

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPINNING WHEEL

Being An Exploit in the Career of Hamilton Cleek, Detective.
By MARY E. AND THOMAS W. HANSEW

(Continued from yesterday)

Cleek nuzzled in his breath and, half-crouching, half-running, sped after her. What if the men had seen! He glanced back quickly over his shoulder, and then redoubled his pace. For, of a sudden, with the speed of a lightning-flash every flare in that valley had gone out—zip!—like that. Every voice had dropped to stillness, and the night was a hideous thing of running footsteps, padding, he knew only too well, up the hillside after them—those watchers who had seen the secret of the night, and tomorrow might give it forth to an unsuspecting world. Their lives wouldn't be worth much if this crew caught them, that was certain.

Panting, he reached her side, caught hold of her elbow, and pinning it close to his fingers hurried her forward, every faculty alert, every nerve a-tremble. Her panting breath was like the breath of a spent runner; she wouldn't last far in those high heels, he knew; the going was too hard. It was only a matter of time now. The hurrying

footsteps seemed to be coming nearer and nearer.

He bent his face down to hers. "The motor-car? Where?" he said in a quick, panting voice.

She managed to stammer out a reply, stumbling feet falling over the rough ground, tripping in clumps of heather, bruising themselves against harsh stones.

"In the lane—beyond—over there! I've been a fool—leave me and go yourself!" she panted out in disjointed sentences that were ringing with despair.

"Never! We'll get there yet. Gather up your skirts. Gad! you're done!" It was his own voice that spoke to her, and for a sudden moment he had forgotten the part he played in the exigencies of this distressing situation. He heard her gasp suddenly, and started eyes up into his face, and then away against him, and realized his folly—too late. The shock of the thing had unnerved her. In the darkness she could not see his face clearly, but the voice had been—different. He'd brought the whole structure about his ears by one foolish momentary mistake. Then quite suddenly she fainted against him.

"Fool!" he apostrophized himself. "Blind fool!" and, stopping instantly, caught her up in his arms just as the lane bore in sight, and throwing her across his shoulder, took the added burden in his best athletic fashion, and ran.

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CHAPTER XXV

The Man in the Black Mask

They reached the motor only just in the nick of time, for already the darkness behind them was rent with cries of "There they are! Head them off!—there they are!" making the night hideous with the noise of them, and the stampede of feet seemed to grow more dense with every minute.

Cleek flung his unconscious burden in the car, leaped in after it, and, tapped the chauffeur upon the shoulder.

"Extinguish your lamps and make

The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking on the Strand;
"If these were Eddy matches
It really would be grand;
To think of using others
Is more than I can stand."

(With apologies to "Alice in Wonderland")

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for Aygon Castle—as quick as you can!" he gave out in his sharp staccato of excitement. "And the quicker the better! There's trouble here, and if those men catch up with us tonight I'll not answer for the lady's safety."

"Yes, sir."

Then with a white and a whirr the car was off, rocketing down the lane and taking the corners upon two wheels so that Cleek had hardly a breath left in his body, and the rush of air that swept them as they sped away began to revive the unconscious form of Catherine Dorr who lay upon the seat beside him.

A drop of brandy, rather uncertainly administered because of the darkness and the jolting car, revived her still more, and in another moment her eyes opened and let them dwell upon his face. In the darkness they glowed like two lamps. And her face was very frightened.

"My God! Not Ross!" she broke out uncertainly, shutting her hands together across her breast in her agitation. "Then—who are you?"

"Who knows?" he responded with a touch of gallantry. "It was your mistake in the first place, remember, not mine. A friend in need, perhaps, who has been able to save you from the consequences of a very foolish action. You know what those men were doing?"

She shook her head dumbly.

"Then you will learn tomorrow from the lips of a man whom you have learned to distrust, because he has proved more than a match for you already. That is so, isn't it? Your Mr. Deland up at the Castle. From what I heard, you have broken parole, and to do that is—"

"You won't tell—oh, surely you won't tell!" she gave out in a low, urgent voice. "How you could mimic Ross Duggan as you did is beyond me. But you stole my confidence, and I demand its return! You tell nothing of tonight to a living soul. Will you promise me that?"

He paused a moment and looked down at her with frowning brows. Then his face cleared.

"Very well, then. That is a bargain. But I don't think you realize just how familiar about you, but I cannot place it. You won't help me?"

"Better let this night's doings be buried in the Limbo of Forgotten Things, dear lady," he said, his hand resting for a moment upon her shoulder. "And if you know not who the shaver of your hair—adventure may be, surely it is better that way. Good-night and goodbye. You will keep your promise?"

"I gave him upon an interlocking look from beneath her dark brows. Then she flung up her head.

"Of course. Thank you for what you have done."

"That is nothing. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Like a shadow she was fleeing up the wide drive, her feet barely making any sound upon it; then, even as she disappeared from view, Cleek turned swiftly to the chauffeur who sat in the front seat of the car, goggle-hiding his eyes from view, and clapped him upon the shoulder.

"Well done, Dollops, well done!" he rapped out with a soft laugh. "I thought it was you the minute peepers rested upon you. Cockney conceit, you little bundle of indefatigability! How did you do it? You caught my meaning, of course! Deuced keen of you, I must say!"

Dollops grinned, and slipped his goggles from his pocket.

"Yes," he returned, with a vigorous nod. "I caught the signal on sight. If the bristles are on you, Guy? So I listen, and then I makes a little plan all on my ownome. 'The Guy' he's up to summink, says I fer me, 'an' I'll lay 'e wants me ter tyke a little 'and'. And so I ups and makes fer the road, and there I find the shaver-a-wattin' in this 'ere little snortin' machine."

"He was there, then, was he?"

"Now, then, me lady," says ter me, 'git you ter right side o' 'im, 'an' if yer can't git on the right side git on the wrong side, s' long as yer gits 'im out o' 'is seat'. 'Shoop along an' send a wire ter town,' says I, 'Comin' later in the day, wait fer me, an' address it ter the Commandant-in-Chief of the General Post Office, Lunnnon'. An' he looks at me an' swallows the gaff like it were plumage. 'Where could 'er larfed, sir—stirle I could! And I gives 'im the tip ter get a drink, and before I'd finished speakin' 'e'd gone. 'Good lad! good lad!' Cleek's laugh was merry if low-pitched. 'The London address of the telegraph messenger was tickled his sense of humour immensely. 'And what did you do then?' 'Drove 'dahn the road, 'an' if yer just ter me 'and in, and then, when I 'eard you call out ter the lady, and knew you was in the clutch and come rocketing toward yer as fast as I could.'"

"Who! And you were nearer than I ter me 'and in, and then, when I 'eard you call out ter the lady, and knew you was in the clutch and come rocketing toward yer as fast as I could.'"

Dollops drew a long breath before replying, and his voice was solemn.

"That little distance of a quarter of a mile might 'ave done for yer entire—an' I weren't tykin' no risks," he replied heavily. "An' if anyfink was to 'appen to you sir—well, it's me fer the river, fer you kin wink an eye-lash. Dollops ain't a-stayin' 'ere wiv you on the upper side of the sky, sir, an' don't you myke no mistake abt that. Where you goes, I goes, too—if it's to 'eaven or 'ell. An' I'm thinkin' I know the w'y the angels'll tyke you."

"Well, they're not taking me yet, dear lad, so don't worry your ginger head about it!" returned Cleek, with a little glug of emotion for so staunch an adherent as this wisp of Cockney-donn who stood before him. "But it's friends like you and women like Miss Lorne that keep a man straight and strong and true, and don't let him turn down the wrong path instead of the right. Come, now, there's still more waiting, and I told him midnight under the big gate. Slip up the driveway and, if you can see how the coast lies."

Dollops disappeared forthwith, and it was but a moment or two later that he returned in company with the Superintendent looking a little round-eyed and scared until he saw Cleek standing in the shadow of the big gate, and going up to him flung an arm about his shoulders.

"You've frightened me into forty bits and out of 'em again," he cried with a little sigh of relief. "For I'd made up my mind that something had happened, and was on the way down here to see

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a long chalk. I'll tell you all about it later on, when there's more time and less chance of being overheard. Now, then, step softly, you two. If there's any one there, we don't want to let 'em think an army's approaching. You gave Inspector Petrie the word if we needed him? That I'd ring Rhea's bell in case of immediate help required?"

"Of course. And that one toll would mean one man, and two tolls, three; and three tolls, as many as they could spare from the duty of guarding the house and letting no one go out or in."

"And they've already let almost every inmate of the place roam about at their leisure this night—to prove their trustworthiness!" threw in Cleek, with a short laugh. "A fine lot of disciplinarians up in this part of the world, I must say—though of course the country's difficult, and you want about fifty men up here to one in London. I'll have a word with the Inspector before I leave—with your permission, Mr. Narkom."

"Certainly."

"We'll get along now, Dollops. You stand here under the gate, and keep watch toward the Castle; Mr. Narkom, you stand here, and guard the road-end, and make the usual signal of a night owl's hoot if you see any one approaching. I'll slip on my rubber sand-shoes to grip with, and slip in up a moment."

And nuzzling the action to the word, that was practically what he did do—though the climb up there in the darkness was certainly more than monetary. For with no light and very little moon it was a more difficult task than Cleek had anticipated, and he had to tread carefully to avoid slipping on the narrow shelves of stone and iron that girt it about.

Up, up, up he went, like some dark fly crawling across the face of the night, to those watching below, their hearts in their mouths at sight of his perilous progress (which at times they could not follow for the pitchy darkness, and knew not if he were safe or not), those moments seemed hours indeed.

But Cleek had been in tighter corners and more difficult places than this in the course of an adventurous lifetime, and the pose and sureness of the man were amazing. Up, and along the stone parapet he went, sliding face toward the stone wall of it, until he could lean back a little and look up. Rhea stood, out against the midnight sky like a monstrous spot of black ink in a lake of indigo-blue. The bronze bell swung beneath him. He knelt cautiously upon one knee, preparatory to whipping out his electric torch, and even as he did so, heard the sound of other footsteps stealing round from the other side and coming toward him with the swift tread of a cat.

Instantly he stopped short—stock-still, as though made out of marble; and leaned back against the parapet, while those sliding, soft, creeping, cat-like footsteps came steadily on. He became conscious of a black shape, slim as a woman's, against the midnight sky, that moved with panther-like precision across the face of the parapet. He could actually hear that other person's laboured breaths, and as the Thing steadily approached felt it fast against his cheek.

If Cleek had been in a less precarious position the soul of the man would have relieved itself by laughing outright. For the situation seemed almost funny. But there was no time for humor. The moment he stirred and made himself known, upon that moment the creature wheeled and whatever it was—would pounce upon him, and dash them both down to sure death upon the stones below, and in full sight of the Superintendent's watching eyes. But what to do if he stayed where he was? Detention was certain in any case. There remained only a moment of moments before it actually would

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"Damn you! what are you doing here?"

Instantly all was pandemonium! For the man—for man it was—sprang round quickly, showing the lower half of a white face to Cleek's watching eyes, and then with a low-pitched exclamation of fury closed with him and fought like some mad thing, spitting out furiously and clawing and scratching with his free hand to gain hold of the other.

(To be continued)

The occupation of Siberia cost the Japanese government \$300,000,000.

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