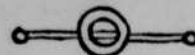


The Room on the Roof



By Will Payne

THE STORY THUS FAR.

Nathaniel Harwood, a handsome lawyer of 43, has lost most of the big fortune left him and his daughter by his wife. He is practically engaged to Mrs. Letitia Heikman, a widow with ten millions. Adolph Krom and a "Professor" Steinman interest him in a motion picture invention they have stolen from their employer, Simon Curlin. Harwood sets them to work in the room on the roof, a retreat above his offices in a Chicago skyscraper. Then he installs them in an old factory in Slow River, Mich., his home town. There he falls in love with Elizabeth Malden. Elizabeth sees Curlin and his young nephew, Robert Whiteside, ejected from the factory. She picks up a revolver dropped by Curlin and leaves it in the shop.

Elizabeth goes to Chicago as Harwood's secretary and becomes engaged to him. Steinman disappears. Krom shows Harwood some pictures, claims the invention is finished, and demands the lawyer buy him out for \$250,000. Krom relates that he killed Steinman in a drunken frenzy and buried the body in a trunk in the Slow River factory. Harwood pays him \$30,000 on account.

Krom sees Harwood kiss Elizabeth and is jealous. He plots, with Peter Green, watchman at the Slow River factory, to kidnap Elizabeth. Returning from lunch, Elizabeth sees Whiteside disappear through a door leading to the room on the roof. Dashing up she finds Krom on the floor, shot dead. Beside him are Whiteside and Curlin, the latter holding the revolver. Elizabeth picked up at the Slow River factory. Elizabeth sees Harwood examining the contents of a black bag Krom usually carried. Later she finds the bag hidden in Harwood's desk. Harwood says nothing of the bag, neither does Elizabeth. Curlin and Whiteside claim they had an appointment with Krom in the roof room but found him dead when they arrived.

In Krom's coat is found a note bequeathing all his property to Elizabeth, "especially trunk buried in coal bin."

Whiteside and Curlin are released on parole till 10 o'clock next morning. Elizabeth goes to the Slow River factory with Judge Liscomb to find the trunk. There they find Curlin, who forces them into a coal bin and locks them in. Whiteside appears in the cellar and battles his uncle to release Elizabeth and the judge. Whiteside's arm is broken when the uncle hits him with an iron bar. Robert subdues his uncle. Elizabeth is about to open the trunk when a new voice interrupts: "Don't be in a hurry."

TWELFTH INSTALLMENT.

The Black Bag.

While they were searching Krom's room at the Ellenborough hotel, Sergeant Samuels perceived that Mr. Harwood was a reasonable man who knew how to appreciate a favor. An excellent understanding was established between them—one result thereof being that Harwood was permitted to retain the two lenses. And Harwood had told the detective that if Curlin and Whiteside broke their parole by going out of the city it would probably be for the purpose of visiting Slow River and unearthing a trunk in the old basket factory.

Harwood thought Capt. West made a mistake in permitting the suspects to go at large on parole; but since that mistake had been committed it might be just as well, in the captain's words, to give them rope and see what they would do.

So when Curlin climbed into the smoking car of the 5:50 train for Slow River Sergeant Samuels climbed into the next car, and when the camera maker alighted at Slow River the detective followed. What happened next was one of the most humiliating experiences in the detective's career. Avoiding the lights of the railroad station, the old man struck off rapidly into the dark, and almost at once the detective lost him. Curlin, he was quite sure, had gone into a disused street near the station. Samuels beat up that street, looking and listening; but not a light showed, not a sound came to his ears.

Curlin, in fact, had let himself into the basket factory—without showing a light, merely striking a match in the basement to find his way into the tight coal bin, where he turned on the electric bulb and shut the door. The coal bin window, at the back of the building and below the ground level, was thickly encrusted with coal dust and cobwebs. Samuels beat past the building two or three times without seeing a sign of life. Presently, finding no sign of life anywhere in that neighborhood, he went back to the railroad station to inquire where a basket factory was located. But the station was then locked and dark. In fact, No. 26, arriving at 10:01, was a sort of curfew in Slow River. Not only the railroad station, but Main street, was quite dark and empty, except the Griggs house. There he found a light, but no one in the office.

Presently a man clerk appeared—a comparative stranger, who had never heard of a basket factory and could offer no helpful suggestion as to how such an establishment might be found. For a while it seemed to the exasperated detective that he might have to shoot up the town in order to get any information. Meanwhile Harwood had been notified that Curlin had left for Slow River, so that at any moment the lawyer's car might appear—and detect the detective in the embarrassing position of being lost in a country town. At length Samuels learned that the basket factory was located on the disused street which he had first followed. He returned there, peering into the dark for a building answering the description he had re-

ceived—and, incidentally, damning all country towns.

When Elizabeth turned on the electric lights their glow showed faintly through a grimy cellar window, and Samuels took a deep breath of relief. The office door was unlocked. By the light of a match he found his way to the basement stairs.

"Don't be in a hurry!" he called out at the foot of the stairs. Naturally he was in bad humor. And old fashioned but stout trunk, bound in cowhide, with rusty iron handles, lay on the basement floor. About it stood four people. Harwood's peachy secretary with an iron bar in her hands; Whiteside, Curlin, and an old man with one arm. They had looked up at the sound of his voice and were now staring at him. His right hand was in his overcoat pocket, the fingers around the butt of an automatic pistol. These parole breakers had given him a lot of trouble, which he charged up to them.

"Got a gun?" he inquired of Whiteside, with the sort of ominous

of irritation behind the blow—delivered with all the force of a sinewy arm. The camera maker simply folded up, like a limp cloth. He would have gone to the floor, but the trunk was behind him; and he would have rolled off that, only Bess, dropping the bar, sprang forward and caught his arm. His mouth was wide open, his eyes popping-oddly like a fish out of water, for the blow had knocked all the wind out of him. He got his hands on the trunk and managed to maintain himself in a sitting posture, gasping for air.

Bess would not look at the detective just then. He was too repulsive; and there was a sort of indecency in her anger, which prompted her, instinctively, to veil her eyes.

Whiteside wet his lips again. "That was fine," he said, rather low. "My arm's broken. It's safe to hit me. Why don't you?"

The hard eyed detective surveyed him coolly and replied, with that ominous cheerfulness: "Just as lief

ing feet on the cement floor above.

Harwood and blunt nosed Detective Wistrom came down the stairs. Leaving Bess on La Salle street, the lawyer had hurried to his office, and presently got in touch with Prof. Kersten over the telephone. He now had five lenses, a film, and a projecting machine for the professor to examine in the morning. But his mind was running also to that trunk in Slow River. Then he was notified that Curlin and Samuels had taken the train. Leaving Whiteside to himself, he and Wistrom followed; but a punctured tire had delayed them unreasonably. Almost the first thing he saw, hurrying down the basement stairs behind the burly detective, was the old trunk standing on the basement floor—with Curlin sitting on it. Before he paid attention to anything else he went around in front of the trunk, looking at the lock.

"They were going to open it; but I told 'em they better wait," Samuels remarked. So the trunk had not been opened!



She made another thrust with the bar.

geniality which he used on such occasions.

"No," said Whiteside. The detective was at his side then and continued, "May as well stick up your hands." His hard eyes and straight lips seemed to convey a sort of third degree intention.

"Whiteside lifted his left arm only, saying, 'This arm's broken.'"

The detective took hold of it, not gently; and Whiteside winced; then wet his lips. The arm was certainly broken. Samuels swiftly felt the young man's coat and hip pockets, and turned to the camera maker, with a slight grin: "How about you?"

"I've got no gun," Curlin growled, eyeing the enemy—roused again and bristling.

"Stick 'em up," the detective directed briskly.

Glowing, swelling with the affront, Curlin lifted his hands and Samuels briefly felt him over. But the camera maker's mind was on the unearthing treasure.

"Now open that trunk!" he demanded, of Elizabeth.

"Open nothing!" Samuels interposed, conclusively.

From the moment he heard that voice on the stairs Curlin had suspected—furiously—that this interruption would prevent the opening of the trunk. Two minutes more and it would have been opened; then his precious invention, he believed, would have been restored to him. To have one's hopes so dashed was unbearable. He shouted.

"That's my trunk! My property is in it! We're going to open it!"

"Open nothing," the detective repeated. "You're going to march. Right about, now!" He caught the old man's arm. Exasperated over that hour's search in the dark, he quite wanted some resistance.

The raging old man pulled back and drew his arm as though to strike—all in an instant. In almost the same instant the detective's fist drove into the pit of his stomach. There was a great deal

as not. Put in your order any time you like."

Bess felt how shameful this was. Not looking at anybody, her lips pressed firmly together, she picked up the bar. "I will open the trunk," she said, "as soon as Mr. Curlin can get up."

"Not at present," Samuels remarked with that sort of finality. "Mr. Harwood will be here to see to that. Nothing's opened till he comes."

That was final. Bess knew that any sort of contest with the man would be useless and foolish. She didn't wish him to speak to her; she didn't wish him to be near her; she didn't wish even to look at him. A brute—to strike an old man so.

Curlin, maintaining himself on the trunk with both hands, was getting his breath in gasps. In a few minutes, no doubt, he would be able to stand and walk. Bess looked over at Whiteside—not a word, not even a perceptible change of expression; yet there was plenty of meaning in the look. They both understood perfectly; it was a pledge. Painfully, silently, she watched the camera maker recover his breath; a minute or so may have passed. Again her eyes turned to Whiteside, in a quick glance; then she looked at Samuels:

"I suppose you came for these men. You may as well take them away."

The detective grinned at so transparent a ruse and replied with amusement: "No hurry. We'll wait for Mr. Harwood." Being habitually observant and accustomed to making deductions, he had noticed the peachy secretary's look at the stalwart young man. How had the peachy secretary come to be in this basement with the young man, anyhow? Harwood had cautioned him about this trunk. He had no idea of leaving it to the secretary, with a crow bar in her hands.

"That must be them now," he commented, as they heard scurry-

Of course, Harwood had seen Bess—with surprise. He now looked at her, smiling a little, somewhat dubiously, his eyes questioning. But she chose to say nothing just then.

So he addressed Curlin. "You gave us quite a chase!" and at once turned to Judge Liscomb, holding out his hand. "Well, judge, I didn't expect to find you here! How are you?"

He spoke so amiably and cheerfully as though he had been in the judge's office; they shook hands. Alert, with that ready, competent air, Harwood then, at once, gave Samuels a significant little look and stepped aside, the detective following. Bess almost marveled at the way he took it in hand and carried it off. For a minute or so lawyer and detective conferred, in undertones; then Harwood turned to Liscomb:

"Do you remember about the night trains from Valley City to Chicago, judge?" No night train to the city stopped at Slow River.

"There's one a little before 2 o'clock," the judge replied.

"That'll answer," said Harwood, brightly, with a nod to Samuels. "Judge Liscomb here will help you find a car to drive to Valley City. Of course, take my car while you're looking for another. Judge Liscomb, this is Sergeant Samuels of the Chicago police department. And Detective Wistrom, Judge Liscomb. Will you help these men find a car to drive them to Valley City, judge?" Carrying it all off that way, with his bright alertness—settling it all, so to speak, with a wave of the wand!

Again Bess looked over at Robert Whiteside, and there was a pledge in the look.

Samuels announced, cheerfully, "Well, we'll march."

But Bess spoke up: "This man must see a doctor; his arm is broken."

"We'll have time in Valley City."

Samuels observed, as though that would settle it.

"No!" she cried. "There are doctors here. Why should he ride with a broken arm?" She was speaking to Harwood. "Judge Liscomb can take them to Dr. Wilcox." Evidently she was angry.

"There'll be time," said Harwood, agreeably. "Judge Liscomb will take you to Dr. Wilcox. One of you can stay there while the judge goes with the other to find a car." So that was disposed of.

Samuels touched Curlin's arms. The blow in the stomach seemed to have taken all the steam out of the camera maker. He stood up, and turned to Harwood, speaking with a sort of sullen impudence:

"A damned thief and cutthroat as ever lived!" Even the hard eyed detective grinned. Curlin turned to Judge Liscomb: "You're a judge, I hear. That trunk's got my property in it. You stay here and see he don't steal it."

But he seemed not to expect that that judge would, and the judge merely flopped an empty sleeve. Once more Whiteside and Bess exchanged glances.

A moment later four men were going up the stairs, leaving Harwood and Elizabeth alone in the moldy basement. He was looking at her with a slight, somewhat dubious smile; and he said:

"I didn't expect to find you here, Bessie—especially in that company." His tone was courteous enough, but with a kind of mournful droop in it. And she comprehended that she was in the age old position of the female who must explain to her man how she came to be in such and such a place in company with such and such a male. She could almost have laughed over that.

"I wondered about this trunk," she said, "and decided to come up here. I wired Judge Liscomb to meet me; but when we got here, Mr. Curlin had already dug the trunk up. We walked in on him." She smiled a little wanly. "He locked us in the coal bin. Then Mr. Whiteside came and let us out. Curlin broke his arm. Then the detective came in." She used the fewest possible words, her mind really on something else.

Harwood listened, with relief. The great point was that she had traveled up there alone and had come to the factory with Judge Liscomb. "I see," he said, pleasantly; and she understood that he exculpated her; she had not come there with a young man. At his pleasantest, he added, "You must be tired, dearie. It may be half an hour or so before the car gets back. We'll go up and sit in the office. I suppose you'll ride back to town with me? Were due at the inquest at half past 10, you know."

Certainly she knew that; but she was struggling against the suggestion of going upstairs. She felt in her bones that he meant to get her out of the way and open the trunk. And this unworded pledge to Robert Whiteside she was going to keep! Without looking at him, she replied, "O, I'm not tired. Now that I'm here I want to see what I've inherited."

Before he could interpose she picked up the bar and thrust vigorously at the lip of the trunk's lid. Once she got the point of the bar under the lid, bursting it open would not take long. She thrust again; but as the trunk stood on its bottom she had to stoop and strike upward.

"I'll turn it over," she said—still persistently not looking at him. Dropping the bar, she turned the trunk on its side. It was much lighter than she had expected. Harwood was greatly embarrassed. Decidedly he didn't wish her to see the inside of that trunk. It might contain Curlin's invention—or something more startling.

"Let it be; you're tired," he said, "We'll get a locksmith."

She replied quite cheerfully, not looking at him, "O, I can do it. I'm strong." By way of proving it she made another thrust with the bar, springing the side of the trunk. A few more like that would do it. But she must not open the trunk.

Harwood stepped beside her and put his hand on the bar. "I'll do it, Bess," he said, "but there's something I must tell you."

She had to relinquish the bar, then, or descend to a mere squabble with him for its possession. What was he going to say? He had the bar; he was looking her straight in the eyes—a handsome, pleasant appearing man. Then he was speaking to her in a grave undertone:

"I may have made a big mistake. Krom may have committed suicide, in spite of what the police think. The last time I saw him—Friday—he told me he killed Steinman. The fellow was such a confounded liar that I paid no attention to it—didn't take it seriously. He was putting in a claim for Steinman's share of

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