

that. Your friend and my friend who sent you to me five years ago was quite correct in calling you clever; I have found you so; I have been willing to pay you a good salary—a very good salary—because you are clever.”

“I’m glad if you have found my work satisfactory, Mr. Santoine.”

“I have even found it worth while at times to talk over with you matters—problems—which were troubling me; to consult with you. Have I not?”

“Yes.”

“Very well; I am going to consult with you now. I have an infirmity, as you know, Avery; I am blind. I have just found out that for several years—for about five years, to be exact; that is, for about the same length of time that you have been with me—my blindness has been used by a certain group of men to make me the agent of a monstrous and terrible injustice to an innocent man. Except for my blindness—except for that, Avery, this injustice never could have been carried on. If you find a certain amount of bitterness in my tone, it is due to that; a man who has an infirmity, Avery, cannot well help being a little sensitive in regard to it. You are willing I should consult with you in regard to this?”

“Of course I am at your service, Mr. Santoine.” Avery’s voice was harsh and dry.

The blind man was silent for an instant. He could feel the uneasiness and anxiety of the man across from him mounting swiftly, and he gave it every opportunity to increase. He had told Eaton once that he did not use “cat and mouse” methods; he was using them now because that was the only way his purpose could be achieved.

“We must go back, then, Avery, to the quite serious emergency to which I am indebted for your faithful service. It is fairly difficult now for one contemplating the reverence and regard in which ‘big’ men are held by the public in these days of business reconstruction to recall the attitude of only a few years ago. However, it is certainly true that five years ago

the American people appeared perfectly convinced that the only way to win true happiness and perpetuate prosperity was to accuse, condemn, and jail for life—if execution were not legal—the heads of the important groups of industrial properties. Just at that time, one of these men—one of the most efficient but also, perhaps, the one personally most obnoxious or unpopular—committed one of his gravest indiscretions. It concerned the private use of deposits in national banks; it was a federal offence of the most patent and provable kind. He was indicted. Considering the temper of any possible jury at that time, there was absolutely no alternative but to believe that the man under indictment must spend many succeeding years, if not the rest of his life, in the Federal penitentiary at Atlanta or Leavenworth.

“Now, not only the man himself but his closest associates contemplated this certainty with dismay. The man was in complete control of a group of the most valuable and prosperous properties in America. Before his gaining control, the properties had been almost ruined by differences between the minor men who tried to run them; only the calling of Matthew Latron into control saved those men from themselves; they required him to govern them; his taking away would bring chaos and ruin among them again. They knew that. There were a number of important people, therefore, who held hope against hope that Latron would not be confined in a prison cell. Just before he must go to trial, Latron himself became convinced that he faced confinement for the rest of his life; then fate effectively intervened to end all his troubles. His body, charred and almost consumed by flames—but nevertheless the identified body of Matthew Latron—was found in the smoking ruins of his shooting lodge which burned to the ground two days before his trial. I have stated correctly these particulars, have I not, Avery?”

“Yes.” Avery was no longer sitting on the arm of the chair; he had

slipped into the seat—he was hunched in the seat watching the blind man with growing conviction and fear.

“There were, of course,” Santoine went on, “many of the violent and passion-inflamed who carped at this timely intervention of fate and criticised the accident which delivered Latron at this time. But these were silenced when Latron’s death was shown to have been, not accident, but murder. A young man was shown to have followed Latron to the shooting box; a witness appeared who had seen this young man shoot Latron; a second witness had seen him set fire to the lodge. The young man—Hugh Overton—was put on trial for his life. I, myself, as a witness at the trial, supplied the motive for the crime; for, though I had never met Overton, I knew that he had lost the whole of a large fortune through investments recommended to him by Latron. Overton was convicted, sentenced to death; he escaped before the sentence was carried out—became a fugitive without a name, who if he ever reappeared would be handed over for execution. For the evidence had been perfect—complete; he had shot Latron purely for revenge, killed him in the most despicable manner. For there was no doubt Latron was dead, was there, Avery?”

Santoiné waited for reply.

“What?” Avery said huskily.

“I say there was no doubt Latron was dead?”

“None.”

“That was the time you came into my employ, Avery, recommended to me by one of the men who had been closest to Latron. I was not connected with the Latron properties except as an adviser; but many papers relating to them must go inevitably through my hands. I was rather on the inside in all that concerned those properties. But I could not myself see the papers; I was blind; therefore, I had to have others serve as eyes for me. And from the first, Avery, you served as my eyes in connection with all papers relating to the Latron properties. If anything ever appeared in those papers which might have led me to suspect that any injustice had been done in the punishment of Latron’s murderer, it could reach me only through you. Nothing of that sort ever did reach me, Avery. You must have made quite a good thing out of it.”

“What?”

“I say, your position here must have been rather profitable to you, Avery; I have not treated you badly myself, recognizing that you must often be tempted by gaining information here from which you might make money; and your other employers must have overbid me.”

“I DON’T understand; I beg your pardon, Mr. Santoiné, but I do not follow what you are talking about.”

“No? Then we must go a little further. This last year a minor reorganization became necessary in some of the Latron properties. My friend, Gabriel Warden—who was an honest man, Avery—had recently greatly increased his interest in those properties; it was inevitable the reorganization should be largely in his hands. I remember now there was opposition to his share in it; the fact made no impression on me at the time; opposition is common in all things. During his work with the Latron properties, Warden—the honest man, Avery—discovered the terrible injustice of which I speak.

“I suspect there were discrepancies in the lists of stockholders, showing a concealed ownership of considerable blocks of stock, which first excited his suspicions. Whatever it may have been, Warden certainly investigated further. Evidently this helpless, hopeless man had been thought worth watching by some one, for Warden’s discoveries gave him also Overton’s address. Warden risked and lost his life trying to help Overton.

“I do not need to draw your attention, Avery, to the very peculiar condition which followed Warden’s death. Warden had certainly had communication with Overton of some sort; Overton’s enemies, therefore, were unable to rid themselves of him by delivering

him up to the police because they did not know how much Overton knew. When I found that Warden had made me his executor and I went west and took charge of his affairs, their difficulties were intensified, for they did not dare to let suspicion of what had been done reach me. There was no course open to them, therefore, but to remove Overton before my suspicions were aroused, even if it could be done only at desperate risk to themselves.

“What I am leading up to, Avery, is your own connection with these events. You looked after your own interests rather carefully, I think, up to a certain point. When—knowing who Eaton was—you got him into a polo game, it was so that, if your interests were best served by exposing him, you could do so without revealing the real source of your knowledge of him. But an unforeseen event arose. The drafts and lists relating to the reorganization of the Latron properties—containing the very facts, no doubt, which first aroused Warden’s suspicions—were sent me through Warden’s office. At first there was nothing threatening to you in this, because their contents could reach me only through you. But in the uncertainty I felt, I had my daughter take these matters out of your hands; you did not dare then, even to ask me to give them back, for fear that would draw my attention to them and to you.

“That night, Avery, you sent an unsigned telegram from the office in the village; almost within twenty-four hours my study was entered, the safe inaccessible to you was broken open, the contents were carried away. The study window had not been forced; it had been left open from within. Do you suppose I do not know that one of the two men in the study last night was the principal whose agents had failed in two attempts to get rid of Overton for him, whose other agent—yourself, Avery—had failed to intercept the evidence which would have revealed the truth to me, so that, no longer trusting to agents, he himself had come in desperation to prevent my learning the facts? I realize fully, Avery, that by means of you my blindness and my reputation have been used for five years to conceal from the public the fact that Matthew Latron had not been murdered, but was still alive!”

The blind man halted; he had not gone through this long conversation, with all the strain that it entailed upon himself, without a definite object; and now, as he listened to Avery’s quick breathing and the nervous tapping of his fingers against the arm of his chair, he realized that this object was accomplished. Avery not only realized that the end of deception and concealment had come; he recognized thoroughly that Santoiné would not have spoken until he had certain proof to back his words. Avery might believe that, as yet, the blind man had not all the proof in his possession; but Avery knew—as he was aware that Santoiné also knew—that exposure threatened so many men that some one of them now was certain to come forward to save himself at the expense of the others. And Avery knew that only one—and the first one so to come forward—could be saved.

So Santoiné heard Avery now get up; he stood an instant and tried to speak, but his breath caught nervously; he made another effort.

“I don’t think you have much against me, Mr. Santoiné,” he managed; it was—as the blind man had expected—only of himself that Avery was thinking.

“No?” Santoiné asked quietly.

“I didn’t have anything to do with convicting Overton, or know anything about it until that part was all over; I never saw him till I saw him on the train. I didn’t know Warden was going to be killed.”

“But you were accessory to the robbery of my house last night and, therefore, accessory to the murder of Wallace Blatchford. Last night, too, knowing Overton was innocent of everything charged against him, you gave orders to fire upon him at sight, and he was fired upon. And what were you telling Harriet when I came in? You have told the police that Overton is the murderer of Latron.



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