Mary Roberts Rinehart's

Thrilling Mystery of

"The Curve of the Catenary"

(Continued From Yesterday.)

"Well, young man," father said. "If you will explain what took you out of the house at 5 o'clock this morning—"

"—Of all mornings," the mater put in. "Oliver, is there ever to be a time when we can depend on you?"

Can you beat it? You'd have thought to hear them that I'd put out the lights and stolen the jewels and been the whole blooming show myself. I got a bit peeved, but in five minutes or so, when they'd all blown off steam, the mater told me what had happened.

I didn't say I'd heard it from Boisseau. I knew she wanted to tell it. Besides, I wanted the real story. In the time they were telling me that I couldn't be depended on and the rest of it, I'd made up my mind to find the mater's pearls and the rest, or sprain a fairly serviceable mind. I was pretty sick of being known as the family fool and idler. But if I was to do anything I had to have something to work on.

* * *

Old Boisseau had been correct, but he'd let out one or two things. It seems that when the mater was lined up again the wall, she was not far from a desk telephone, and as the crowd grew she edged toward it.

"I was trembling so I could scarcely stand, Oliver," she said. "But at last I got the receiver and took it off. I knew if I called for help he'd shoot me. I tried to speak, but at first I couldn't make a sound. But at last I managed to speak to him, very loud, so the girl downstairs could hear. I said: 'This is an outrage. You will never get out of the building with these jewels.' I almost fainted, but I knew the telephone girl could hear it."

"The telephone in the restaurant was out of order?"

"Not at all," father broke in furiously. "The fool of a telephone girl was not there. One of the gang had assaulted the policeman at the door and she'd left her board for fear she would miss something."

"I wish you wouldn't both interrupt me," mather said peevishly. "The man heard me and wheeled on me like a shot. 'Hang up that telephone receiver!' he said, in the most savage manner. 'No tricks, ladies.' He was waiting until Pamela Brook undid the safety clasp of her diamond collar. 'Hurry up, madam,' he said. 'And in case any of you have any hope of assistance, I'll tell you two things. First, one of my men is standing near the switchboard down stairs and has the operator covered. Second, even if the operator could use the switchboard, the telephone trunk lines are out of order. Boisseau's is cut off from the world, ladies.'

"But he was nervous, nevertheless," the mater said, with something very like triumph. "He hurried Pamela. Indeed, he was quite brutal to her. Her hands were shaking, of course."

Pretty nervy of the mater, I call it. I was just about to tell her so, when Sis demanded where I'd been all night.

"I came in shortly after midnight and went to bed," I said virtuously.

"And got up at 5 o'clock, I suppose!"

"I did. Exactly that."

"I don't believe it. You'll be telling us next that you've been to the mill."

Well, I didn't care to go into things just then, so I ignored her.

"By the way, father," I said, "Miss Hazeltine is not well. She fainted this morning, and I took her home in a taxicab."

"Who is Miss Hazeltine?" mother demanded.

"One of the office stenographers."

"Did you have to take her home?"

"Good heavens, mother," I said, "the girl was sick."

Now I look at things this way. If a chap's people think he's a dub he gets to thinking it, too. And he's apt to think that what he does doesn't matter, because they don't expect anything better. Do you see what I mean? And another thing. It never turns a fellow against a girl to call her things she isn't. It makes him want to be extra nice to her, and send her flowers, to make up for the other. We're built that way. So it didn't help matters any for the mater to turn to father and say:

"I don't know where he gets it from."

"Gets what from?" This was father, and a trifle sharp.

"His liking for low company."

"Mater!"

"You see nice girls, your own sort, all the time, Oliver. And yet, on the slightest pretext you are off with some designing young minx who—"

"She's a nice girl, mater, and you have no right to attack her."

"Have you asked her to marry you?"

Can you beat that?

"Good heavens, no. I hardly know her."

"I don't believe she fainted. It's easy enough to pretend to faint. Why couldn't Howard Martin take her home?"

I saw poor Sis color. I give you my word, I'd never thought of her and Martin before. I knew how much chance Martin had with the mater—about as much as a ripe apple in a school yard at recess.

We had a family row then and there. The mater got it out of me that Miss Hazeltine had not fainted at the office. I'm not clever at dodging, and before I knew it she had the damning fact. Things went from bad to worse. The governor put in a few choice words, and because we were all jangled and upset there was the deuce to pay.

At the end of ten minutes I heard myself saying:

"Just a minute, mother"—I give you my word, I had no idea of saying it. If it was a bombshell to the rest you can guess what it was to me! "Miss Hazeltine is a lady, as far as that goes. I don't think she'll have me. She's seen too much of the Gray temper—" this was a shot for father, and a bull's-eye—"but if she'll overlook the family weakness, I'm going to marry her." And I slammed out.

I'd been a fool and I knew it. She'd never get back to the office. I knew the mater. The more I thought of things the worse they looked. It came over me the way things hit a fellow sometimes, that the reason I hadn't kicked over the traces long ago and got out of the office was because she was there.

* * *

There was another thing. I've never had to worry about money. Mother's father left me some, and I had an allowance. But I didn't suppose for a minute that Miss Hazeltine took father's dictation and his peevish spells because she liked it. She worked for a salary and now that was gone.

Lots of chance I had to carry out my threat, if you can call it that, to marry her. She'd hate the ground I walked on, and no wonder.

Her going away would peeve Martin, too. He liked her. All at once it struck me that he liked her pretty well. He'd asked me what she was crying about, d'you remember? And when I thought about it, I recalled seeing them together now and then at odd times, talking very earnestly. Perhaps they were engaged. Hang it all, anyhow.

I took a chance and sent her some flowers. Then I went to my bank and overdrew my account to get some money for the office cleaner's family. They let me overdraw now and then and charge it to the governor. He's the president of the bank. It's queer, looking back, to think how that office cleaner haunted me, as if my subconscious self, or whatever you like to call it, had somehow happened on the truth and was irresistibly shoving me along.

It's not so darned queer either. I'm going to be frank in this or stop writing it. I was afraid somebody Miss Hazeltine was interested in was directly or indirectly responsible for the thing, and it pleased me to think I was doing my bit to help. Form of vanity maybe.

I put the money in an envelope and sent it by a messenger from the telegraph office.

"Be careful of it, son," I said. "It's money."

He eyed the address.

"More sympathy!" he said in a disgusted tone. "Betcher she did it herself and threw the razor in the street afterward."

"More sympathy? What do you mean?"

"This is the second bunch of bones I've taken there to-day. I'm thinkin' of jumpin' off the dock into the river myself. I need the money."

You read a lot of detective trash that's published, and almost always there's a lot of coincidence. Well, it's all bunkum.

All coincidence ever does is to mix you up. When I'd got the whole queer story clear I knew who sent that other lot of money. Not before. I offered that kid a dollar to tell me who'd sent him before and he took it and talked glibly about a tall thin man with a black mustache. But when I made him look at me I knew he lied.

I didn't go on with him. I was afraid he'd say it was a girl. I went to the office. I knew the governor would call up to know if I was there, and there was no use making things any worse. Martin was storming around when I got there.

"You people run this business like an amateur tennis match!" he raved. "Your father not here, you not here, Miss Hazeltine laid up and the first order for weeks here by wire."

Gee, it was good to be busy again. My nerves settled down. We called a meeting of superintendents and department foremen and talked things over until noon. Then, of course, just when we'd got a line on things, the governor came in and stirred everything up again. It made me sick.

I tried to tell him what we'd thought of, but he wouldn't listen.

"You run out and play with the locomotive," he said. "When I need your help to run the business, I'll send out to the shed for you."

That let me out, all right. I got my hat and left the mill. What's the use? But before I left, I went back to the office.

"I'm going, father," I said. "Not to the shed, however. I'd tired of playing office boy here. If I can be of any use, and you want me, you'll find me at the club."

"I don't expect to want you."

"Very well. But I'd better say a word before I go about Miss Hazeltine, I met her this morning on the street. She was ill and in trouble, so I took her home."

"She will have plenty of time to recover," the governor said grimly.

And I knew the mater had got in her fine work. She would never come back to the office.

"Very well. It's rotten injustice and I—"

"Just a moment," he cut in, "I'll have a check made out, and as you will probably be seeing her to-day, you can take it to her."

But I went out and slammed the door. Poor little kid, the straightest, whitest little girl I'd every known, and shoved out like that! Why, beside her, the girls they threw in my way all the time were—oh, well, what's the use?

Out in the mill yard I remembered some notes I'd made at the conference that morning to give the governor and I fished in my pocket to tear them up. But I pulled out a piece of paper I didn't recall. It had a sort of formula typed on it. Typed, except for the symbol, which was drawn in with red ink. This was the formula:

h=l sine ∝

d=l cos ∝

l=l.w.—1% The Curve of the Catenary

∝ =angle with t.h.

On the second line the "d" was not typed, but written in.

I turned it over. It was the paper with the dead woman's address on it.

It was nothing new for Martin to have formulas about him. He was always figuring out something. But that "d" now. It looked as if the thing had been written on the machine in the governor's office. Martin had his own stenographer and machine. The "d," too, looked like Miss Hazeltine's writing. I admit I was somewhat heated up. Why the mischief didn't he use his own stenographer?

I stuffed the paper back in my pocket, and shook the dust of the mill from my feet. I'm not the moping sort, but I made up my mind not to go back to the office until I'd been sent for. I was 23 and the governor might as well learn now as later that I wouldn't stand for insult.

I decided to do a little detective work that morning, lunch at the club and play golf at the country club that afternoon. And until father came over with an apology I made up my mind to live at the club in town. One of the fellows calls the club "an ever-present help in time of trouble," and take my word for it, it is.

* * *

I went to Boisseau's. Workmen were taking down the awning, and Boisseau's manager and one of them were having an altercation on the pavement.

"The tear was there when you put the awning up," the manager protested. I should have objected, but there was no time. If it had been raining, I would have refused to accept a damaged awning. Boisseau's cannot afford to have anything but the best."

"Well, I'll tell you this," the other man snarled. "I put that awning up myself, and if there was a hole in it I'll eat the whole thing, scallops and all. Somebody shied a champagne bottle through it from a window above. That's all there is to it."

"If there was a bottle there would be glass."

"I've got the bottom of the bottle in my pocket."

He hauled out a piece of glass triumphantly and held it on his extended palm. But the manager waved it away with disdain.

"That's not part of a bottle," he said.

It was not. It was a round piece of glass, like a watch crystal, but much thicker, and rather larger in diameter. Even the awning man saw his mistake, and with a shrug of his shoulders he shied the thing into the street.

"Where did you find that?" I asked.

"On the matting under that hole."

The mention of the hole turned him ugly again. I left him and the manager wrangling and went inside.

Old Boisseau was glad to show me the scene of the previous night's trouble. He'd been thing it over, and he had a theory.

"It was a one-man job, Mr. Ollie," he said. "There were no men with revolvers in the ballroom. Why should there be? All that was necessary was to tell the ladies they were there. It served the same purpose. Think of it, Mr. Ollie. One man and a million dollars or more! No accomplices to spoil the scheme; no cogs, as you say, to slip."

I didn't agree with him. We had got to the ballroom, and were standing in the doorway. Floor-polishers were at work on the floor, and a line of palms was waiting for the decorator's van.

"The gas had been shut off in the cellar," said Boisseau, heavily.

"But he had outside help. How about the wires."

"This is an age of machinery, Mr. Ollie. All the wire had been short-circuited in one place, in the park outside. It was near a pole. He could have climbed the pole, short-circuited the wires, climbed down, walked across the park, and entered the hotel, all in ten minutes.

"He couldn't have got to the ballroom without an assembly card."

"That could be stolen. Not all who receive cards use them. You, for instance, Mr. Oliver—you did not use yours."

By Jove, that was true. My card had been stuck in the mirror of my shaving-stand for days, but I didn't remember having seen it the day before. Of course, that was all nonsense. Sis had a way of gathering up all the house invitations and putting them away. Then the mater's secretary makes up the lists from them for dinners and parties. Still, it had given me a start.

"Even if he did what you say," I argued to Boisseau, "how about the attack on the policeman?"

(To Be Continued.)

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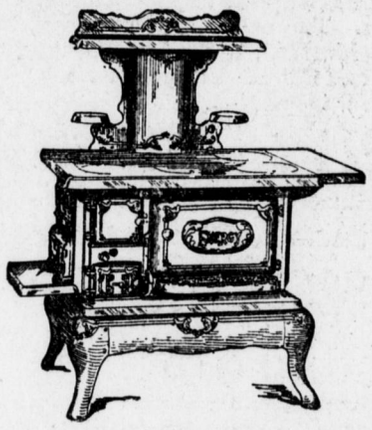

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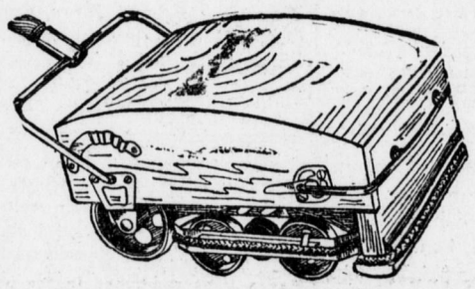

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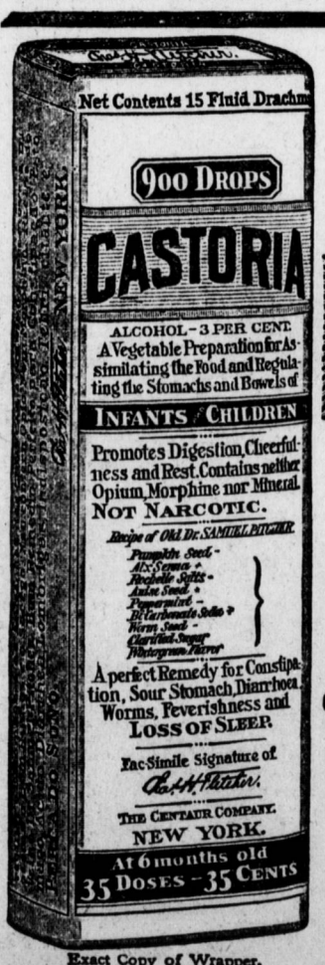

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