you a few moments alone?"

She bowed, apparently still dissatisfied regarding his lengthy conversation with Christie, yet permitted him to follow down the hall. She held open the door of "15," and he entered silently, not wholly understanding the change in her manner. She stood before the dresser, drawing off her gloves and removing her hat.

"Will you be seated, Captain; the arm-chair by the window is the more comfortable." She turned toward him

almost shyly, yet with womanly coyness which would not be stilled. "Was your call upon Miss Maclaire very interesting? Did you admire her very much?"

Keith's eyes lifted to her face, his ears quick to detect the undertone in her voice.

"Interesting? yes, for I was seeking after information, and met with some success. As to the other question, I am not sure whether I admire the lady or not. She is bright, pretty, and companionable, and in spite of her profession, at heart, I believe, a good woman. But really, Miss Hope, I was too deeply immersed in my purpose to give her personally much consideration. Among other things we spoke of you."

"Of me? Why?"

"I told her something of our adventures together; of how both Hawley and I had been confused. She was anxious to learn who you were, but unfortunately, I have never, even yet, heard your name."

"You have not?"

"No; I left you at Fort Larned believing you Christie Maclaire—supposing it your stage name, of course—and was confirmed in this belief by finding in the holster of the saddle you had been riding an envelope bearing that address."

"I remember; it contained the note the man brought to me from Hawley; he had written it that way." She crossed the room, sinking down into a chair facing him. "And you have actually confused me with Christie Maclaire all this while? Have never known who I was?"

He shook his head.

"I told you to call me Hope; that is my name—I am Hope Waite."

"Waite!" he leaned forward, startled by the possibility—"not—not—"

"Yes," she burst in, holding out her

hands, clasping the pocket, "and this was my father's; where did you get it?"

He took the trinket from her, turning it over in his fingers. Little by little the threads of mystery were being unraveled, yet, even now, he could not see very far. He looked up from the locket into her questioning face.

"Did I not tell you? No; then it was an oversight. This was about the throat of one of the men I buried at Cimmaron Crossing, but—but, Hope, it was not your father."

"I know," her voice choking slightly. "Mrs. Murphy found that out; that is why I am here. I heard my father came to Sheridan, and I wanted you to help me find him."

He was thinking and did not answer at once, and she went on in some alarm.

"Do you know anything about him, Captain Keith? Where is he? Why is he here? Don't be afraid to tell me."

He pressed the locket back into her hand, retaining the latter, unresisted, within his own.

"I have not seen your father, Hope, but he was certainly here a few days ago, for Fairbairn met him. They were together in the army. I am going to tell you all I know—it seems to be a tangled web, but the ends must be somewhere, although, I confess, I am all at sea."

He told it slowly and simply, bringing forth his earlier suspicion, and how he had stumbled upon facts apparently confirming them. He related her father's robbery, his loss of valuable papers, and the conversation between Hawley and Scott which led to the suspicion that these same papers had fallen into the hands of the former, and were the basis of his plot. Hope listened, breathless with interest, her widely opened eyes filled with wonder. As he concluded speaking she burst forth:

"But I don't understand in the least, Captain Keith. Why did this man Hawley send me to the Salt Fork?"

"He thought he was dealing with Christie Maclaire. He had some reason for getting her away; getting her where he could exercise influence over her."

"Yes—yes; but who is she?"

"That is what makes the matter so hard to unravel. She doesn't even know herself. Hawley is going to take advantage of her ignorance in this respect, and convince her that she is the person he wishes her to represent—but who is the person? If we knew that we might block the game."

Both sat silent, striving to figure out some reasonable explanation.

"Do you know of any special papers your father carried?" he asked.

"No; none outside his business agreements."

"Has any one ever disappeared connected with your family? Did you have an older sister?"

"Fred and I were the only children. Why should you ask that question?"

"Because something of that nature would seem to be the only rational explanation. Your brother must have told Hawley something—some family secret—which he felt could be utilized to his own advantage. Then he saw your picture, and was immediately reminded of the remarkable resemblance between you and Christie Maclaire. Evidently this discovery fitted into his plan, and made it possible for him to proceed. He has been trying ever since to get an interview with the woman, to sound her, and find out what he can do with her. He has written letters, sufficiently explicit to make it clear his scheme is based upon a will drawn, as he claims, by Christie's grandfather. No doubt by this time he has fully convinced the girl that she is the rightful heiress to property—as he stated to Scott—valued at over a million dollars. That's a stake worth fighting for, and these two will make a hard combination. He's got the papers, or claims to have, and they must be the ones stolen from your father. I have been trusting you might know something in your family history which would make it all plain."

"But I do not," decisively. "You must believe me; not so much as a hint of any secret has ever reached me. There are only the four of us, Father, Mother, Fred, and I. I am sure there can be no secret; nothing which I would not know. Perhaps, if I could see Miss Maclaire—"

"I am convinced that would be useless," he interrupted, rising, and pacing across the floor. "If Hawley has convinced her of the justice of the claim, he will also have pledged her to secrecy. He is working out of sight like a mole, for he knows the fraud, and will never come to the surface until everything is in readiness. I know a better way; I'll find Fred, and bring him here. He would tell you whatever it was he told Hawley, and that will give us the clue."

He picked up his hat from the table, but she rose to her feet, holding forth her hands.

"I cannot thank you enough, Captain Keith," she exclaimed frankly. "You are doing so much, and with no personal interest—"

"Oh, but I have."

The long lashes dropped over the brown eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"That I have a personal interest—in you, Hope."

She stood silent, her bosom rising and falling to rapid breathing.

"You don't mind my calling you Hope? I haven't got used to Miss Waite yet."

Her eyes met his swiftly.

"Of course, not. Such ceremony would be foolish after all you have done for me. Do—do you call her Christie?"

He laughed, clasping her closer.

"I assure you no—she is strictly Miss Maclaire, and, solemnly, 'shall be to the end of the chapter.'"

"Oh, well, I didn't care, only that was what you called her when you were telling me what she said. Are you going?"

"Yes, to find Fred; the sooner we can get this straightened out, the better."

(To Be Continued.)

Announcement.

The St. Mary's Guild will hold their Annual Christmas Sale on Wednesday, December 6, at Coates' hall.

Mr. and Mrs. B. Wurl, who have been visiting their son, Otto, and family, at Quincy, Ill., for a week, arrived this morning.

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NO MORE MAIL FOR SANTA CLAUS
Postoffice Department Has Announced That All Such Letters Must Be Returned.

The postoffice department announces that letters addressed "Santa Claus" are hereafter to be marked "Fictitious" and returned to the sender or destroyed.

It is very likely true that many precious children, not to say grown-ups, have composed these letters as an indirect method of soliciting charity that could not be obtained on the merits of the case. Nevertheless, there is underneath all the money-getting a spark of sentiment and romance in our people, that is fanned to life at least annually by the gift spirit of the Christmas tide.

Most children still believe the Santa Claus myth, which brings a bright ray of hope and sunshine into many a sordid tenement. No doubt many of the Santa letters are genuine. The practical result is that some wealthy people are assisted to solve the embarrassing problem of how to spend their money, and that some children of the darksome slums learn that the world still has kind human hearts. Let the charitable societies have the letters, please, Mr. Hitchcock, and use their own judgment as to responses.

Change at Bank of Union.
Roy A. Flanagan, who has been assistant cashier of the Bank of Union for the past two years, has concluded to locate on the Pacific coast, probably at Spokane, Wash., and has tendered his resignation, to take effect about November 1, or as soon thereafter as convenient for him to be relieved. Mr. Flanagan's many friends will regret his decision to locate elsewhere, as he has been a very courteous and faithful official and good citizen and filled the position very acceptably.

The new assistant cashier will be Jack M. Patterson of Plattsmouth, a young gentleman in every way qualified for the position. He is a son of T. M. Patterson, cashier of the Bank of Cass County, and has had special training, as well as practical experience in the banking business. Mr. Patterson came on Monday and is working in the bank to familiarize himself with the duties here and to form the acquaintance of the bank's patrons before Mr. Flanagan retires.—Union Ledger.

"P. & B.," the new 5c cigar, made in Plattsmouth. Try one.

Oscar Hassman Here.
Oscar E. Hassman, second son of Charles Hassman, formerly of this city, is in town, the guest of Oscar's aunt, Mrs. C. A. Turn, who is a sister of Oscar's father. Oscar has a good job as fireman on the Southern Pacific, which brings him over \$100 per month, and has his headquarters at Albany, Oregon. The Hassman family have been on the coast about seven years, and in that time Charles, who was formerly clerking in the E. G. Dovey & Son's store, has acquired two farms and very recently purchased a third tract of land. Mrs. Hassman, who had poor health here, has entirely recovered and is feeling fine. Mr. Hassman is within a short distance of the ocean, where the sea atmosphere is invigorating.

Pay Losses Promptly.
R. Moffet, clerk of the local camp of the W. O. W. lodge here, last evening received a draft for \$1,500, payable to Mrs. John P. Tritsch, covering the policy the late Mr. Tritsch carried in this popular insurance order. Mr. Tritsch joined the order little more than a year ago. In addition to the policy so promptly paid, the company will erect a monument at the grave of the deceased, costing \$100.

W. T. Richardson Doing Nicely.
W. T. Richardson of Mynard, the Missouri Pacific wreck victim whose right leg was amputated Monday at the Methodist hospital, is rapidly gaining strength after the operation. Richardson's splendid condition brought him through the ordeal much better than had been anticipated.—Omaha World-Herald.

Met With Mrs. Hadraba.
The Ladies' Aid society of the Swedish church met last Thursday with Mrs. Joe Hadraba at her residence on High School Hill. There was a good attendance and matters of importance pertaining to the work of the church were discussed. It was an interesting session, and all present were well repaid for the time occupied with the meeting.

John Carlson and his mother, Mrs. Peter Carlson, and her little grand-daughter, Hilma Nyden, accompanied by Miss Ellen Carlson, were Omaha passengers on the morning train today, where they spent the day visiting the land show and at the same time were entertained at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Nyden, Mrs. Carlson's daughter.

F. E. Pierson of the Neilson laundry was called to Omaha on business this afternoon.