

The LASH of CIRCUMSTANCE

by HARRY IRVING GREENE
Author of "Yosonde of the Wilderness"
Illustrations by Magnus G. Kettner

SYNOPSIS.

Abner Halliday, a miserly millionaire, is found gagged, bound and insensible in his room, his safe rifled and \$40,000 missing. The thread of the story is taken up by his nephew Tom. Living in the same house are other relatives; reckless Bruce Halliday and pretty Clara Winton. Bruce, who is a bond broker, has been trying to raise \$10,000 to put through a deal and save himself from financial ruin. He has applied to his miserly uncle and is offered for the loan but has been refused. Tom sends for William LeDuc, an old-time friend connected with a detective agency. In relating the story Tom reverts to his acquaintance with Mrs. Dace, a wealthy widow, whose business agent is Richard Mackay, a hoodler and political boss. Tom is jealous of Mackay and is deeply in love with Mrs. Dace. Bruce Halliday warns him to shun her as an adventuress. Tom sees Mrs. Dace and Mackay together. He afterwards meets the woman at a horse race, and, happening to mention that Bruce had a tip on the winner, she gives him \$500 to place on the race. The tip goes wrong and she loses her money. Later Tom invests in stocks. He makes some money, and returns the lost \$500 to Mrs. Dace. It is at this juncture that the chief of the \$10,000 from old Abner Halliday occurs.

CHAPTER IX.—(Continued.)

"You say that is all you know about that phase of the matter. Very good. But what else do you know?" Driven fairly into a corner I answered desperately:

"I know he had a key to the house. While I was sitting with him at the interview I have just mentioned he became angry at the thought of uncle's refusal to assist him, and struck the table several times with some small metallic object which he had tightly clenched in his hand. The familiar appearance of the object immediately attracted my attention and I managed to see enough of it to know that it was a key to this place. I was somewhat surprised, not knowing how he had come into possession of it; but thinking it was his own business I did not mention it to him in his then condition of mind. I do not believe that he knew that I had noticed it, or was even aware that he had exhibited it in his excitement, for immediately after his outburst he thrust it back into his overcoat pocket. I think that I have now without reservation told you all that I know concerning his words and actions within the last few days. He can undoubtedly explain his possession of the key as well as his whereabouts last night to your entire satisfaction. But I hope it will not even be necessary to hurt his pride by questioning him."

LeDuc leaned forward with deep interest in his face. "Then if there are but four keys to the front door known to be in existence, and as your uncle has his own as well as the one which you formerly possessed, and as Mrs. Tebbets still has hers, the only one remaining to be accounted for should be in the possession of your other cousin, Miss Winton. If she still retains hers, then the one Bruce had must of necessity be a duplicate, and a duplicate could not have been made without the maker having for a time had one of the originals. That phase of the matter we will take up, if necessary, when we come to it, but what we want to know now is regarding the originals. And to ascertain that we must know whether Miss Winton has parted keepership of hers. I must see her at once."

"Perhaps it would be well for me to call her up over the wire and ask her to come here," I suggested. "Uncle will be glad to see her, and I know she will dance with anxiety to come when she hears about this." He nodded his acquiescence, and going to the telephone I briefly put her in possession of the news with the request that she come to us immediately. In her excitement and eagerness she dropped the ear instrument instead of replacing it upon the hood and I could hear her as she rushed about the room calling upon her mother for her hat and gloves. Fifteen minutes later she was ringing at the front door. LeDuc shot me a look full of significance.

"Did you say that she and Bruce are engaged, or something to that effect?" he inquired, referring to a remark which I had dropped a few moments before. I nodded.

"So Bruce intimated to me. I knew they were desperately fond of each other and he told me that had he not been wiped out he would have married her. At any rate, she does not seem to have her key with her this morning," was my answer. Down stairs we heard Mrs. Tebbets opening the door, and a moment later with a patter of feet and a rustle of skirts Clara bounded in upon us. Her eyes were dilated and she seemed almost ready to burst from suppressed excitement. Her first words were about Uncle Abner and as to whether he was now entirely out of danger. I assured her that he was and then introduced LeDuc, requesting that she seat herself a moment with us before going into the other room. She dropped upon the edge of a chair, fidgeting and nervous. LeDuc, immediately all courtesy, laid aside his cigar.

"I will detain you but a moment, Miss Winton," he apologized, his faint habitual smile breaking into an affable one. "But as I am investigating this affair in the interests of your uncle and in the hope of recovering more or less of his money, I am going to assume that you, as one of the family, will be glad to give me your assistance. At the present moment I am devoting my attention to locat-

ing the keys of the house, it being evident that the premises were entered by the front door, as the back door was bolted from the inside. Will you be good enough to let me have yours for a few moments?" Clara moved nervously.

"It's queer about that key; I can't find it," she said hastily. "I always carry it in my purse, but when I searched for it a few moments ago on my way over here it was not there. For the life of me I cannot imagine where I could have misplaced it, for I have been very careful to always keep it in that one place. I simply know I have not lost it, but it is just as strange as it can be." She squirmed like a worried schoolgirl.

"Suppose we go back a little. When do you remember of having it last?" he pursued. Her forehead wrinkled with thought.

"Three or four days ago when I came over here. I have not had occasion to think of it since until Tom called me up a few moments ago. I am as worried about it as I can be, but I am certain that I have not lost it."

I saw LeDuc's gaze run over the graceful form of the girl and then settle upon her face with an expression that was beyond doubt one of unequivocal approval. That Clara, whose heart was as open to the world as is the heart of a flower to the light of the sun, could harbor any secret as dark as this was preposterous to one who knew her. I had never met a girl with sounder morals or better instincts, and her character was of spun gold. And even though she loved Bruce and had always defended his frailties, I did not believe that she would have shielded him had she believed him guilty of an unnatural crime as this, matter of history though it is that one can never tell what heights or depths a woman will achieve to save the man who carries her heart. Quietly I asked her when she had seen Bruce last, and knowing her mannerisms as I did became instantly aware that my question had put her on the rack, for a faint shadow flitted cloudlike across her face. Yet she answered me with her accustomed frankness.

"Day before yesterday—and I do not understand it either. He was to see me yesterday evening, but he neither came nor sent word as to why he broke the engagement. It is not like him to do such a thing, and while I suppose there is some good reason back of it, I do not know what it is. Anyway, I am worried." She dropped her eyes and tapped gently on the floor with her toe. "I wish you would try and get him on the wire, Tom, and find out if he is all right. That is all I care to know at present." I assented and started for the telephone, but had made but a step or two before I heard first his familiar ring at the door and a moment later his equally familiar voice from the hall below. Then up the stairs he came and at the first footfall I halted, listening. Usually he mounted something after the fashion of a scurrying cat in a series of light leaps, but now his feet pounded the boards with heavy uncertainty. I opened the door before him, but at the first sight of his face I stepped back.

He advanced to the doorway, faltered there with one hand braced against the jamb and the crimson flushing his face as he saw Clara amongst us. His eyes were as red-shot as a bloodhound's, and the hand that hung by his side was aspen. The unmistakable marks of an evil night were stamped about his mouth and his usually clear face looked puttyish and mottled. I heard Clara gasp as she arose and slowly approached him with unbelieving eyes. He stepped aside as though to avoid her, his glance falling to the floor.

"I have heard about it—it is in the papers. Tell me the particulars," he said with a hoarse intonation. From the bottom of my heart I pitied him as I gently pulled the girl back to her seat and answered him in matter of fact tones.

"There is nothing to tell at present except that the safe was burglarized last night and the \$40,000 stolen. I spent the night downtown and found Uncle Abner bound and unconscious when I returned home this morning. He was not much hurt and is all right now. This is Mr. LeDuc, who has been engaged by Uncle Abner to try and ferret out the matter. I think that is the whole thing in a nut shell." He stood as if in a half daze, his gaze rambling over us.

"Any clues?" he mumbled at length. I made no spoken reply, merely bowing in the direction of the detective. And at the signal LeDuc immediately assumed vocal command.

"The only thing we have learned as yet which seems to be of any particular interest is that Miss Winton's key has mysteriously disappeared. All the others have been accounted for and we are anxious to locate hers. She is unable to offer any explanation, and we therefore turn to you as one who is frequently in her company in the hope that you may offer a suggestion. Can you offer any thought along that line?"

He shook his head decisively and without hesitation, and I leaned back in my chair with a long breath of astonishment. I had been thoroughly

confident that he would at once admit his possession of it and offer some explanation that would immediately satisfy everybody. LeDuc was looking steadily at him, apparently as puzzled by his answer as was I. To all outward appearances there was something hidden beneath the skin here, and I determined to make a quick thrust at the heart of the matter, bleeding him of his secret for his own good.

"Where were you last night, Bruce?" I asked quietly. The pallor of his cheeks took on the unhealthy hue of wet ashes and he stood mute with an unpleasant narrowing of his eyes. For a long minute the silence was unbroken, LeDuc scanning him impatiently and Clara, her pupils expanded, leaning far forward in her intentness. Then he shifted sullenly upon his feet.

"I have no reply to make to that question at present."

I signaled to LeDuc, who instantly caught the cue. "But perhaps if the young lady would pardon us—" he murmured with a courteous bow to Clara. She arose upon the instant, and glancing neither to right nor left, passed into my uncle's apartments, while Bruce glooming after her with tightened lips moved no muscle. As the door closed behind her I made another effort in his behalf.

"I wish you would be reasonable in this matter, Bruce. You ought to know that you can trust us implicitly when I give you my word as I now do. If you have any reason—any man's reason—to think that your whereabouts last night if known to Clara would distress her, Mr. LeDuc and I will blind ourselves upon our honor to keep your communication confidential. Later on you make such explanation to her as you may desire, but in view of certain statements which you made to me it is necessary that our mutual friend here should know where you spent the night. Will you tell us?" A pale glow of passion, phosphorescent like, appeared deep behind his eyes and he answered me doggedly, almost defiantly.

"No. It is a matter which at present concerns only myself. Nor do I understand your insinuations when you say it is for my own good that I make confidants of you. What do you mean by such attempted intimidation?"

Ignoring the gathering storm, I answered him in a calm tone:

"Bruce, I trust you implicitly and tell you now that it would take nothing less than a bombshell of absolute proof to shatter that belief. That being the case, when I assure you that I have reason to believe that it is for your own good to do so, I think you might honor me with your confidence. Along that same line I am going to ask you another question. Do you object to showing us the contents of your pockets—everything?" He turned a dull red, seemed about to explode with the heat of his passion, and then growing suddenly cold bowed frigidly and began laying before us the contents of his clothes. It was the usual miscellaneous assortment of a man's personal belongings, and when he had finished a glance told us that the object for which we were searching was not among them.

"The pockets of your overcoat, please," purred LeDuc. With mocking deliberation Bruce began turning the folds and crevices of that garment inside out. Nothing of interest was exposed to us, and when he had finished we sat eyeing each other with silent lips. I broke the lull.

"Bruce, you had a key to the house yesterday. You pounded upon the table with it as we sat together downtown and then put it back in your side overcoat pocket. I noticed it distinctly. Now Clara's key has disappeared and it is impossible for us to overlook the coincidence. Where did you get the one you had and

which you do not now show us? We have a right to know, and for your own good you should tell, bearing in mind that we are all your friends and believe in you beyond telling." His eyes narrowed.

"You mean to say that I had a key to this house yesterday?" he returned with slow distinctness. I bowed.

For a moment he stood looking at me with an expression I had never seen him wear before creeping over his features. Then he turned away abruptly.

"I make no reply beyond saying that you are a very badly mistaken individual. Neither do I understand what you mean by all these intimations, and furthermore I am indifferent. I have nothing more to say. You may both present the devil with my compliments for all I care."

Pausing not at all, he went thumping down the stairs, while I sat staring at the detective, who in turn sat smiling queerly back at me.

CHAPTER X.

The expression on my companion's face remained unchanged as the sound of my cousin's footsteps was cut off by the bang of the closing door. The smile seemed to have grown into his features, so unaltered did it remain, and tiring of its monotony I arose and without apology passed into the next apartment. Clara was sitting beside the bed of Uncle Abner, stroking one of his gorilla-like hands as he rolled his head from side to side with weak whisperings. Most of the lines which now harrowed his face were unfamiliar to me. Heretofore he had always appeared as a fairly well-preserved man of nearly fescore, but now his face was as wrinkled as one's palm. He shot a sidewise glance full of apprehension as I entered, but seeing it was only I resumed his mutterings. Clara's face was unwontedly serious. Her lips were tight fitting and thinned by compression; the laugh had entirely deserted her eyes, and altogether she was the picture of one who suffers uncomplainingly. Of course it took no wizardry to guess the cause of her unhappiness. Bruce, to whom she was engaged, and to whom she therefore must be devoted, had broken his faith with her without explanation or apology; and if that had not been enough in itself, his appearance had been sufficient to shock any one who had pride in him. I knew Clara as I knew the alphabet. There never was a woman more generous, nor one who once having decided to give gave more freely. Therefore I knew that having bestowed her heart upon Bruce she had done so without stint or reservation. Her nature lay close to the surface, and what might have been a superficial wound to another would hurt her to the core of her being. Sympathizing deeply with her I approached her from behind and took her cheeks in my palms. "It is bound to come out all right, Clara," I half whispered.

She freed her face by a slight forward movement and Uncle Abner, closing his eyes wearily, lay for the moment inert on the pillow. They seemed to be ignoring me in their silence, and unable to think of anything to do or say which might relieve the situation, I turned away and left them to themselves. LeDuc had gotten upon his feet in my absence, and hat in hand, appeared to be waiting for me to go with him. The whole atmosphere of the place was offensive to me, and as I led him down the stairs and out into the open I filled my lungs to the uttermost, as a convict might who breathes the pure air of freedom after long confinement in a fetid cell. It was quite a while before either of us saw fit to speak.

At the end of the block he threw his cigar into the street. "The police—you did not tell them about seeing your cousin have the key yesterday?"



"Bruce, You Had a Key to the House Yesterday."

he said half interrogatively, half assertively. I told him I had not. His next question was, "Why?"

"Because of several reasons. First of all, they did not ask me; second, because I have no idea that Bruce is guilty in this matter; and third, because I did not care, under the circumstances, to put his reputation in their hands. Also, I assumed that he would immediately acknowledge his possession of it and give an adequate explanation. You will readily understand that I did not want the newspapers to come out with a sensational story, and I, therefore, reserved that bit of information for my own investigation. You may be sure, however, that I had intended to mention it to him privately when we met again, and only volunteered the information to you because I knew you would work up to it eventually and corkscrew it out of me. Furthermore, I know I can rely upon you to suppress details, which although as yet unexplained, in all probability have no real bearing on the issues." His reply came without hesitation.

"Tom, you have known me for years and you know that even as a boy I always played fair. Now, I have no more use for a professional criminal than I have for a mad dog or a venomous serpent. They have shot me, stabbed me and laid in ambush to assassinate me, and when I think of them I am imbued with a great and righteous wrath. But when I come across a young fellow of good instincts who has fallen because of a reckless step, I would a whole lot rather give him a boost than a kick. I want you to get me right on that statement."

I signified my comprehension. As he himself said, LeDuc had always been a fair, even a generous, fighter, and his last assertion was wholly in accord with my understanding of the man. Glancing about to make sure that we were safely beyond earshot of any possible listener I broached a matter about which I had been thinking for some little time.

"Billy, there is another thing which the police did not bring out and which I did not volunteer, but which you ought to know. My excuses for not having stated it before are practically the same as those I gave in Bruce's case, namely, because I do not believe it has anything to do with the crime and because I wish to shield a certain individual from annoyance and publicity. Under the same understanding that you are to consider it as a privileged communication I will tell it to you. It is this: There is one more person, at least, who knew that Uncle Abner occasionally had considerable sums of money on hand, and to whom I imparted in a casual conversation the circumstance of this particular amount being in the house. I had a little visit with her yesterday on my way downtown after my quarrel with my uncle. In it I told her of Bruce's misfortune. Also, I once left my keys at her house through an oversight and they remained there several days. And while I should bitterly resent even the intimation that she was a conscious party to the crime, it is nevertheless a crevice through which the information may have leaked. I suppose you would like to hear me out on this line." He slipped his arm through mine, drawing me closer to him.

"By all means. It may prove decidedly interesting. My promise goes to this angle of the case as well as all others. Shoot ahead."

"Then I do not mind telling you that I am in the habit of calling upon a lady who is—well, we will call her an exceedingly good friend of mine. I care a great deal for her, respect her thoroughly and believe she is fond of me. I have incidentally told her about Uncle Abner and his strange ways, and one evening left my keys in her apartments after having opened

a bottle of wine with a corkscrew which I kept attached to my key ring. It was several days later that I called her attention to my oversight and received them back from her. While I trust her implicitly, yet she has a yellow maid who is inscrutable to me and who always seems to be hovering within earshot. To my mind it is not impossible that this maid was in possession of the keys while they were on those premises—in fact, her mistress so intimated when she returned them to me. That the maid through outside acquaintances might have taken advantage of any information which she chanced to overhear is within the realm of possibilities. You understand I merely offer this as a suggestion."

"And do you know anything of the character of the maid's acquaintances on the outside?" was the swift interrogation. I bit my lip.

"No. But I do know this. I know that Richard Mackay is the business agent of this girl's mistress—Mrs. Dace of the Arcadia—and that he sometimes calls upon her. And knowing his reputation as I do, it has occurred to me that stranger things have happened than that this girl might be under his influence and reveal secrets to him that she has become possessed of. I understand there is practically no limit to the man's machinations."

LeDuc brought me to a sudden standstill. "Do you mean Richard Mackay, 'Coughing Dick,' the hoodler and arch conspirator?" he cried, his hand gripping my arm like a trap.

"Yes. You will remember the fact that uncle mentioned the fact that the man who choked him cleared his throat in a peculiar manner."

The grip upon my arm loosened and for a moment my friend stood staring into my face. Then with a soft whistle he drew me on again. It was several moments before he once more broke the silence.

"By the bye, you had better give me your card with your telephone number on it so that I may be able to reach you over the wire in case of necessity," he suggested reflectively, and I felt in the pocket in which I always carried my card case in order to comply with his request. The case, which was an unusually handsome affair, had been presented to me by Mrs. Dace, and I would not have lost it for a great deal, but at the end of a couple of minutes' search, which exhausted every nook and cranny of my raiment, I was compelled to give up the quest in despair.

"I must have lost it," I announced, deeply chagrined. LeDuc looked at me with a question in his eyes.

"And you had it last—when?" were his words. I ran the course of my actions during the past few days through my mind until I recalled the occasion of its last use.

"Last evening. After the theater I gave the friend who was with me one of my cards with the request that he call me up some evening when he was lonesome. But I have a distinct recollection of putting it back in my upper vest pocket. I would not have lost it for many times its value, and it was a rather expensive trinket at that." Ruefully I continued my search for the fourth or fifth time as he sympathized with me, following his condolences with the remark that a pencil memorandum in his book would answer the same purpose. Therefore I gave him the number orally and noted that he wrote it down correctly. Then with an apology and an excuse of urgent business he darted aboard a passing car with a farewell flirt of his hand.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Country Makes a Difference.

He—in China, a fellow never sees his wife till after they are married. She—How strange. In England, it's the wife who never sees her husband after they are married.—M. A. F.



"It's Queer About that Key; I Can't Find It—"