

The Social Pirates :-:

Story No. 12---The Disappearance of Helen Minter

Plot by George Bronson Howard

Novelization by Hugh C. Weir :: Copyright Kalem Company

"Help! Help!"

Such a cry is associated with a gloomy alley, or dark country lane at midnight. To connect it with a taxicab in a crowded city street in broad daylight requires an elastic imagination—but to the two young women who had heard the smothered cry it was both very real and very poignant. For a moment they stood, dumb with amazement, staring after the curtained motor, from the recesses of which the curious appeal had emanated. Then simultaneously they whirled and faced each other, asking mutely the same question.

It was Mona Hartley who found her voice first.

"You heard it, too? A woman's voice! Are we awake, or dreaming?"

In answer Mary Burnett caught her companion's arm and whirled her aside, just in time to avoid a heavy truck.

"If you need physical proof that you are awake, you will soon have it if you stand where you are!" She threaded her way hurriedly through the traffic to the curb, searching for a vacant taxicab. But there was none in sight, and in the meantime she realized that the machine, from which had come the cry of distress, was drawing farther away each moment. The sound of her own name, in a hearty, masculine voice, brought her spinning about with a little gasp of delight.

"Mr. Carson!" she cried. "You are just in time! Where is your car?"

The tall, rather serious-faced young man, who had stepped from the entrance of the corner office building, glanced keenly at the girl's flushed features.

"What is wrong?"

"I don't know! I'll tell you about it later. We want you and your car to pursue a mysterious taxicab—if we haven't lost it!"

Casper Carson, the young millionaire social worker and reformer, was a man accustomed to think and act quickly. Without another word he sprang across the walk and threw open the door of a dark blue, up-to-date touring car. As Mary and Mona jumped into the clutch for blocks they chased the taxi until it mysteriously, and to the disgust of the trio, disappeared down a side street.

"I took down the license number, anyway," said Mary.

"We ought to have no trouble then," he declared. "But, of course, by the time we had traced the owner of the vehicle and located the driver it would probably be too late to do the unknown woman any service." He lighted a cigarette thoughtfully and turned in the course of the machine toward the garage. "I'll go down to the district attorney's office, anyway," he decided. "Burke, my driver, is waiting at the garage, and he can take you back to your flat. I'll report progress tonight."

Carson left them at the garage, and his driver took his place, Carson promising again to report any developments as soon as possible. But his manner showed more plainly than his words how dubious he regarded the promise of encouraging news.

The two girls settled back in their seats as the car backed out of the garage and began the return trip to their apartments.

They were passing the brownstone front of what had obviously once been a pretentious residence, but which was now given over to select commercial purposes. On the windows of the building appeared the gilt inscription: "Madame Suto, Beauty Parlors."

It was not the building which drew Mary's whispered cry, but the sight of a taxicab, drawn up before the building, evidently waiting for a passenger inside. It was the same machine from which had come the vain cry for help—the machine which had eluded their belated pursuit. Even as Mary's wandering glance noted the telltale license tag, the door of the Beauty Parlors opened and a middle-aged man, in a stylish spring suit, hurried down the stairs and across the walk.

He climbed into the machine, with a curt direction to the driver, and it moved off. Mary ordered Carson's chauffeur to follow. The curtain of the taxi had been rolled up and the two girls could see the occupant without difficulty. He was leaning back in his seat, puffing at a thick brown cigar.

"Do you know, Mary, I have seen that man before!" said Mona suddenly, knitting her brows.

"That is exactly the idea I have had, too," answered Mary. "Maybe we have seen his picture somewhere. There, his car is stopping! He is getting out!"

The taxi ahead drew up at the curb and the occupant, tossing the driver a bill, and without waiting for the change, made his way across the walk, and into the entrance of an office building as the taxi continued on its way. The girls, studied the building for a moment in silence, uncertain as to whether or not to try to follow the man further. The first floor was given over to the use of a bank. On the corner windows of the second floor appeared the legend, "Daniel Slatern, Attorney-at-Law."

"We might as well give it up for the present," said Mary finally. "With what we have learned no doubt Mr. Carson can suggest the next step!"

"You seem to have a lot of confidence in Mr. Carson's judgment," smiled Mary blushed. "Why shouldn't I?" she retorted.

The girls did not have long to wait for the appearance of Casper Carson at their flat. They had hardly finished dinner when he was announced, and his face showed that he had no news even before he shook his head. At Mary's excited story of the sequel of their fruitless pursuit of the taxicab he looked grave, and when the girl described how it had ended, and the appearance of the unknown man whom they had traced, his gravity increased.

Without a word he reached into his pocket and produced a small wallet from which he extracted two newspaper clippings. The first gave a two-column likeness of a rather grimaced, close-shaven man, at sight of whom both girls cried out in recognition.

"That is Dan Slatern, political boss of the upper tier," explained Carson slowly. "He is a bad man—"

and a dangerous one." He held out the second newspaper clipping, and Mary read aloud a recent interview with Carson, given to an energetic reporter, in which the young millionaire had set forth certain vigorous views on what he termed "The Social Evil of So-Called Beauty Parlors," declaring that many of these establishments were operated largely as a cloak to gambling houses and that they were playing the illegal trade under the protection of a clique of men high up in the political control of the city.

"One of those places which I had in mind when I gave the interview," said Carson, as Mary finished, is none other than the establishment of which I believe has given his endorsement and protection to it is none other than Dan Slatern. I have been working for months for evidence that would prove my suspicions and convict him in a court of law!"

"Do you think that the affair of the taxicab has any bearing on the inside operations of Madame Suto?" asked Mona thoughtfully.

"I don't think there is any doubt about it," was the emphatic rejoinder. "I can't see just the evidence you want about Madame Suto and Slatern." She then unfolded the plan. "What do you think of it?" she asked.

Carson and Mary agreed and an appointment was made for him to meet Mona the next evening at the Metropolitan Cafe—an establishment frequently by actresses, chorus girls and men about town.

Mary was to remain in the background for the present, but there was every indication that when she was needed in the little drama of Mona planning her role would be no small one.

There was a definite reason behind the dinner appointment of Mona and Carson. The Metropolitan cafe was one of the establishments most patronized by Slatern, and where his appearance was the signal for every unoccupied waiter in the house to quicken into activity. Carson led the way through the glaringly lighted doorway, with a mental register of protest at the character of its surroundings, but Mona concealed her feelings cleverly, and none of the diners would have suspected from her attitude of unaffected enjoyment that she was counting the moments before their task would be done, and they would be free to depart. The two found a table in a retired position as possible, and from which both could command a view of the door. Slatern had not yet appeared, and Mona was beginning to worry for fear that he might vary his routine of habit on this occasion when the political boss sauntered in, escorted a very blonde, overly-dressed young woman, who showed obvious pride in her "conquest."

Slatern and his companion were ushered to a table in a prominent position, and Mona and Carson delayed their chairs without arousing suspicion, and also directed her attention to the other table. Mona and Carson, however, continued their meal as though unconscious of the scrutiny.

When Slatern and his companion finally left the cafe, Mona and Carson were just behind them.

The two couples reached the walk at almost the same moment. As the door closed, Mona broke away from Carson's arm, and raised her voice angrily.

"I am done with you—for good!" Carson took a step toward her, and tried to regain hold of her arm. But she shook him off.

"You are a tight-wad, a disgusting tight-wad!" She said that her voice had reached the ears of Slatern, and that the other was looking over his shoulder curiously. "I don't want any more of your promises! I am through—from this moment!"

With head high, and eyes flashing, she crossed to an empty taxicab, and jumped in, leaving Carson staring after her. Slatern nudged his companion, with a chuckle, and then, reaching down quickly, picked up a small lace handkerchief from the walk which Mona had dropped from her bag. With the handkerchief was a business card, on the back of which was a hastily scribbled line of writing. Slatern held it to the light, and read: "It is imperative for me to have your report of Suto's place at once. Please rush it!" On the reverse side of the card was the engraved name, "Casper Carson."

Slatern's eyes gleamed with sudden satisfaction. He did not know that the whole incident of Mona's quarrel had been carefully staged in advance, and that the card had been dropped purposely at his feet. Unaware of these facts, the political boss thrust the card into his pocket, and with a malicious glance back at Carson, who was still standing uncertainly before the door of the cafe, swaggered across the walk to his own car.

Late the next afternoon Mona emerged from a taxicab before Madame Suto's establishment, ascended the steps, and was ushered by the liveried colored attendant at the door into a handsomely appointed waiting room. In a moment or two Madame Suto appeared.

"You wish to see me?" Mona nodded. "I wish to see you very much—privately."

Madame Suto raised her eyebrows. "I am very busy."

"I fancy that my errand is well worth your time and attention," rejoined Mona, coldly. "However—" she started to walk indifferently toward the door, but the other caught her arm.

"Step this way, please!" she conceded, grudgingly. Mona followed her conductress through the portieres, and down a narrow corridor, giving into a series of thinly partitioned booths, in which she caught glimpses of women customers in various stages of

"beautifying." At the end of the corridor the Madame Suto's door, and conducted her visitor into a small room, which evidently served the purpose of a private office.

"And now what is it?" she demanded.

"My name is Jenkins—May Jenkins," began Mona, boldly. "For several months I have been in the employ of Casper Carson. Do you know him?"

"Perhaps," was the enigmatic response. "And what of it?"

"I have been assisting him to gather evidence against certain establishments like yours," said Mona, directly. "You may know, perhaps, that he believes you're running a gambling house."

Madame Suto's face flushed.

"Go on!" she snapped.

"Carson has double-crossed me," said Mona, in as vicious a tone as she could muster. "He gives nothing but promises—and I have broken with him, and told him he would be sorry to let me go! I intend to make him sorry! That is why I have come to you—to tell you certain matters which may be of interest to you!"

"I don't know what you mean," Madame Suto scanned the girl's face shrewdly, and her manner perceptibly stiffened.

"I mean that you are to be raided at almost any hour!" Mona stepped closer to the other, and spoke the last words almost into her ears. She could feel the thrill of alarm which coursed through the Madame's trim body. For just an instant the other hesitated and then she stepped to the telephone on her desk and called a number into the transmitter.

"Wait here, please," she said, with a trifle more cordiality in her voice. Mona dropped into a chair, affecting not to be interested in the conversation over the wire. She could hear a man's voice through the receiver, and then the Madame, lowering her voice, spoke rapidly and nervously, and evidently to such purpose that a moment later she hung back the receiver with a sigh of relief.

"A friend of mine is coming over, who would like to hear your story, my young friend. If you can convince him of its truth, perhaps you have not done so badly after all!"

"I don't care for that part of it," said Mona, carelessly, guessing at once that the "friend" in question was Dan Slatern. "All that I am interested in is getting back at Carson. I told him I would make him sorry, and I want to make my promise good!"

"Just so! Just so!" nodded the Madame, absently. She stepped to the door. "If you don't mind waiting for just a moment, I have an urgent customer waiting outside."

"Not at all," said Mona, pleasantly. She heard the key turn on the other side of the door and smiled to herself. Evidently the Madame was not disposed to take any chances!

The girl strolled to the one window of the room, and parted the curtains. It opened on a rear alley just across from which loomed the outlines of a rear house fronting on the next block. The alley itself, was deserted.

She dropped the curtains and turned back to a survey of the room. If the plans of Casper Carson had gone through without a hitch, his men even now were assembling for the raid on the Beauty Parlors, which had been agreed upon at dusk. That it was a "plant" without either the knowledge or assistance of the district attorney's office, would, of course, not be known until later—and Carson's wealth and influence were such that he would answer any legal inquiries, if, indeed, any should be made. He knew that Slatern was well aware of the reform crusade, of which he, Carson, was the prime mover—and that the young millionaire had been sworn in as a special deputy by the district attorney's office, which was engaged in one of its periodical fights with the police department.

That such a raid should be ordered without warning from the district attorney's office was more than probable—and Carson knew it would not be a difficult task to convince Slatern of its genuineness.

While Mona was busy with these thoughts, the key turned in the door again, and the Madame reappeared, with a man whom the girl at once recognized as Dan Slatern. That he recognized her also, and recalled the previous quarrel with Carson with a smile he stepped toward her.

"I understand you have something to tell me."

Mona met his appraising glance boldly, and repeated the story she had told Madame Suto. Slatern heard her through without comment.

"And when is this raid to take place?" he asked abruptly, after she had finished.

"It is scheduled for —" The girl's sentence was interrupted by a sound of a scuffle, and a vigorous hammering at the street door. Slatern, with an oath, sprang back into the corridor, followed by Madame Suto and Mona. It was evident that the "raid" was already in progress.

Slatern turned swiftly to Madame Suto, and she met his mute question with a nod.

"Everything has been cleared away," she said. "I took care of that—as soon as I heard the girl's story."

Slatern sprang through a hidden door, pulling Mona after him, and shutting the concealed door, just as the sounds from the front of the building showed that Madame Suto had admitted the presumable officers of the law. After a reasonable length of time Slatern returned to ascertain if the officers had gone. In a few moments he was back at Mona's side.

"They have gone," he said. "And I rather fancy that your friend, Carson, is almost convinced that he was on a blind trail!" He lighted a fresh cigar with a chuckle. At that moment a woman's suppressed scream rang through the building, to be smothered the next instant.

Slatern threw away his match with a curse, but Mona pretended to be unconscious of anything out of the ordinary, although she was straining her ears in the hope of a repetition of the cry. It had come apparently from a room below, and there was no doubt that a rough hand had silenced the mouth from which it had burst.

Was it the same woman who had called in vain from the covered taxi-cab? She saw that Slatern was watching her covertly out of the corner of his eye, and tried to smile.

"Shall we be going back?" she asked. "Or shall I leave from this house?"

"Oh, the coast is clear enough now," said Slatern rather absently. He led the way back through the tunnel, and again into the beauty parlors. Madame Suto was pinning on her hat, evidently preparing to go out for dinner. Except for the splintered street door, there was no sign of the "raid," which had threatened to disturb the serenity of the place, and the liberty of its occupants.

"I think we are under obligations to Miss Jenkins," said Slatern, giving Mona the name she had offered to Madame Suto. "What do you think your services are worth to us?" he asked, plugging his hands into his pockets.

The girl made a gesture of protest. "Not a dollar! I told you I was not doing it for money—but to get back at Carson! I rather think he will be sorry before he is through!"

Slatern grunted. "Have it your way! But just the same I am not a man to forget a favor. Suppose you call at my office in the morning? It is just possible that we can be of mutual benefit to each other."

"I'll come," promised Mona, as Slatern led the way to the street door. She smiled a farewell, and made her way down the steps and to the street, conscious that both Slatern and Madame Suto were staring after her.

Mary and Carson were anxiously waiting for her when she reached her apartment. The two listened in amazement as she told of the exciting events that had marked her introduction to Madame Suto, and of the success which had so far attended her efforts as amateur detective.

"I am to see Slatern in the morning," she finished. "I have an idea that he is going to suggest that I enter his employ in the same capacity in which he thinks I worked for you, Mr. Carson."

She was right. When she called on the political boss next day he was plainly much taken, not only with the cleverness of his visitor, but with her charms, and made it clear that he considered himself much the gainer and Carson much the loser by her change of masters.

"You can be of much help to me," he went on. "As a first step, make up your differences with Carson."

"Why should I do that?" asked Mona.

Slatern winked. "So that you can keep me informed of his plans. Don't you see my drift? If you can make him think you are devoted to his reform plans, you can let me know in advance of anything in the wind."

"Gee, but you are smart!" cried Mona admiringly.

"Oh, they will have to get up early to get ahead of Sam Slatern!" admitted the Boss, putting his chest.

Mona promised to meet him at Madame Suto's place for a little informal luncheon at noon, and hurried back to her apartment, where she found Mary waiting for her.

Hardly had Mary taken her departure, with a promise to return the next day for another treatment, when Madame Suto darted again to the telephone. Mona, returning to Slatern's office, reached the desk of the political boss just as the proprietor called him on the wire.

"The new girl is right! That woman is a detective. I watched her spying around the place when she thought I was out! What shall I do?"

Slatern pondered the question for a moment. "We'll have to get her out of the way! If she comes back tomorrow, we'll take care that she doesn't leave!"

He hung back the receiver, and from a drawer of his desk took a small phial of whitish powder. He tapped it with a wink.

"This is halaldron," he explained. "A little of this will put our friend out of commission more quickly than chloroform!"

Mona shuddered, as she recalled the tales she had heard of the powers of the drug, and she realized the effects—if the slightest hitch occurred in her daring plans. She compressed her lips tightly as she took her departure. They were playing with a desperate and cunning foe—one whom they would have to fight with his own weapons if they hoped for success!

Carson heard her report of the conversation with a plainly worried air. "I don't like it," he said emphatically. "Suppose that something goes wrong?"

"But nothing is going wrong!" protested Mona. She brought out an envelop from her handbag, and dusted a few grains of a whitish powder onto Carson's desk. "Oh, you needn't be afraid of that!" she laughed. "That is nothing more deadly than sugar! I shall be on hand tomorrow at the Suto place—with this substitute for halaldron!"

Carson brightened. "And I shall make it a point to have the place surrounded by men from the district attorney's office—ready for instant action. There will be no pretense this time!"

He took a police whistle and a skeleton key from a drawer in his desk. "If there is any suggestion of danger, don't wait, but blow this whistle! We'll get into the place if we have to break the building down!" And he looked as though he meant it.

Mona reached Madame Suto's place ahead of Mary, so as to be on hand when her friend arrived. Still keeping up the deception, which she had maintained so successfully, she evinced keen interest in the preparations to take care of Mary when the other put in an appearance. So cleverly did she play her part that she managed to keep a position in the adjoining booth when Mary was finally ushered into a compartment for her second "treatment." Madame Suto kept in the background, leaving the details of the massage to an attendant.

Mona watched the attendant through a crack in the partition, and saw the other step back to take the prepared drug from a stand in the rear of the booth. Unconscious of the substitution of the harmless sugar, which Mona had managed while waiting Mary's appearance, the attendant carefully dusted the supposed drug on a hot towel, and held it over Mary's face. Instantly the girl in the chair broke into a fit of violent sneezing.

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