

THE BLIND MAN'S EYES

BY WILLIAM McHARG AND EDWIN BALMER

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CHAPTER XXII.—Continued.

DIBLEY at the bridge had told enough to let Eaton know that those whom Eaton pursued were no longer in the machine he had followed with Harriet. As Eaton had rushed out of Santoine's study after the two that he had fought there, he had seen that one of these men was supporting and helping the other; he had gained on them because of that. Then other men had appeared suddenly, to give their help, and he had no longer been able to gain; but he had been close enough to see that the one they dragged along and helped into the car was that enemy whose presence in the study had so amazed him. Mad exultation had seized Eaton to know that he had seriously wounded his adversary. He knew now that the man could not have got out of the car by himself—he was too badly wounded for that; he had been taken out of the car, and the other men who were missing had him in charge. The three men who had gone on in the machine had done so for their own escape, but with the added object of misleading the pursuit; the water they had got at Dibley's had been to wash the blood from the car.

And now, as Eaton recalled and realized all this, he knew where the others had left the machine. Vaguely, during the pursuit, he had sensed that Harriet was swinging their motor-car in a great circle, first to the north, then west, then to the south. Two or three miles back upon the road, before they had made their turn to the south, Eaton had lost for a few moments the track of the car they had been following. He had picked it up again at once and before he could speak of it to Harriet; but now he knew that at that point the car they were following had left the road, turning off on to the turf at the side and coming back on to the road a hundred yards beyond.

This place must be nearly due north of him. The road where he had left Harriet ran north and south; to go north he must parallel this road, but it was dangerous to move too near to it because it was guarded. The sky was covered with clouds hiding the stars; the night in the woods was intensely black except where it was lighted by the fire at the bridge. To the opposite side, a faint gray glow against the clouds, which could not be the dawn but must be the reflection of the electric lights along the public pike which followed the shore of the lake, gave Eaton inspiration. If he kept this grayness of the clouds always upon his right, he would be going north.

The wound in Eaton's shoulder still welled blood each time he moved; he tore strips from the front of his shirt, knotted them together and bound his useless left arm tightly to his side. He felt in the darkness to be sure that there was a fresh clip of cartridges in his automatic pistol; then he stepped forward.

FOR the first time he comprehended the almost impossibility of travelling in the woods on a dark night. To try to walk swiftly was to be checked after only two or three steps by sharp collision with some tree-trunk which he could not see before he felt it, or brought to a full stop by clumps of tangled, thorny bushes which enmeshed him, or to be tripped or thrown by some inequality of the ground. When he went round any of these obstacles he lost his sense of direction and wasted minutes before he could find again the dim light against the eastern sky which gave him the compass-points.

As he struggled forward, impatient at these delays, he came several times upon narrow, unguarded roads and crossed them; at other times the little wilderness which protected him changed suddenly to a well-kept lawn where some great house with its garages and out-buildings loomed ahead, and afraid to cross these open places,

he was obliged to retrace his steps and find a way round. The distance from the bridge to the place where the three men he was following had got out of their motor, he had thought to be about two miles; but when he had been travelling more than an hour, he had not yet reached it. Then, suddenly he came upon the road for which he was looking; somewhere to the east along it was the place he sought. He crouched as near to the road as he dared and where he could look up and down it. This being a main road, was guarded. A motor-car with armed men in it passed him, and presently repassed, evidently patrolling the road; its lights showed him a man with a gun standing at the first bend of the road to the east. Eaton drew further back and moved parallel to the road but far enough away from it to be hidden. A quarter of a mile further he found a second man. The motor-car, evidently, was patrolling only to this point; another car was on duty beyond this. As Eaton halted, this second car approached, and was halted, backed and turned.

ITS bright headlight swept through the woods and revealed Eaton. The man standing in the road cried out the alarm and fired at Eaton point blank; he fired a second and third time. Eaton fled madly back into the shadow; as he did so, he heard the men crying to one another and leaping from the car and following him. He found low ground less thickly wooded, and plunged along it. It was not difficult to avoid the men in the blackness of the woods; he made a wide circuit and came back to the road further on. He could still hear for a time the sounds of the hunt on the turf. Apparently he had not yet reached the right spot; he retreated to the woods, went further along and came back to the road, lying flat upon his face again and waiting till some other car in passing should give him light to see.

Eaton, weak and dizzy from his wounds and confused by darkness and his struggle through the woods, had no exact idea how long it had taken him to get to this place; but he knew that it could have been hardly less than two hours since he had left Harriet. The men he was following, therefore, had that much start of him, and this made him wild with impatience but did not discourage him. His own wounds, Eaton understood, made his escape practically impossible, because any one who saw him would at once challenge and detain him; and the other man was still more seriously wounded. It was not his escape that Eaton feared; it was concealment of him. The man had been taken from the car because his condition was so serious that there was no hope of hiding it; Eaton thought he must be dead. He expected to find the body concealed under dead leaves, hurriedly hidden.

The night had cleared a little; to the north, Eaton could see stars. Suddenly the road and the leafless bushes at its sides flashed out in the bright light of a motor-car, passing. Eaton strained forward. He had found the place; there was no doubt a car had turned off the road some time before and stopped there. The passing of many cars had so tracked the road that none of the men in the motors seemed to have noticed anything of significance there; but Eaton saw plainly in the soft ground at the edge of the woods the footmarks of two men walking one behind the other. When the car had passed, he crept forward in the dark and fingered the distinct heel and toe marks in the soft soil. For a little distance he could follow them by feeling; then as they led him into the edge of the woods the ground grew harder and he could no longer follow them in that way.

It was plain to him what had occurred; two men had got out of the car here and had lifted out and carried away a third. He knelt where he could

feel the last footsteps he could detect and looked around. The gray of the electric lights to the east seemed growing, spreading; against this lightness in the sky he could see plainly the branches of the trees; he recognized then that the grayness was the coming of the dawn. It would be only a few minutes before he could see plainly enough to follow the tracks. He drew aside into the deeper cover of some bushes to wait.

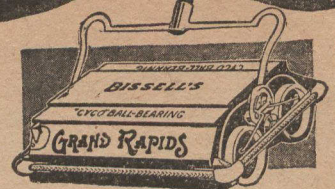
The wound in his shoulder no longer bled, but the pain of it twinged him through and through; his head throbbed with the hurt there; his feet were raw and bleeding where sharp roots and branches had cut through his socks and torn the flesh; his skin was hot and dry with fever, and his head swam. He followed impatiently the slow whitening of the east; as soon as he could make out the ground in front of him, he crept forward again to the tracks.

There was not yet light enough to see any distance, but Eaton, accustomed to the darkness and bending close to the ground, could discern the footmarks even on the harder soil. They led away from the road into the woods. On the rotted leaves and twigs was a dark stain; a few steps beyond there was another. The stains had sunk into the damp ground but were plainer on the leaves; Eaton picking up a leaf and fingering it, knew that they were blood. So the man was not dead when he had been lifted from the car. But he had been hurt desperately, was unable to help himself, was probably dying; if there had been any hope for him, his companions would not be carrying him in this way away from any chance of surgical attention.

Eaton followed, as the tracks led through the woods. The men had gone very slowly, carrying this heavy weight; they had been travelling, as he himself had travelled, in the dark, afraid to show a light and avoiding chance of being seen by any one on the roads. They had been as uncertain of their road as he had been of his, but the general trend of their travel was toward the east, and this evidently was the direction in which they wished to go. They had stopped frequently to rest and had laid their burden down. Then suddenly he came to a place where plainly a longer halt had been made.

THE ground was trampled at this spot; when the tracks went on they changed in character. The two men were still carrying the third—a heavy man whose weight strained them and made their feet sink in deeply where the ground was soft. But now they were not careful how they carried him, but went forward merely as though bearing a dead weight. Now, too, no more stains appeared on the brown leaves where they had passed; their burden no longer bled. Eaton, realizing what this meant, felt neither exultation nor surprise. He had known that the man they carried, though evidently alive when taken from the car, was dying. But now he watched the tracks more closely even than before, looking for them to show him where the men had got rid of their burden.

It had grown easier to follow the tracks with the increase of the light, but the danger that he would be seen had also grown greater. He was obliged to keep to the hollows; twice, when he ventured on to the higher ground, he saw motor-cars passing at a distance, but near enough so that those in them could have seen him if they had been looking his way. Once he saw at the edge of the woods a little group of armed men. His dizziness and weakness from the loss of blood was increasing; he became confused at times and lost the tracks. He went forward slowly then, examining each clump of bushes, each heap of dead leaves, to see whether the men had hidden in them that of which he was



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