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THE MAN IN LOWER TEN

The Great Mystery Story

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CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

I looked at her, at the lines around her eyes, at the drawn look about her mouth. Then I held out my hand. "I said, as she gave me hers. "There is nothing in God's green earth I am afraid of, save of trouble for you. To ask questions would be to imply a lack of faith. I ask you nothing. Some day, perhaps, you will come to me yourself and let me help you."

The next moment I was out in the golden sunshine; the birds were singing carols of joy; I walked dizzily through rainbow colored clouds, past the twins, cherubs now, swinging on the gate. It was a new world into which I stepped from the Carter farm house that morning, for I had kissed her!

CHAPTER XIX.

AT THE TABLE NEXT.

McKnight and Hotchkiss were sauntering slowly down the road as I caught up with them. As usual, the little man was busy with some abstruse mental problem.

"The idea is this," he was saying, his brows knitted in thought, "if a left-handed man, standing in the position of the man in the picture, should jump from a car, would he be likely to sprain his right ankle? When a right-handed man prepares for a leap of that kind, my theory is that he would hold on with his right hand, and alight at the proper time, on his right foot. Of course—"

"I imagine, although I don't know," interrupted McKnight, "that a man either ambidextrous or over-armed, jumping from the Washington Plier, would be more likely to land on his head."

"Anyhow," I interposed, "what difference does it make whether Sullivan uses one hand or the other? One pair of handcuffs will shut both hands out of commission."

As usual when one of his pet theories was attacked, Hotchkiss looked aggrieved. "My dear sir," he expostulated, "don't you understand what bearing this has on the case? How was the murdered man lying when he was found?"

"On his back," I said promptly, "head toward the engine."

"Very well," he retorted, "and what then? Your head lies under your fifth intercostal space, and to reach it a right-handed blow would have struck either down or directly in."

"But, gentlemen, the point of entrance for the bullet was below the heart, striking up. As Harrington lay with his head toward the engine, a person in the aisle must have used the left hand."

McKnight's eyes sought mine and he winked at me solemnly as I unostentatiously transferred the hat I was carrying to my right hand. Long training has largely counterbalanced heredity in my case, but I still pitch ball, play tennis and

curve with my left hand. But Hotchkiss was too busy with his theories to notice me.

We were only just in time for our train back to Baltimore, but McKnight took advantage of a second's delay to shake the station agent warmly by the hand.

"I want to express my admiration for you," he said beamingly. "Ability of your order is thrown away here. You should have been a city policeman, my friend."

"The agent looked a trifle uncertain. "The young lady was the one who told me to keep still," he said.

McKnight glanced at me, gave the agent's hand a final shake, and climbed on board. But I knew perfectly that he had guessed the reason for my delay.

He was very silent on the way home. Hotchkiss, too, had little to say. He was reading over his notes intently, rapping now and then to make a penciled addition. Just before we left the train Hotchkiss turned to me. "I suppose it was the key to the door that she tied to the gate?"

"Probably, I did not ask her," I replied. "Curious, her looking that fellow in," he reflected.

"You may depend on it, there was a good reason for it all. And I wish you wouldn't be so suspicious of motives, Rich," I said warmly.

"Only yesterday you were the suspicious one," he retorted, and we lapsed into strained silence.

It was late when we got to Washington. One of Mrs. Klopston's small tyrannies was exacting punctuality at meals, and, like several other things, I respected her.

There are always some concessions that should be made in return for faithful service.

So, as my dinner hour of 7 was long past, McKnight and I went to a little restaurant down town where they have a very decent way of fixing chicken a la King. Hotchkiss had departed, economically bent, for a small hotel where he lived on the American plan.

"I want to think some things over," he said in response to my invitation to dinner, "and, anyhow, there's no use dining out when I pay the same, dinner or no dinner, where I am stopping."

The day had been hot, and the first four dining rooms was sultry in spite of the palms and fans which attempted to simulate the verdure and breeze of the country.

It was crowded, too, with a typical summer night crowd, and, after sitting for a few minutes in a sweltering corner, we got up and went to the smaller dining room upstairs. Here it was not so warm, and we settled ourselves comfortably by a window.

Over in a corner half a dozen boys on their way back to school were ragging a preening waiter, a proceeding so exactly McKnight's taste that he insisted on going over to join them. But their table was full, and somehow that kind of fun had lost its point for me.

Nut far from us a very stout, middle-aged man, apple-cheeked with the heat, was eloquently jolly for the benefit of a bored looking girl across the table from him, and at the next table a newspaper woman ate alone, the last edition propped against the water bottle before her, her hat, for coolness, on the corner of the table. It was a motley Bohemian crowd.

I looked over the room casually, while McKnight ordered the meal. Then my attention was attracted to the table next to ours. Two people were sitting there, so deep in conversation that they did not notice us. The woman's face was hidden under her hat, as she traced the pattern of the cloth mechanically with her fork. But the man's features stood out clear in the light of the candles on the table. It was Bronson!

"He shows the strain, doesn't he?" McKnight said, holding up the wine list as if to read from it. "Who's the woman?"

"Search me," I replied, in the same way. "When the chicken came, I still found myself gazing now and then at the abstracted couple near me. Evidently the subject of conversation was unpleasant. Bronson was eating little, the woman not at all. Finally he got up, pushed his chair back noisily, thrust a bill at the waiter and stalked out."

The woman sat still for a moment; then, an apparent resolution to make the best of it, she began slowly to eat the meal before her.

But the quarrel had taken away her appetite, for the mixture in our chafing dish was hardly ready to serve before she pushed her chair back a little and looked around the room.

I caught my first glimpse of her face then, and I confess it startled me. It was the tall, stately woman of the Ontario, the woman I had last seen covering beside the road, blood streaming from a cut over her eye. I could see the scar now, a little affair, about an inch long, gleaming red through its layers of powder.

And then, quite unexpectedly, she turned and looked directly at me. After a minute's uncertainty, she bowed, letting her eyes rest on mine with a calmly insolent stare. She glanced at McKnight for a moment, then her eyes came back to me. When she looked away again I breathed easier.

"Who is it?" asked McKnight under his breath.

"Ontario," I forced it with my lips rather than said it. McKnight's eyebrows went up and he looked with increased interest at the black-gowned figure.

I ate little after that. The situation here, then, back to me. When she looked next, there was a woman who could, if she wished, and had no motive for so doing, put me in jail under a capital charge. A word from her to the police, and police surveillance would become active interference.

Then, too, she could say that she had seen me, just after the wreck, with a young woman from the murdered man's car, and thus probably bring Allison West into the case.

It is not surprising, then, that I ate

little. The woman across seemed in no hurry to go. She loitered over a demitasse, and that finished, sat with her elbow on the table, her chin in her hand, looking darkly at the chafing groups in the room.

The fun at the table where the college boys sat began to grow a little noisy; the fat man, now a purplish shade, ambled away behind his slim companion; the newspaper woman pined on her business-like hat and staid out. Still the woman at the next table waited.

It was a relief when the meal was over. We got our hats and were about to leave the room, when a waiter touched me on the arm.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but the lady at the table near the window, the lay in black, sir, would like to speak to you."

I looked down between the rows of tables to where the woman sat alone, her chin still resting on her hand; her black eyes still intently staring, this time at me.

"I'll have to go," I said to McKnight hurriedly. "She knows all about that affair—she's a bad enemy."

"I don't like her lamps," McKnight observed, after a glance at her. "Better jolly her a little. Goodbye."

CHAPTER XX.

THE NOTES AND A BARGAIN.

I went back slowly to where the woman sat alone. She smiled rather oddly at I crew near, and pointed to the chair Bronson had vacated.

"Sit down, Mr. Blakely," she said. "I am going to take a few minutes of your valuable time."

"Certainly," I sat down opposite her and glanced at a cuckoo clock on the wall. "I am sorry, but I have only a few minutes. If you—"

She laughed a little, not very pleasantly, and opening a small black bag covered with spangles, waved it slowly.

"The fact is," she said, "I think we are about to make a bargain."

"A bargain?" I asked incredulously. "You have a second advantage of me. You know my name—I paused suggestively and she took the cue.

"I am Mrs. Conway," she said, and flicked a crumb off the table with an over-muscled finger.

"The name was scarcely a surprise. I had already surmised that this might be the woman whose rumor credited as being Bronson's common law wife. Rumor, I remembered, had said other things even less pleasant, things which had been brought out at Bronson's arrest for forgery."

"We met last under less fortunate circumstances," she was saying. "I have been fit for nothing since that terrible day. And you—you had a broken arm, I think."

"I still have it," I said, with a lame attempt at jocularity; "but to have escaped at all was a miracle. We have now, a little affair, about an inch long, gleaming red through its layers of powder, although sometimes I doubt it."

She looked somberly toward the door through which her late companion had made his exit.

"You sent for me?" I said.

"Yes, I sent for you." She roused herself and sat erect. "Now, Mr. Blakely, have you found those papers?"

"The papers? What papers?" I parried. "I needed time to think."

"Mr. Blakely," she said soberly, "I think we can lay aside all subtleties. In the first place let me refresh your mind about a few things. The Pittsburg police are looking for the survivors of the car Ontario; there are three that I know of yourself, the young woman with whom you left the scene of the wreck, and myself. The wreck, you will admit, was a fortunate one for you."

I nodded without speaking.

"At the time of the collision you were in rather a hole," she went on, looking at me with a disagreeable smile. "You were, if I remember, accused of a rather atrocious crime. There was a lot of corroborative evidence, was there not?"

I tried to remember a dirk and the murdered

man's pocketbook in your possession, and a few other things that were—well, rather unpleasant."

"I was thrown a bit off my guard. "You remember also," I said quickly, "that a man disappeared from the car, taking my clothes, papers and everything."

"I remember that you said so." Her tone was quietly insulting, and I bit my lip at having been caught. It was no time to make a defense.

"You have missed one calculation," I said coldly. "and that is, the discovery of the man who left the train."

"You have found him?" She bent forward, and again I regretted my hasty speech. "I knew it, I said so."

"We are going to find him," I asserted, with a confidence I did not feel. "We can produce at any time proof that a man left the Flier a few miles beyond the wreck. And we can find him, I am positive."

"But you have not found him yet?" She was clearly disappointed. "Well, so be it. Now for our bargain. You will admit that I am no fool."

I made no such admission, and she smiled mockingly.

"How flattering you are!" she said. "Very well. Now for the premises. You take to Pittsburg four notes held by the Mechanics' National bank, to have Mr. Gilmore, who is ill, declare his indorsement of them forged."

"On the journey back to Pittsburg two things happen to you; you lose your clothing, your valise and your papers, including the notes, and you are accused of murder. In fact, Mr. Blakely, the circumstances were most singular, and the evidences well, almost conclusive."

I was completely at her mercy, but I gnawed my lip with irritation.

"Now for the bargain," she leaned over and lowered her voice. "A fair exchange, you know. The minute you put those four notes in my hand—that minute the blow to my head has caused complete forgetfulness as to the events of that awful morning. I am the only witness, and I will be silent. Do you understand? They will call off their dogs."

My head was buzzing with the strangeness of the idea.

"But," I said, striving to gain time, "I haven't the notes. I can't give you what I haven't got."

"Now for the case continued," she said sharply. "You expect to find them. Another thing," she added slowly, watching my face, "if you don't get them soon, Bronson will have them. They have been offered to him already, but at a prohibitive price."

"But," I said, bewildered, "what is your object in coming to me? If Bronson will get them anyhow—"

She shut her fan with a click and her face was not particularly pleasant to look at.

"You are dense," she said insolently. "I want those papers—for myself, not for Andy Bronson."

"Then the idea is," I said, ignoring her tone, "that you think you have me in a hole, and that if I find those papers and give them to you you will let me out. As I understand it, our friend Bronson, under those circumstances, will also be in a hole."

She nodded.

"The notes would be of no use to you for a limited length of time, if I went on watching her narrowly. If they are returned over to the state's attorney, within a reasonable time there will have to be a note pro—that is, the case will simply be dropped for lack of evidence."

"A weak would answer, I think," she said slowly. "You will do it, then?"

I laughed, although I was not especially cheerful.

"No, I'll not do it. I expect to come across the notes any time now, and I expect just as certainly to turn them over to the state's attorney when I get them."

She got up suddenly, pushing her chair back with a noisy grating sound that turned many eyes toward us.

"You're more of a fool than I thought you were," she sneered, and left me at the table.

CHAPTER XXI.

MCKNIGHT'S THEORY.

I confess I was staggered. The people at the surrounding tables, after glancing curiously in my direction, looked away again.

I got my hat and went out in a very uncomfortable frame of mind. That she would inform the police at once of what she knew I never doubted, unless possibly she would give a day or two's grace in the hope that I would change my mind.

I reviewed the situation as I waited for a car. Two passed me going in the opposite direction, and on the first one I saw Bronson, his hat over his eyes, his arms folded, looking moodily ahead. Was it imagination? or was the small man hidden in the corner of the rear seat Hotchkiss?

As the car rolled on I found myself smiling. The alert little man was for all the world like a terrier, ever on the alert, and scouring about in every direction.

I found McKnight at the incubator, with his coat off, working with enthusiasm and a manicure file over the horn of his auto.

"It's the worst horn I ever ran across," he groaned, without looking up, as I came in. "The blankety-blank thing won't blow."

I punched it savagely, finally eliciting a faint throaty croup.

"Sounds like crank," I suggested. "My sister-in-law uses camphor and goose grease for it; or how about a spice polisher?"

But McKnight never sees any jokes but his own. He flung the horn clattering into a corner, and collapsed sulkily into a chair.

"Now," I said, "if you're through manuring that horn, I'll tell you about my talk with the lady in black."

"What's wrong?" he asked McKnight languidly. "Police watching her, too?"

"Not exactly. The fact is, Rich, there's the mischief to pay."

Stooge came in, bringing a few additions to our comfort. When he went out I told my story.

"You must remember," I said, "that I had seen this woman before the morning of the wreck. She was buying her Pullman ticket when I did. Then the next morning, when the murder was discovered, she grew hysterical, and I gave her some whisky. The third and last time I saw her, until tonight, was when she crouched beside the road, after the wreck."

McKnight slid down in his chair until his weight rested on the small of his back, and put his feet on the big reading table.

"It is rather a face," he said. "It's really too good a situation for a common-law lawyer. It ought to be dramatized. You can't agree, of course; and by refusing you run the chance of jail, at least, and of having Allison brought into publicity, which is out of the question. You say she was at the Pullman window when you were?"

"Yes, I bought her ticket for her. Gave her lower eleven."

"Lower ten?"

McKnight straightened up and looked at me.

"Then she thought you were in lower ten?"

"I suppose she did, if she thought at all."

"But listen, man," McKnight was growling excited. "What do you figure out of this? The Conway woman knows you have taken the notes to Pittsburg. The probabilities are that she followed you there, on the chance of an opportunity to get them, either for Bronson or herself."

"Nothing doing during the trip over or during the day in Pittsburg; but she learns the number of your berth as you buy it at the Pullman ticket office in Pittsburg, and she thinks she sees her chance. No one could have foreseen that that drunken fellow would have crawled into your berth."

"Now, I figure it out this way: She wanted those notes desperately—does still—wanted those notes desperately—does still—wanted those notes desperately—does still—"

"You're more of a fool than I thought you were," she sneered, and left me at the table.

head for some purpose. In the night, when everything is quiet, she slips behind the curtains of lower ten, where the man's breathing shows he is asleep. Didn't you say he snored?"

"He did," I affirmed. "But I tell you—"

"Now keep still and listen. She gropes cautiously around in the darkness, finally discovering the wallet under the pillow. Can't you see it yourself?"

He was leaning forward, excitedly, and I could almost see the gruesome tragedy he was depicting.

"She draws out the wallet. Then, perhaps she remembers the alligator bag, and on the possibility that the notes are there, instead of in the pocketbook, she gropes around for it. Suddenly, the man awakes and clutches at the nearest object, perhaps her neck chain, which breaks. She drops the pocketbook and tries to escape, but he has caught her right hand as she groped with her revolver, is noiseless.

"It is all in silence; the man is still stupidly drunk. But he holds her in a tight grip. Then the tragedy. She must get away; in a minute the car will be aroused. Such a woman, on such an errand, does not go without some sort of a weapon. In this case she groped with her hand, and a revolver, is noiseless."

"With a quick thrust—she's a big woman and a bold one—she strikes. Possibly Hotchkiss is right about the left-hand hand. Harrington may have held her right hand, or perhaps she held the dirk in her left hand as she groped with her right. Then, as the man falls back, and his grasp relaxes, she straightens and attempts to get away. The swaying of the car throws her almost into your berth, and, trembling with terror, she crouches behind the curtains of lower ten until everything is still. Then she goes noiselessly back to her berth."

"It seems to fit partly, at least," I said. "In the morning when she found that the crime had been not only forgiven, but that she had searched the wrong berth and killed the wrong man; when she saw me emerge, unharmed, just as she was bracing herself for the discovery of my dead body. Then she went into hysterics. You remember, I gave her some whisky."

"It really seems a tenable theory. But, like the Sullivan theory, there are one or two things that don't agree with the rest. For one thing, how did the remainder of that chain get into Allison West's possession?"

"She may have picked it up on the floor."

"Well, I admit that," I said, "and I'm sure I know no. Then how did the murdered man's pocketbook get into the sealed skin bag? And the dirk, how account for that, and the blood stains?"

"Now what's the use, asked McKnight aggressively, "of my building up beautiful theories for you to pull down? We'll take it to Hotchkiss. Maybe he can tell from the blood stains if the murderer's finger nails were square or pointed."

"Hotchkiss is no fool," I said warmly. "Under all his theories there's a good hard layer of common sense. And we must remember, Rich, that neither of our theories includes the woman at Dr. Van Kirk's hospital, that the charming picture you have just drawn does not account for Allison West's connection with the case, or for the bits of telegram in the Sullivan fellow's pajama pocket. You are like the man who put the clock together; you've got half of the works left over."

"Oh, go home," said McKnight, disgustedly. "I'm no Edgar Allan Poe. What's the use of coming here and asking me things if you're so particular?"

With one of his quick changes of mood, he picked up the guitar.

"Listen to this," he said. "It is a Hawaiian song about a fat lady, oh, ignorant one! and how she fell off her mule."

But for all the lightness of her words, the voice that followed me down the stairs was anything but cheery.

There was a Kanaka in Honolulu who had had for his daughter a monstrous fat girl—"

he sang in his clear tenor. I passed on the lower floor and listened. He had stopped singing as abruptly as he had begun.

(To Be Continued)