

The LASH of CIRCUMSTANCE

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CHAPTER I.

That was a rather peculiar crime, the robbing of my Uncle Abner's safe. It was cleverly planned, opportunely timed and successfully executed. It was a good haul, too. Forty thousand dollars in crisp coin of the realm is pretty high pay for almost any criminal for a few hours' work and risk, and that is what the perpetrator got out of it.

You will notice that I said "criminal." I did that to distinguish it from the operation of a gang of thieves; for as it turned out it was the work of a single individual and not the combination of effort of a coterie. That made it still more difficult to solve. As a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, so is the cunning of a combination of men no keener than the wits of its dullest member. That is why conspiracies generally come to grief—somebody turns out to be weak. In the matter of which I am speaking there were as many baffling points as there are to a hedgehog, and for a time it seemed impregnable. As for the sleuth hounds of the police, they came up to it with caution, smelled about it discreetly and then drew away, looking wise, to ponder over it, and for all I know are looking wise and pondering yet. But with William LeDuc the case was different.

LeDuc had been something of a friend of mine ever since we were schoolboys together, and he did really brilliant work on the case. Everything conjured up by the human mind is capable of human solution if we go about it right, and LeDuc found the way. Just because a dog is helpless before a bristling porcupine it is no sign that all animals are. The wild cat isn't. He is too quick for the bristler. He feels him out of his defensive posture by lightning play and eventually gets him by the unprotected nose—which is the beginning of the end of the problem. Just what LeDuc did has never been made public up to this time for the reason that none but he or I is competent to give the inner particulars of the running down of the thief, and up to this time neither of us has cared to tell. But I feel that I must do so now.

That I happened to know more than anybody else about certain incidents connected with the affair and was able to supply LeDuc with the proofs of guilt was due to the fact that I lived with Uncle Abner at the time the crime took place. I, also, was the one who found him lying bound and unconscious. Also it was myself who reported matters to the police and introduced LeDuc to my uncle. As for the time when the burglary took place, I happened to be away from home, having stayed at a hotel in the business district quite a few miles from where I lived.

And now at the outset I am going to emphasize one fact. While it is an unpleasant thing for me to do so, I am going to tell everything I know regarding this crime. I am going to spare nobody's feelings, faults or reputations. That I have not done so before was because of a reason which will be apparent when all the other facts are known. But now that a certain event has happened I feel free to make everything known.

In writing this account I have thought best to do so chronologically when possible. Therefore, I must go somewhat into matters which preceded and were more or less directly connected with the crime in order that the motive may be shown and that there may be the proper perspective. To do this I must tell more or less about people not absolutely connected with the burglary, but who are necessary to the narrative by reason of their proximity. However, they are simply the shading and side lights that go to make up the picture. And while LeDuc may disappear for considerable periods in the telling, the mistake should not be made of thinking he is nowhere around. That is what he did in the actual ferreting out of the case, and that is what misled the criminal. But when his fine Italian hand did appear at the finish, it wore a glove of mail.

Right at this point I find myself somewhat at a loss to decide just where to begin the recital. This is for the reason that I am not a writer trained in the art of building up a mystery with such skill that it stands intact until the time comes to demolish it; when with one deft blow the keystone is removed and the whole fabric comes down with a crash. Therefore all I can hope to do is to simply and plainly outline the characters which seem to me to be pertinent to a full understanding of conditions, and then go on and relate events as they happened. Perhaps I had better begin with a brief description of Uncle Abner, his peculiarities and meanness.

When you look at that last sentence again you will begin to understand that I meant it when I said I was going to spare nobody. Neither do I believe any one will think as I proceed that I am attempting to spare my own feelings. What an idiot I was! I think when the fates were making the world's supply of fools, after they had constructed me they broke the mold. Having turned out

a perfect specimen there was no use of experimenting further.

I have called Uncle Abner mean and peculiar, but that description is insipid. It is about as adequate as describing Satan as not being a pleasant person. Of all the cold-blooded men I ever met, Abner Halliday had the most frog-like temperature. I once had a dream which will illustrate my life-long impression of him. It happened when I was spending a year at a technical school learning practical mechanics prior to entering college, and it was brought about by a particularly heartless and thoroughly uncalled-for letter which he had written me. I dreamed that I had seen him dissected at a clinic and that his veins were filled with liquid air instead of warm red corpuscles. And when it came to the region of his heart they found its place occupied by a toadstool. He was long, lean, miserly and rich. As to the amount of his wealth, I had little knowledge except from a boast he once made to me and which I was inclined to believe at the time.

I happened incidentally to remark that he must be a pretty wealthy man, and he turned to me with that cunning leer of his—a leer that had the cunning of a fox and the relentlessness of a wolf. "I suppose you know how far it is from here to the heart of the city," he grinned. I told him that it was eight miles as the crow flies.

"And about \$0 rods. Now, you listen to me, young gadabout. If I should turn all my money into American dollars and put them side by side, edges touching, remember, they'd reach from here to the city hall."

"Which is a long ways," I assented meekly. He grinned again.

"And I'll tell you where else they would reach. They'd reach to the chambers of the judges; they'd reach to the private office of the assessor, and they'd reach to the heart of any public official I wanted, then to—which is the reason I desire them. Understand, now, young jackanapes?"

"Yes," I returned wearily, disgusted by his contempt for all human honesty. Then I went away and left him, feeling more resentful than ever that I must toil day in and out as the cashier of a soulless corporation for \$2,000 a year, and then out of it pay my uncle pretty near first-class hotel rates for my board and lodgings. At times his browbeating and insults fairly sickened me of life; yet I swallowed them with the resignation of a school-boy who takes quinine as a condition to his being allowed to go fishing. Oh, dead men's shoes! How we will dance until we fall for the prospect of wearing them.

Now a few words about the house we lived in.

It was a rookery. Large and rambling, it had degenerated from a handsome, well-groomed suburban home to a hulking, tattered demoralized outcast amidst respectability. It was bruised and battered. The spine of its roof already had a curvature; the paint hung from it in shreds, and ragweeds surrounded it. Internally it was nearly hollow. Year by year Uncle Abner, clutching his dollars, sat by and watched it run down as steadily as a clock that is never rewound; prideless of himself and of all belonging to him save his money. And whenever he did spend a few dollars upon repairs his cheerfulness was that of one who gives a surgeon his fee for extracting his vermiform appendix. Necessity, so grinding and imperative that further neglect would prove fatal, was the only condition that could loosen the Gordian knot which bound his money bags.

I never opened the heavy door that led from the group of magnificent century old oaks, the branch ends of which stroked the gray house like caressing hands, without a feeling of disgust and hot shame. The lower floors were unfurnished save for the kitchen, the dining room and the room for the housekeeper. Barring those portions it was as barren as a ship's empty hold. For years Mrs. Tebbets had been the housekeeper of the place, doing all the household work and never to our knowledge receiving company, and almost never leaving the premises. The upstairs portion of the house was also bare of furniture save for my uncle's and my apartments. His quarters consisted of a large, sparsely furnished room running the length of the front of the house, with an alcove in connection, my own sleeping room and den being adjacent thereto. That Uncle Abner continued to live amidst this shameful waste of handsomely designed rooms and broad natural grounds, was about the only piece of extravagance I ever knew him to indulge himself in. However, I could partially account for it in two ways. In the first place he had come into possession of the premises through some sort of a hocus-pocus swap; had secured them for a song, won the resulting lawsuit, and then left the former owner to whistle for the song; and in the second he had a real and abiding fondness for trees and grass. Trees and grass, however, do not require repairs.

Now as to his associates. There were only three people in the world whom he did not seem to have a natural aversion for. These were

myself, whom he tolerated as a sort of licensed and necessary evil; Bruce Halliday, my second cousin, whose happy-go-lucky exploits he would sometimes chuckle over, and Clare Winton, another distant cousin of mine from a different branch of the family. But it was practically impossible to know Clare and not love her a little at least; and it was his affection for her, combined with his fondness for nature, that made me realize that he was a human being after all. Bruce used to say to me privately that if Uncle Abner was the crab apple of the family tree, Clare was certainly the peach, but I always preferred to regard her as the jewel. I would not liken her to a diamond as I would Mrs. Dace, who scintillates and dazzles, but rather to a perfect pearl whose beauty is soft and emanates from deep within.

While it was easy enough to account for his fondness for Clare, I never could quite understand what a man of his instincts saw about a prodigal like Bruce to pat on the back, good looking and agreeable though he is. And it puzzled me almost as much to notice that Clare, who is high-minded and as sweet and wholesome as fresh milk, would so readily overlook things in my cousin of which I knew she instinctively disapproved. One day I spoke to her about it. I good naturedly charged her with being very fond of him, and she admitted it with audacious sang froid.

"Of course I am. Everybody is—everything is. Children climb all over him and stray dogs follow him home. Why shouldn't they if he pets them?"

I expostulated. "But he is so obvious—I might even say notorious—about his—well, I will call them 'financial peculiarities.' He doesn't care who knows about them." She answered me as pertly as a sparrow.

"That's just what I like about him. Bruce doesn't know there is such a thing as underhandedness."

So that's the way some immaculate women have of sticking up for tarnished men. It seems to be one of the mysteries of the female mental equipment which is incomprehensible to the male mind. But while I always liked Bruce, we are of somewhat different temperaments. I am not a purist in any sense of the word, but I believe in discretion. Personally I prefer a person who does the indiscreet thing discreetly to one who does the discreet thing indiscreetly. And that is one way in which he and I differ. Neither do I admit that it is hypocrisy on my part—merely discretion. It has always seemed to me that when two people's characters are equal, that whatever advantage the one may have over the other rests with the one who has the better reputation.

Also Bruce was usually up to his ears in trouble of one of two kinds—financial or feminine. But no matter which it was, he always managed to slip through it like an eel through oil.



"If I Should Turn All My Money Into American Dollars, They'd Reach From Here to the City Hall."

He is a broker by trade. Also, he speculates on his own account, and part of the time is floating like a bubble on the top wave of prosperity and the rest of the time swimming for dear life in the succeeding trough. It was a good deal as he himself once put it, when he had planned to feed a few of us a week in advance:

"You had better put a sandwich in your pocket, boys, for life is uncertain. As you know, it is turkey with me one day and feathers the next, and you have got to take your chances as to which you will get when you dine with me. But come on just the same. If it is turkey it will be the biggest one in the market, and if it's the other it will be feathers in our caps anyhow."

In spite of yourself you can't cherish anything against a man like that. I never criticized him to any one save Clare, and only to her incidentally and openly the same as we criti-

cized other things that were in common between us. She understood perfectly that there was no animus back of my words, and I would not have cared particularly if she had told him all I said. As a general proposition she would agree with me, but not always. I remember once when she crushed the rose which she had been caressing into a shapeless pulp with one convulsive squeeze at some careless remark of mine concerning his improvidence.

"Did you ever happen to notice where Bruce's clothes show the first signs of wear?" she asked defiantly. I admitted that I had not.

"Then I will tell you. It is at the flap of his right-hand trouser's pocket where he carries the loose money that he loans and gives away." So you see her action signified nothing except another instinctive desire on her part to fly to his defense and cover his sins of extravagance by the mantle of his charities. And, of course, against sentiment like that logic is useless.

Then, too, when it comes to his little love affairs Bruce is certainly a pachyderm. You could shoot him as full of Cupid's arrows as you could thrust a human pin cushion full of needles, and the result would be the same in each case. An unfortunate affair of the heart affects some people not unlike a mosquito. It annoys them for a few moments, and then another mosquito comes and the first one is forgotten. With others it gets under the skin like a "chigger"—fester and torments and will not be scratched out. And there is where Bruce and I differ again. He is of the first class, while I am of the chigger-bitten variety.

Clare nearly always came to see us upon Sunday afternoons. We would usually hear her whistling as she came up the walk when she was still quite a ways distant. Clare can sing like an angel, but she much prefers to whistle like the devil. She squeaks and trebles and flats with her lips in a pucker and her chin aslant, and the discord she creates is shocking. But she never gets discouraged, and would rather shrill a few false notes through her puckered lips than open her round throat and let notes pour forth that would drive a prima donna to glaring envy. Into the house she would come by means of her private key with a file of her lips and a hat-a-tat-tat of her feet on the uncarpeted stairs, until a final hollow thump would announce her arrival at the portals of my uncle's inner sanctuary. Thereupon I would arise to a military "attention" and my uncle to a creaking remembrance of uprightness as she threw open the door to reveal herself, sinking to the floor with skirts spread in an exaggerated courtesy of the olden days. Up to uncle she would go with a ridiculous kiss upon the bald spot of his head, and then settle light as a puff-ball in the window seat and commence to

seem to care for any men but Bruce and myself, and I can't believe that you and he are in earnest in your brazen flirtations. In the first place, he has no more seriousness about him than a jumping-jack, and in the second I cannot conceive of a girl with your ideals loving a man of his peculiar financial practices and alley-cat habits. Outside of his more or less respectable club he has no more fixed place of abode than has a balloon, and I don't believe he would be any more content to settle down than one.

She would toss her head. "That is because the poor fellow has no home to allure him. Just you wait until he gets married. If he wins the right wife he will settle down so hard that you can hear the echo."

I would wave my hands in protest. "But he speculates upon the board—bets, and all that, and while I do not consider such things as particularly depraved, I know that you are utterly against them. Besides, he is a financial humorist. How could he support a wife in the dreary, moneyless periods?"

"I'm sure I don't know—that would be his end of the bargain. But I do know that if he had a wife who would save what he throws away when he is prosperous they would never come to want. And I am not sure, after all, but that it is better to have a lot of money part of the time and none the rest than to have only a little all the time."

That would quiet me for a time. I had to depend entirely upon my salary, for being under heavy bonds I could not have speculated had I cared to and still retained my position if the fact became known. Still, by certain economies I had managed to hide away a few hundreds for emergencies, and in addition to that I had in the savings bank \$5,000 which had come to me from my father's estate. That, however, I regarded a good deal as a trust fund which was to be left unused except in case of last resort. So I would take another tack and try and impress her with the greater virtue of ultimate achievement through industry and economy rather than by mowing your way through the ranks of your fellow men. From her quietness I would think she was becoming converted until of a sudden she would give a fidget.

"There he comes now, down the walk back of us," she would assert without even a glance around. And sure enough it would be Bruce, a cigar in his mouth and a bundle as big as a peck measure wrapped up in paper under his arm. I always thought my physical senses were particularly alert, but she would invariably announce his coming before I knew he was within gunshot. Hearing, intuition, instinct or sixth sense, I know not what it was, but at times it struck me as almost uncanny. Up to us he would come strolling with a smile and audacious "Hello, little sweetheart," and a nod and an off-hand "Howdy, old man," to me; and standing before us with his feet wide apart would grin at her like a good-natured puppy. Then I would see Clare's eyes begin to light up.

"What is it this time, Bruce?" she would half gasp excitedly. With a studied deliberation that would keep her in squirming suspense he would gradually open the bundle and raise it on high. Then suddenly he would pour a pallful of roses, carnations or violets over her head and send them tumbling into her lap and down on the grass in a waterfall of fragrance. And at that she would utter a little cry and go down upon her knees as she gathered them up by the handful, scolding him like a magpie for his extravagance, and stopping after every few words for a rapturous smell of each captured treasure. And that would be my reward for my lecture on the sin of extravagance.

Then, regardless of my presence,



Sewed on the Buttons Missing From His Garments or Trimmed the Edges of His Ever Frayed Collars.

seem to care for any men but Bruce and myself, and I can't believe that you and he are in earnest in your brazen flirtations. In the first place, he has no more seriousness about him than a jumping-jack, and in the second I cannot conceive of a girl with your ideals loving a man of his peculiar financial practices and alley-cat habits. Outside of his more or less respectable club he has no more fixed place of abode than has a balloon, and I don't believe he would be any more content to settle down than one.

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he would sit down and begin to make love to her. Nor would he do this in the way that any other civilized man would go about such a thing, but openly and notoriously in the flibustier fashion in which he did everything. She always seemed helpless before his extravagant compliments, while, as for myself, I would watch him in silence unable to make up my mind whether I was amused or disgusted. After he got tired of that he would insist that she go with him over to the boulevard where they could sit on a bench and pick out an automobile from those going by, such as he was going to purchase for her especial benefit. At first she would demur, but would finally say, "All right, if Tom will go, too." Whereat he would laugh and say to me with an audacious wink:

"Oh, Tom doesn't care to go. He would rather loaf up in his den and read a book than go over there and sit in the dust, wouldn't you, Tom?" In reply I would bow low and say "certainly," with a sarcasm that would have shriveled any other living human being, but at which he would only laugh again and straightway march her off. And that, of course, would be the last of them for that day so far as I was concerned.

As I said before, I was not in love with her; I did not think that she was more than half in earnest and therefore was not jealous. But it always left me feeling sort of disgusted. I don't believe it is in the male nature for any man to witness a woman whom he likes tacitly accepting the advances of a man other than himself without wishing that he had horns. He may not particularly want the woman himself, but the sight of it breeds a sneaking desire in him to go out and hook something.

CHAPTER II.

In my uncle's large front room there was a safe that he had picked up somewhere in the dark ages of his youth, doubtless upon some foreclosure; and it was one of the simplicities of his complex mind that he should cling to it with the faith which a child reposes in the toy savings bank in which he had deposited his treasure. It was a dogged enough looking contraption, and around it revolved the principal characters and events of this history as a moth circles a flame. Behind the portly doors were kept the integrals of his fortune; the mortgages, leases, deeds and notes that were the material evidences of his possessions. While it was nearly always practically empty of cash, at remote intervals, and for a few days at a time only, it contained considerable sums in specie. This last happened when he would collect the money on a mortgage or other security, and because of not feeling well would receive payment at the house instead of the bank. Once in a long while this would chance to occur after banking hours, or on a Sunday or holiday, and in that event, after the payee had departed, he would give himself over to a revel with the currency with all the delight of a child fondling a new toy. He did not seem to care for gold as the stereotyped miser always does but would nose around among the bundles of greenbacks with the seeming fascination of a feline for catnip. It was during one of these scenes that our quarrel occurred.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Cause for Joy?
Mis Pert—Ever since I refused Tom two weeks ago he hasn't been sober a day.
Miss Caustique—Not tired celebrating, eh?—Exchange.

Nothing Else.
He—I wish you would select more appropriate times to go to your dress-maker's.
She—My dear man, all times go to a dressmaker's are fitting occasions.