



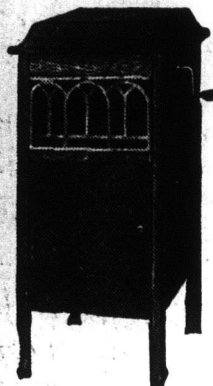
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The Secret of Saddle Gap

By Edith G. Bayne

Contd. from page 10

"If you're the clever feller you look you ought to be keen on pickin' up—hints."

"Hints? I eat them up!" "Well, listen here. Gimme an idee 'bout this case you've come up here on an' who knows but maybe I can tip you off a leetle bit," said the old chap, craftily. "I'm sorry. I can't take anyone into my confidence, Mr. Comox."

"If—if it concerns Menary—" Bestwood got smoke in his throat and coughed.

"If you're on Mark's trail, why all I can say is I can't help you to string an old pal up. What's past is gone. These here mountains holds their secrets tight, stranger. If its hoss stealin' I might tell a lot. I've know'd a heap o' rustlers, too. But Mark ain't a hoss thief. An' Mark's an old pal. I don't squeal on a pal."

Bestwood wondered if a little fear as well as natural inquisitiveness didn't prompt the old man's queries. He thought he had read fear in those fierce eyes in the morning's interview but couldn't be sure. Now why should Old Comox be afraid, since his mind seemed at rest in regard to the engineer's question? He couldn't be afraid for his precious Gap. What then? Bestwood had imagination of a practical kind. He thought hard for a moment. He decided to take a "flyer."

"Mr. Comox, a man was murdered up here in this country," he said, impressively "and the murderer was never brought to justice."

He looked solemnly, steadily, at—not the face of the old man but at his hands. Somewhere he had read that the hands betray guilt more surely than the facial features. If his shot had gone home—

"A heap o' murders has been did in these hills," Old Comox said casually, in an even tone. His right hand fingers beat a restless tattoo on his knee and his left hand pulled his old hat a little lower on his head. Otherwise he betrayed not the least agitation. Nor did he seek to ascertain what particular murder Bestwood was supposedly investigating. At length he got up, not abruptly, but reluctantly and stretched his arms a little.

"Wait. Don't go yet," said the other hurriedly. "Sit down and tell me something about your mining experiences. You must have had many interesting ones, many thrills and adventures. Tell me," he added, "about you and Menary and Charlie Frear."

Old Comox stopped at half stretch. His arms fell.

"What—what do you know—'bout Charlie Frear?" he asked, haltingly, in a low voice.

"Not a thing in the world," replied Bestwood, mildly.

The old man favored him with a long, unflickering gaze. His lower lip shook ever so little.

"You lie!" he said at last with a harsh, dry laugh.

"Why should I trouble to lie?" asked Bestwood, calmly.

"Charlie croaked nigh on ten year ago. Ain't nobody round here ever spoke his name to me, till you to-night. How come you to know 'bout him?"

"Mark Menary knew him, didn't he?"

The old man now grinned fiendishly. "Ah! But Mark never spoke his name to you, I'll take my oath!" he chuckled hoarsely. "Twasn't Mark."

"Why not?" "Because," said the old man slowly, clutching the engineer by the shoulder, "because it was Mark that killed him."

In spite of himself Bestwood started. He shook off the vise-like grip and got up abruptly. The old man was cackling in his shaggy beard.

"Mark croaked him—over the head with a—"

He jerked himself short, his old caution to the fore again. He may or may not have intended to tell so much.

"Comox, you're a queer card," said Bestwood. "First you declare you won't give your old pal away—"

"Nobody round here knows 'bout Charlie, didn't I tell you? An' I'm crazy, they mostly all say. What's the word of a crazy man worth, eh?"

"If I could be sure you were!"

"Now you clear right away out o' the country, stranger. I've told you. I've saved a lot o' time an' trouble for you, an'

"Why, just so-so. You don't expect me to throw bouquets at myself! Self-praise is no recommendation."

"If you're the clever feller you look you ought to be keen on pickin' up—hints."

"Well, listen here. Gimme an idee 'bout this case you've come up here on an' who knows but maybe I can tip you off a leetle bit," said the old chap, craftily.

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"If I could be sure you were!"

"Now you clear right away out o' the country, stranger. I've told you. I've saved a lot o' time an' trouble for you, an'

if you nose round for five year you won't never hear no more. Only Mark an' me know, an' you can't get Mark on sich evidence as mine."

"You ask me to let the whole thing drop?" asked Bestwood in amazement, real or feigned.

"You'd better," and there was menace in the old man's tone.

"I see. In a burst of confidence, or acting on sheer impulse, you've said this to get rid of me. Why?"

"Eh?"

"Why do you wish to get rid of me?"

"Didn't I say Mark was a pal—?" began Old Comox.

Bestwood gave a snort of impatience.

"Comox, that was a heaven-sent hunch of mine a few minutes ago. I didn't know about any murder. I merely made a wild jab at the idea, and you bit like a sucker! I could have said grand larceny or cattle rustling or check-raising, but I decided to hit high. 'Aim high' being a good motto. I've always tried to follow it. Murder is the highest crime in the calendar—or should we say the lowest?—and up here on the edge of civilization it must have flourished, especially during the gold-mad days when this district was a sort of Yukon on a small scale. I've learned something this evening."

"You—razor-faced hyena!" snarled the old man suddenly, whipping out his side-arm and waving it almost under the engineer's nose. "Smell that. Now if you don't pack up an' make tracks you'll get the full of it where it'll do the most good!"

Bestwood smiled serenely.

"I'm going," he said re-assuringly.

"Calm yourself."

"Where?" pursued Old Comox, sternly.

"To clear out. Isn't that what you want?"

"That's what! Hustle now, darn you!"

"Watch my smoke!"

"You're goin' right now."

"Right!" and Bestwood drew his tent stakes as he spoke.

"I'm sittin' here on this log, stranger, with the gun trained on you. One false move an'—"

"How melodramatic!" and Bestwood threw some clothing into his duffel bag. "The moonlight's gone to our heads, gray-beard. This is a play. I vow it is."

"It is, eh?" sneered Old Comox.

Bestwood was ready and mounted in less than ten minutes.

"Down the old wagon-trail with you! You don't get to Menary's again if I know it!" cried the old man.

"Bye-bye, old fire-eater!" Bestwood called back gaily as he obediently trotted off down the trail.

But the only answer from Dan Comox was a roar of blasphemy. He stood watching the supposititious detective out of sight and then mounting a knoll nearby waited to see him pass Crowder's Coulee two miles below. Not till then did he return across the river.

When he was gone a man stepped out from behind a great boulder near where Bestwood's tent had been pitched, a spare figure, of middle height with a melancholy droop to the shoulders. This man had been a more or less willing eavesdropper and though not hearing all that had been said had gathered enough to make a fairly accurate guess as to the trend of the talk. It was Mark Menary. In moccasins he had been coming down the trail from Eagle Lake, portaging a light canoe when, as he rounded the turn below Bestwood's camp, he heard his own name uttered. He had stepped adroitly out of sight.

Gail Menary was just on the point of retiring when she heard her father's footfall. Sleepily, in a loose Jap kimono, her two thick braids of hair falling forward over her slim shoulders, she opened the door.

"That you, Dad?"

"Yes. Got some grub for me?"

"In the oven. Any luck?"

"Nothing much. Just a small string o' perch, an' two or three bass. Kids all in bed?"

"Hours ago."

When Menary had washed and was partaking of his belated supper, his daughter told him that the young engineer had been rather wanting to see him.

"He staved till past ten. I don't think it was anything special," she added, smothering a yawn. "You'll see him to-morrow."

Menary looked up. A curious light gleamed in the shrewd grey eyes. His face seemed to have lost the look of strain and of caution it had been wearing.