



"Have You Any Idea of How He Became Possessed of the Key to the House Which I Saw Him Have Yesterday?"

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

SYNOPSIS.

Abner Malliday, a miserly millionaire, is found gagged, bound and insensible in his room, his safe rifled and \$20,000 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 Clare 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 dejected 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 dejected 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 theft of the \$20,000 from old Abner Halliday occurs. LeDuc meets Clare and Bruce. He learns that the key which Mackay had to the house is missing. Mackay's dealings with Mrs. Dace make Tom more jealous.

CHAPTER XI.

I went back to the house. Clare had left my uncle's room and I heard her voice mingled with Bruce's on the lawn below. Uncle Abner had arisen and was carefully examining his papers as he rearranged them in their customary order. He had been hurt but little, and now that his blood was circulating freely again and the stiffness was disappearing from his limbs he was not suffering bodily to amount to anything. But his humor was beastly. The look with which he greeted me as I entered was almost carnivorous.

"This is what comes of housing fly-by-nights who spend their money staying in hotels when they should be at home in the beds which they have already paid for," he snarled. "If you had been here it would not have happened. I don't believe there was more than one thief, and he could not have held you if you had any fight in you."

"He probably would not have tried it. At any rate, had I resisted I would have stood an excellent chance of being killed. Men who enter the houses of others to commit a crime at night know that they hold their own lives in the hollow of their hands and are prepared to meet resistance with bloodshed." I returned somewhat feebly. But the coolness of my tones only made his wrath flame the hotter.

"It don't make any difference. It was your business to be here when you knew there was so much money in the house instead of running away like a coward and leaving me to protect it all alone. And I suppose you expect you will inherit some of it after I am gone, but I'll show you," he yelled. The direct intimation that he would ignore me upon his death bed, and that he considered my life of less consequence than a fraction of his wealth, turned me from him without a word.

I went to my own room, where I stood at the window looking upon the grounds below. Bruce and Clare were wandering aimlessly about, and even at that distance I could see the worry that lay upon her face. As for Bruce, he seemed to have recovered a good deal of his old-time assurance. But presently he turned away with a

Duc, who would keep his secret equally sacred, and we would be none the wiser. I sincerely regret his obstinacy, for even though it does not get him into any particular trouble it may compel him to go through an ordeal that may be unpleasant for us all. I know LeDuc well enough to believe that he will get at the bottom of this affair if he possibly can, no matter whom he uncovers as he digs."

She breathed a little sigh. "Of course I appreciate all that and I have tried to reason with him, but he would not listen to me any more than he did to you. He almost swore when I begged him to ignore me and tell you men all about himself. While I would stake my life upon his innocence of all complicity in this matter, I can explain it to myself in only one way, and I cannot force myself to believe even that." Our eyes met squarely.

"I am certain there is no other woman in the case; Bruce is not that kind," I stated positively.

She reddened and her hands became tight little fists. "No, I will not believe such a thing of him," she cried with a slight quivering of the lips. Quickly she arose and passed into my uncle's apartments with head on high. It seemed too bad that I had been obliged to mention such a distasteful thing, but I knew well enough that despite herself it was hovering in her mind, and I wanted to add my convictions of his moral honesty to her own. It distressed me to see her unhappy, but deeming it best to let her have a little time in which to compose herself I did not follow her, leaving the house almost immediately thereafter, and in fact avoiding any further contact with my uncle that day. A little later I had gotten Mrs. Dace on the telephone and told her that I would like to see her as I was the possessor of rather startling news. She asked me to come to her at once.

She did not seem to be as surprised or interested as I recalled as I thought the tale warranted. To be sure her eyes quickly arose to mine when I told her of the crime, and she gave me her undivided attention until I had finished; then seemed to be turning the affair over in her own mind, for she allowed several minutes to elapse without comment.

"Whom do you suspect—I mean you personally?" she then asked me. I requested that she pledge herself to secrecy, which she did with a little laugh that told me that she considered such a formula superfluous.

"I suspect absolutely no one. Yet I am puzzled and worried by Bruce's conduct. I do not attach much importance to his denial of having the key and our failure to find it, although I cannot account for the denial part of it. Neither do I give great weight to his words about his going to get hold of a large sum of money. I take it for granted that when he said he was going to raise it somehow or other it was with the mental reservation that it was to be done honestly, of course. Also when it comes to his absolute refusal to tell us where he was last night I can imagine a solution of that, for when a man is under the influence of liquor he will sometimes do things that he would not think of were he in his right mind. It is also on record that sleep walkers sometimes commit burglaries when they are in a trance and are utterly irresponsible for their actions. Take that recent case that everybody was talking about. The person involved attended a dance and became very tired, fell asleep on the way home, skillfully broke into his own house and robbed himself of money that he had hidden away, and the next day remembered nothing about the matter. It was long afterwards that he happened to stumble across the money where he had secreted it in his semiconscious state."

She did not appear to be particularly impressed by my statement. "I am inclined to believe that whoever robbed your uncle at least thought he knew what he was about," she answered with what I imagined was a faint suggestion of sarcasm. "However, Bruce, being somewhat indisposed and in an excited state, might have unconsciously let fall a remark in some public place, which, in connection with his perhaps exhibiting the key, led to its being stolen from him and the perpetration of the crime by some one else," I acquiesced.

"I have thought of that as a possible solution of the reason as to why he will not reveal his whereabouts, and I am certain it will not escape LeDuc. Perhaps Bruce is conscious of having been indiscreet in his speech or actions and is ashamed to talk about it. But this much is fairly certain. It is too great a stretch of the imagination to conceive that the attack upon the safe at this particular time was made at hap-hazard. The one who did it knew to a certainty that the money was in the house. And so far as we now know but four persons in the world had that knowledge, namely, Uncle Abner, Bruce, myself and—" I paused, clearing my throat and giving her an opportunity to interrupt me if she chose. She did so promptly.

"You told me," she said sweetly. "Therefore it seems to lie between Bruce and myself." The opening that I had been feinting for was now before me and I thrust at it.

"Is it not barely possible that Janet, the maid, might have overheard me mention the fact of uncle having a large sum in the safe and thoughtlessly repeated it to some acquaintance of hers?" Although not a muscle of her face moved, in some mysterious way I knew that my companion was smiling inwardly.

"No, Janet hears nothing that is not spoken to her, and I do not permit her to have lovers. Besides, you say the thief had a key to the front door. How do you account for an outsider possessing that?"

I wondered if she had forgotten the incident of my keys having been for some days in the possession of the maid and the possibility of duplicates easily made from the original. I hesitated for a moment as I idly turned the pages of a book that she might have time to recall this circumstance, but she merely sat placidly surveying me and I thought it would be better taste not to mention it. Her confidence in Janet seemed to be complete, and of course in matters of this kind if the maid was guilty her mistress would be the last one in whom she would confide. I therefore decided to abandon the subject for the time.

"I do not attempt to account for it," I returned slowly. "But as must be apparent to you, my cousin Bruce is under suspicion in some quarters, and believing from the bottom of my heart that he is innocent, I am trying to evolve a theory which will let him out despite his own obstinacy and seeming determination to keep himself in. I was merely trying to discover all possible leaks through which the information might have escaped. I have told Mr. LeDuc everything and you need not be surprised if he calls upon you. But he is a gentleman and you need have no hesitancy about talking to him freely."

She appeared a trifle annoyed at this prospect, but after a moment's reflection, wherein her brow was clouded, she drew a long breath. "Poor Bruce," she said sympathetically. "It would be a shame if he should somehow get dragged into this. In the few times I met him I learned to admire him very much. It is impossible that he is guilty—I simply know he is not. I sincerely hope that he may clear himself without publicity."

"Amen," I responded heartily.

CHAPTER XII.

A few days later there happened a little incident so inexplicable and irritating in its character that it caused me considerable annoyance and thought. It was one of those peculiar occurrences that one does not care anything about in itself, yet which exasperates him because of his inability to explain it. It so happened that I desired to wear a certain suit of clothes which I had purchased a short while before, and with that purpose before me went into the closet where I kept my spare apparel hanging in order to get it out. I could not



"It is a Plain, Unmitigated, Unadulterated Forgery."

find it. Growing more and more impatient as I searched among my things I at last removed all that the closet contained, article by article, and laid them on the bed. The suit that I was looking for was certainly missing.

I sat down and thought. I remembered distinctly the last time I had worn it, and had an equally clear recollection of replacing it in its accustomed place at the end of the day. I was positive that I had not touched it since that time and its absence now, as far as I was able to reason, could only be explained on the theory of theft. I went downstairs to Mrs. Tebbets to question her about it, and happening to recall that she had expressed her admiration of it upon seeing it upon me for the first time, I now described it to her as the suit which I had worn on Derby day. She answered me very promptly:

"Why, yes. That is the one you sent me word about yesterday. I let the man have it as you told me to in the note."

I looked at her in mystification, knowing that I had sent her no note and being at a loss to grasp her meaning. "What note—what man?" I demanded. She stood rubbing her damp hands with a towel and seem-

ingly a little impatient at my stupidity.

"The note on your card which you sent me only yesterday saying that I was to give it to the tailor," she retorted. I could only repeat somewhat more emphatically that I had done no such thing.

She threw down her towel with a sniff and began rummaging about among the odds and ends of a shelf. Presently she picked up a small piece of cardboard, which she handed me with an expression of triumph. "Very well. Just read it for yourself then. If that is not your card and writing I cannot trust my eyes, and if I cannot trust my eyes the Lord knows what I can trust. And that is all I have got to say about that." I seized the piece of paper and glanced at it. It was certainly either one of my cards or a perfect imitation, and having satisfied myself on that point I turned it over and saw written on the back a few lines, which while certainly bearing a strong resemblance to my micrograph when I scribble in a hurry, were as certainly not mine. They read: "Mrs. Tebbets: Please to deliver to the bearer, who is in the employ of my tailor, the suit of clothes I wore on Derby day that he may press the same. Thomas Halliday."

For a moment I was too surprised to do more than turn it over in mute incredulity. Then I turned upon her sharply.

"What kind of a rooking man brought this?"

"He was short and fat. I guess he was about as old as you are. I thought at the time that he looked funny in the eyes, but I did not let him in the house and did not pay much attention to him. I am always careful about admitting strangers, you know. It is all right, isn't it?"

"No, there isn't anything right about it. It is a plain, unmitigated, unadulterated forgery. Did he say anything more to you?" Her chin dropped.

"Well, of all things! To think of the impudence of people nowadays. No, sir, he said scarcely a word and I never did like the looks of him. He just took the clothes and went away as fast as he could, and I never thought of it again. But that is certainly your card, isn't it, Mr. Tom? It looks just like those I used to see on your dresser." It was plain that she was beginning to be distressed and I hastened to reassure her.

"The card is either mine or a very clever imitation, I am not quite certain of which as yet. But in all probability it is one of mine. The

had been to the Derby or had worn any special suit upon that day? The more I cudgled my brains over it the more benumbed they became, until at last I picked up my hat and rushed out of the house. Having but little idea that I would learn anything by so doing, I nevertheless immediately boarded a car and going to the shop of my tailor threw the note on the counter before him. "What do you know about that note, Johnson?" I demanded.

He picked it up, adjusted his eye-glasses and read it with a slowly forming and negative pursing of his mouth. Then he held it forth. "Nothing at all. What is there about it?" I took the card from him and replaced it carefully in my pocket as I made my reply.

"Only this—that it is a forgery. And while I did not for a moment think that you had any information about it, I went to the pains of coming here to ask you. Neither do I suppose you know anything concerning the whereabouts of the clothes mentioned." His answer furnished me the second surprise of the day.

"Oh, yes, I do. The suit is here all right. It was brought in yesterday by a strange man who said you wished me to press it for you. I have done so and it is now in perfect condition." I looked at him with the incredulity with which one faces a person who makes an incredible statement with a straight face and under the guise of seriousness.

"Let me see the suit," I ordered.

He did so, and I inspected it critically. I could discover nothing amiss either externally, and searching the pockets found they were empty. However, that was to be expected, as I could remember having nothing in them when I had hung it away, certainly nothing of any value to anybody but myself. I had only succeeded in thickening the mystery which enveloped this extraordinary transaction, and puzzled beyond expression, I arranged with the tailor that in the future he should allow none of my clothes which he happened to have in his possession to leave his hands upon an order ostensibly written by me unless the order contained a secret mark which we then and there agreed upon. Then instructing him that if any one called for the suit in question and presented an order for the same not bearing the minute token of its genuineness which we had just invented, that he was to detain him until he could summon an officer and have him arrested, I departed. What possible object any person could have had in wishing to secure possession of a suit of my clothes which contained nothing of the slightest worth, and who having secured possession of it should go to the trouble of conveying it from my house to the tailor shop was utterly beyond my comprehension. The forger had not injured the clothes, as some petty-minded enemy might have done out of a spirit of spite, and altogether I could conceive of no possible benefit or satisfaction any one could have derived from such an elaborate and criminal subterfuge. Utterly baffled, I determined to try nothing more about it for the time, quietly awaiting any new developments that might arise.

The next morning another strange thing had happened. I was dressing for the day at my customary hour for arising when suddenly the house-keeper's knuckles fell upon the door in a series of nervous taps. She almost never came to the upper floor before the breakfast hour, and I therefore searched her face with some curiosity as I told her that she might enter. She immediately burst forth in an excited volley.

"Oh, Mr. Tom! The house has been burglarized again in the night. What on earth are we coming to with such people prowling all around in the darkness? I never was so frightened in my life. I declare I nearly fell in a faint when I discovered it. Please come with me and I will show you." Dumfoundedly, and with my necktie still dangling from my hand, I followed her squat figure as she climbed down the front stairs, waddled through the dining room and kitchen and then one foot at a time descended the steep stairs that led to the basement. There was only one door entering from the outside into these lower regions and that was never used—in fact, had been bolted ever since my occupancy of the premises. The aperture in the side of the house through which the coal supply was dumped from the drive into the bin was protected by an iron grating which was always carefully locked after such an operation, and the low windows which admitted light to the furnace room had fixed iron bars on the outside. The police, LeDuc and myself had gone over this region thoroughly in our search and had found that the locks had not been tampered with nor the gratings disturbed; the dust and the rust had proven that beyond contention. Now to my amazement I saw that the door had been forced by some powerful instrument that had torn the receiving socket for the bolt bodily from its fastenings. My hair arose with a cold tingling of my scalp, much as it might have done had I been suddenly confronted by some uncanny object in the dead of night.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Postgraduate Course.

Pretty Daughter—Now that I have graduated, mamma, don't you think I ought to take a postgraduate course? Practical Mother—Certainly, my dear, I have arranged a complete course for you in roatology, bakeology, washology, serology, patchology, washology, ironology and general domesticology. Run along now and get on your working harness.