

quickly and you can save everything.  
"A FRIEND."

"Wait a moment."

Amber held the other's arm as he made for the lane.

"Don't delay for God's sake, Amber!" cried Sutton fretfully; "we may be in time."

"Wait," commanded Amber sharply.

He flashed his lamp on the ground. The soil was of clay and soft. There were footmarks—of how many people he could not tell. He stepped out into the road. The ground was soft here with patches of grass. Whoever had passed through the wicket had by good fortune or intention missed the soft patches of clay, for there was no recent footprint.

"Come along!" Sutton was hurrying up the road and Amber and the girl followed.

"Have you got a gun?" asked Amber.

For answer Sutton slipped a Smith Weison from his pocket.

"Did you expect this?" asked the girl by his side.

"Something like it," was the quiet answer. "Until we had settled this business I insisted that we should all be armed—I know Whitey."

Sutton fell back until he was abreast of them.

"I can see no sign of footmarks," he said, "and I'm worried about that message."

"There is one set of footprints," said Amber shortly.

His light had been searching the road all the time. "As to the message I am more puzzled than worried. Hullo, what is that?"

In the middle of the road lay a black object and Sutton ran forward and picked it up.

"It is a hat," he said. "By Heaven, Amber, it is my father's!"

"Oh," said Amber shortly and stopped dead.

They stood for the space of a few seconds.

"I'm going back," said Amber suddenly.

They stared at him.

"But—" said the bewildered girl, "but—you are not going to give up the search?"

"Trust me, please," he said gently. "Sutton, go ahead; there are some labourer's cottages a little way along. Knock them up and get assistance. There is a chance that you are on the right track—there is a bigger chance that I am. Any way it will be less dangerous for Cynthia to follow you than to return with me."

With no other word he turned and went running back the way he came with the long loping stride of a cross-country runner.

They stood watching him till he vanished in the gloom.

"I don't understand it," muttered Frank. The girl said nothing; she was bewildered, dumbfounded. Mechanically she fell in by her brother's side. He was still clutching the hat.

They had a quarter of a mile to go before they reached the cottages, but they had not traversed half that distance before in turning a sharp bend of the lane they were confronted by a dark figure that stood in the centre of the road.

Frank had his revolver out in an instant and flashed his lamp ahead.

The girl, who had started back with a heart that beat more quickly, gave a sigh of relief, for the man in the road was a policeman, and there was something very comforting in his stolid, unromantic figure.

"No, sir," said the constable, "nobody has passed here."

"A quarter of an hour ago?" suggested Frank.

"Not during the last three hours," said the policeman. "I thought I heard footsteps down the lane the best part of an hour since, but nobody has passed."

He had been detailed for special duty, to detect poachers, and he had not, he said, moved from the spot since seven o'clock—it was then eleven.

Briefly Frank explained the situation.

"Well," said the man slowly, "they couldn't have brought him this way—and it is the only road to the quarry. Sounds to me like a blind. If you'll wait whilst I get my bicycle, which is

behind the hedge, I'll walk back with you."

On the way back Frank gave him such particulars as he thought necessary.

"It's a blind," said the man positively. "Why should they take the trouble to tell you which way they went? You don't suppose, sir, that you had a friend in the gang?"

Frank was silent. He understood now Amber's sudden resolve to return.

The road was down-hill and in ten minutes they were in sight of the house.

"I expect Peter—" began Frank.

Crack!—Crack!

Two pistol shots rang out in the silent night.

Crack—crack—crack!

There was a rapid exchange of shots and the policeman swung himself on to the cycle.

"Take this!"

Frank thrust his revolver into the constable's hand.

At the full speed the policeman went spinning down the hill and the two followed at a run.

No other shots broke the stillness and they arrived out of breath at the wicket gate to find Amber and the constable engaged in a hurried consultation.

"It's all right."

Amber's voice was cheery.

"What of father?" gasped the girl.

"He's in the house," said Amber.

"I found him gagged and bound in the gardener's hut at the other end of the garden."

He took the girl's trembling arm and led her toward the house.

"He went out for a little walk in the grounds," he explained, "and they pounced on him. No, they didn't hurt him. There were three of the rascals."

"Where are they?" asked Frank.

"Gone—there was a motor-car waiting for them at the end of the lane. The policeman has gone after them in the hope that they have a breakdown."

He led the way to the sitting-room.

"Peter is with your father. Sit down, you want a little wine, I think"—her face was very white—"I'll tell you all about it. I didn't quite swallow that friendly notice on the wicket. I grew more suspicious when I failed to see any footmarks on the road to support the abduction theory. Then of a sudden it occurred to me that the whole thing was a scheme to get us out of the house whilst they had time to remove your father."

"When I got back to the wicket I made another hurried search of the garden and happened upon the tool-house by luck. The first thing I saw was your father lying on a heap of wood trussed and gagged. I had hardly released him when I heard a voice outside. Three men were crossing the lawn toward the wicket. It was too dark to see who they were, but I ran out and called upon them to stop."

"We heard firing," said the girl.

Amber smiled grimly.

"That was their answer," he said; "I followed them to the road. They fired at me again, and I replied. I rather fancy I hit one."

"You are not hurt?" she asked anxiously.

"My lady," said Amber gaily, "I am unscathed."

"But I don't understand it," persisted Frank. "What did the beggars want to take the governor for?"

Amber shook his head.

"That is beyond me—" He stopped suddenly. "Let us take a look at the library," he said, and led them to the room.

"Hullo, I thought I turned this light out!"

The light was blazing away, the gas flaring in the draught made by the open door.

Well might it flare, for the window was open. So, too, was the door of the safe hanging wretchedly on one hinge.

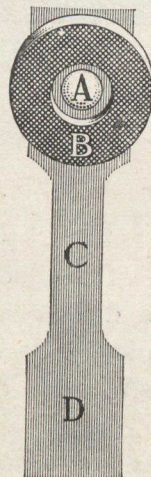
Amber said nothing—only he whistled.

"So that was why they lured us from the house," he said softly. "This is Whitey's work, and jolly clever work too."

(To be continued.)

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