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SYNOPSIS. Jack Keith, a Virginian, now a border plainsman, is looking for roaming war parties of savages. He sees a wagon team at full gallop pursued by men on ponies. When Keith reaches the wagon the raiders have massacred two men and departed. He searches the victims finding papers and a locket with a woman's portrait. Keith is arrested at Carson City, charged with the murder, his accuser being a ruffian named Black Bart. A negro companion in his cell named Neb tells him that he knew the Keith in Virginia. Neb says one of the murdered men was John Sibley, the other Gen. Willis Walte, formerly a Confederate officer. The plainsman and Neb escape, and later the fugitives come upon a cabin and find its occupant to be a young girl, whose name is revealed as Miss Hope. The girl explains that she is in search of a brother, who had deserted from the army, and that a Mr. Hawley induced her to come to the cabin while he sought her brother. Hawley appears, and Keith in hiding recognizes him as Black Bart. There is a terrific battle in the darkened room in which Keith is victorious. Horses are appropriated, and the girl who says that her name is Hope, joins in the escape. Keith explains his situation and the fugitives make for Fort Larned, where the girl is left with the hotel landlady. Miss Hope tells that she is the daughter of General Walte. Keith and Neb drift into Sheridan, where Keith meets an old friend, Dr. Fairbain. Keith meets the brother of Hope Walte, under the assumed name of Fred Willoughby, and becomes convinced that Black Bart has some plot involving the two. Hope learns that Gen. Walte, who was thought murdered, is at Sheridan, and goes there, where she is mistaken for Christie Maclaire, the Carson City singer. Keith meets the real Christie Maclaire and finds that Black Bart has convinced her that there is a mystery in her life which he is going to turn to her advantage. The plainsman tells Hope Walte of her resemblance to Christie Maclaire. They decide that Fred Willoughby may hold the key to the situation. Keith finds Willoughby shot dead.

CHAPTER XXV.—(Continued.)

"Was that all?" "De ol' gin'ral he didn't seem ter know what ter say; he done set dar lookin' off ober de prairie like he was fumegasted. He sho' did look like dat black debble hed hit him 'right hard. Den he says slow like, 'tairnin' his boss 'round; 'Bartlett, yo' am puttin' up a good bluff, but, by Gawd, I'm goin' ter call yo'. Yo' don't set a cent ob dat money 'less yo' put de proof. I'll meet yo' whar yo' say, but ef I can git hol' ob some papers dat's missin' I'll take dat grin off yo' face.' De odder one laughed, and de ol' gin'ral started fo' ter ride away, den he pull up he's hoss, an' look back. 'Yo' sorter herd wid dat kind ob cattle, Bartlett,' he say, sharp like, 'maybe yo' know a gambler roon' yere called Hawley? De black debble nebber eben lose he's grin. 'Do yo' mean Black Bart Hawley? 'Dat's de man, whar is he?' 'Dealin' f'ar fo' Mike Kenna in Topeka a week ago—friend ob yours?' 'Dat's none ob yo' damned business,' snorted de ol' gin'ral, givin' his boss de spur. Sho', Massa Jack, he nebber knowed he was talkin' ter dat same Hawley, an' dat black debble jest laughed as he rode off."

In recovering these; but, with time limited, he had been sent back on a wild goose chase, while Keith alone knew, with any degree of positiveness, where those documents really were. Hawley certainly had them in his possession the day before, for he had taken them to Miss Maclaire to thus convince her as to the truth of his statements. And Hawley was still in Sheridan. However, it was not likely the man would risk carrying documents of such value, and documents connecting him so closely with that murder on the Santa Fe Trail, about upon his person. At best, life was cheap in that community, and Black Bart must possess enemies in plenty. Yet if not on his person—where? Scott was only a fool, a mere ignorant desperado, not to be trusted to such a degree—yet apparently he was the only one working with the gambler in this deal, the only one cognizant as to his plans. Christie—Keith came to a stop in the street at the recurrence of the woman's name. Why not? If she had been convinced, if she really believed that these papers proved her right to both property and parentage, then she would guard them as a tigress does her young. And Hawley would know that, and must realize they would be far safer in her hands than in his pocket. She could not use them without his aid and guidance, and yet, whatever happened to him they would still be safely beyond reach. True, this might not have been done; the gambler might not yet have felt that he had sufficient hold upon the woman to trust her thus far, but it was, at least, a possibility to be considered, and acted upon.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A Chance Conversation. The opportunity thus so unexpectedly afforded was not one to be wasted, and Keith accepted it with swift determination. The expression in the woman's face was scarcely one of welcome, yet his purpose was sufficiently serious to cause him to ignore this with easy confidence in himself. "I am, indeed, most fortunate to discover you alone, Miss Maclaire," he said, avoiding her eyes by a swift glance over the table, "and evidently at a time when you are only beginning your meal. May I join you?" She hesitated for an instant, debating with herself, and as quickly deciding on disagreeable tactics. "I presume this is a public table, and I consequently have little choice in the matter, if you insist," she replied, her voice more civil than her words. "Still, Mr. Keith, I am not accustomed to associating with criminals." He smiled, holding his temper in check, more than ever determined to win. "Then, possibly, you may rather welcome a new diversion. I can assure you our criminals out here are the most interesting portion of our population. I wish I might have your permission."

secret. There are details yet to be decided upon, and Mr. Hawley's present objection to publicity is only ordinary prudence. She leaned toward him, her fingers playing nervously with a knife. "Mr. Keith, I cannot help but like you, and I also feel most kindly disposed toward Mr. Hawley. I wish in this I was no longer compelled to consider you an enemy of us both. There is no reason why I should, except for your blind prejudice against this other man who is my friend. I know you have some cause, for he has told me the entire story, yet I am sure he did no more than his actual duty. He let me realize how very sorry he was that the marshal at Carson City had called upon him for assistance."



"Who? Hawley?" Keith questioned, hardly trusting his own ears. "Yes; indeed he is a very different man from what you have been led to believe. I know he is a gambler, and that, but really it is not altogether his fault. He told me about his life, and it was very sad. He was driven from home when only a boy, and naturally drifted into evil company. His one ambition is to break away, and redeem himself. I am so anxious to help him, and wish you could realize his purpose, as I do, and become his friend. Won't you, for my sake? Why, even in this affair he has not the slightest mercenary purpose—he has only thought of what was rightfully mine."

about that. They were entrusted to him by an old man whom he discovered sick in Independence, and who died in his rooms three years ago. Mr. Hawley has been searching ever since for the old man's granddaughter. It is remarkable how he was finally convinced that I was the one. "A photograph, was it not?" A gleam of sudden suspicion appeared in the brown eyes, a slight change in facial expression. "That was a clue, yes, but far from being all. But why should I tell you this?—you believe nothing I say." "I believe that you believe; that you are fully convinced of the justice of your claim. Perhaps it is just, but I am suspicious of anything which Bart Hawley has a hand in. Miss Christie, you really make me wish to retain your friendship, but I cannot do so if the cost includes faith in Hawley. Do you know that is not even his name—that he lives under an alias?" "Is there anything strange in that out here?" she asked stoutly. "I told you how deeply he regretted his life; that alone would be sufficient cause for him to drop his family name. Did you ever learn his true name?" He was not sure—only as Neb had reported what Waite had called the man, yet ventured a direct reply. "Bartlett, I believe—he uses it now as a prefix." "Bartlett!—Bartlett!" her hands clasping, and unclasping nervously. "Why, what a strange coincidence!" "How? What do you mean?" "Oh, nothing—nothing," blushing her lips in vexation. "The name merely recalled something. But really, I must go, Mr. Keith, or I shall be late at the theater. You have not attended since I came?" "No," arising from the table with her. "However, I have heard you sing before, and hope I may again." "How tenderly you dwell on that word 'hope,'" she said banteringly. "It almost makes me envious." "Your resemblance almost makes me forget."

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