

The Double-Walled Secret

In Peril of His Life

By Edwin Baird

CHAPTER III.

The lights came on, the couch was lowered; but his struggle, though furious, was of brief duration, for the strip of cloth which held his broken arm in place became undone and the red-hot pain left him gasping, powerless, white to the lips.

Again Stryker gave a low word of command and again the couch was lifted. The torturing stabs of pain wrung a groan from Kelcey and he ground his teeth, trembling with rage. He judged they had reached the hall when he heard a feet step on the stairway, and then the girl's voice—

"Father! Stop! He doesn't know—he never saw—"

"Stand aside, Bonnie," he heard her father say. Evidently she had thrown herself in his path, and Kelcey knew she was holding her ground when the couch came to a standstill.

"Father, you must listen! I tell you, he saw nothing—nothing!"

There was an agonizing pause. Kelcey could hear the girl whispering, and now and again he caught a mumbled word from her father. They stood only a short distance from him, but he could make nothing of what they said. Presently he heard Stryker say:

"Take him back."

He was carried back to the room, but the rope was not removed from his ankles and the man with the dead-white face stood guard at his head, until Stryker came in and dismissed him.

Only by a supreme effort did Kelcey refrain from voicing the outburst that clamored in his mind for utterance. Stryker drew up a chair and attended the grievously used arm before speaking. Then—

"My daughter," he said, "has saved you. Do you feel strong enough to go home alone?"

Kelcey nodded. He could not yet trust himself to speak.

"I don't know who you are," went on the white-haired man, "but I do know that you are not a jail-bird, and I suspect that you belong to that organized society upon which your rotten civilization is falsely based. Assuming this, I can not rely upon any promises you may make—"

"You can be assured," said Kelcey, as evenly as he could, "that I shall say nothing about my experiences in this house—if that is what you mean."

"That's what I mean," replied Stryker, in his low voice. "But I don't trust you. I trust no man. And so," taking a white silk scarf from his coat, "I must ask that you wear this." As he spoke he folded the scarf, then slipped it over Kelcey's eyes and knotted it securely behind his head.

Kelcey's first impulse was to tear the thing off, but he knew the futility of offering resistance, and submitted as passively as his flaming anger allowed.

Blindfolded, he was led from the house to an automobile churning near the door. Stryker assisted him into the tonneau, stepped in after him and the machine started. The first part of their journey was over uneven ground and the car travelled slowly, but after a while they emerged upon a smooth road and Kelcey knew, from the way the air whipped his face, that the driver of the automobile had thrown the speed to "high." They had gone upward of fifteen miles, he surmised, before the car came suddenly to a stop.

He was guided to the ground, then to a wooden platform. He knew Stryker stood beside him when—

"If you will give me your address, Mr. Kelcey, I will see that your monoplane is returned to you."

An unreasoning impulse, born of his wrath, prompted Kelcey to say: "Never mind! Keep it. Perhaps it will pay you for your services."

He had no way of knowing the effect of his words, for he was answered only by silence. After a while he heard the shriek of a train in the distance and in a few minutes it came to a grinding halt at the platform. The scarf was taken from his eyes and he was lifted to the steps of one of the coaches. When he looked back he saw the hard, white eyes of the auto gleaming athwart a small railway station. And then the train moved on into the warm, black night.

He sank into a seat near the door, with the feeling of one awakening from an unpleasant dream. The motion of the train, the travellers around him, the train crew, all afforded him a positive relief. They were actual, while the recent events seemed very unreal.

He paid his fare in cash, exchanged a commonplace or two with the conductor, and inquired as to

the time they would reach Lake Forest. He was conscious of no curiosity to know the name of the station where he had boarded the train. He desired only to forget his fantastic adventure as speedily as possible. He alighted at Lake Forest, assisted by a brakeman, called up his father's garage and, half an hour later, was rolling homeward in the family limousine.

CHAPTER IV.

Although he felt in nowise bound to silence, he slurred over his mishap as briefly as he could (still with the idea of sealing the adventure), and it is quite likely that he soon would have come to regard the thing as a vague and disagreeable memory had it not been for a peculiar incident in which he chanced to participate. It happened late one afternoon, about a fortnight afterward, just as he left the University Club and was starting for the White-stone Hotel to keep a dinner engagement. His motor was held up at the Michigan avenue intersection and he noticed that a crowd had collected on the corner. In the next few moments he witnessed something that caused him to detain his



A Back-to-the-Lander in His Wheat Field in the Edmonton, Alberta, District. The farmer shown at the left is an erstwhile piano agent who took to farming at a period of life when most men think they are too old to make a fresh start.

chauffeur, as the traffic moved on, and then spring to the ground.

A policeman had arrested a ragged wretch, charged with soliciting alms, and a pretty-haired girl (he knew her instantly) was interceding in the beggar's behalf. The officer addressed her with the insolence of his kind before a crowd.

"So you're his pal—ha! Well, we'll have to take you along, too." He chuckled thickly and laid hold of her arm.

Infuriated, the girl jerked free and struck him sharply across the face with her silver-mesh purse. It was then that Kelcey leaped from his motor. When he elbowed his way to her she was struggling and fighting hopelessly, yet her captor had a double handful. The beggar took his advantage and his departure with no waste of time. The crowd drew in closer, enjoying the scene hugely.

It so happened that the policeman knew Kelcey very well and the latter had little trouble in gaining the girl's liberty.

"Come!" he beseeched her, and took her arm, for she showed no inclination to leave. She looked up at him mutely, then back to the policeman, who was glancing about furtively for the fleeing beggar. Her face was white and her breath came pantingly, like the breath of a runner whose strength is spent. Those in the front circle of the crowd gaped at her; those behind craned their necks to see. "Come, Miss Stryker," urged Kelcey, speaking in a low voice close to her ear, "you must let me get you out of this."

She signified her willingness, and the crowd parted for them, still staring curiously. At his behest she got into his car. Not until they were flowing southward in the avenue's gasoline river did she speak.

"I shouldn't have done that," she murmured, as though thinking aloud. "I shouldn't have done it." Then, suddenly, she began to cry.

Kelcey had an odd, uncomfortable sense of shame. Nothing embarrassed him so much as the sight of a woman crying. He caught himself casting side-long glances at the occupants of the automobiles whizzing past. He wondered how many of his friends had seen him. This further annoyed him. And then, as he realized that he was ashamed of being seen with this girl who undoubtedly had saved his life, he felt contemptibly mean and small.

In an awkward, blundering way he tried to solace her. She bowed her head lower and dried her eyes surreptitiously. But he was not looking at her—had not looked at her. Presently he heard her say: "If you will tell your man to stop—I think—I'd like to get out."

He protested earnestly, sincerely. It would be nothing less than criminal to put her down here, so far from where she evidently wanted to go. Wouldn't she let him take her to her proper destination? It would be a genuine pleasure, he insisted.

The car swung in toward the curb and stopped in front of the Whitestone. She stood up; but he sat nearest the sidewalk and barred her way.

"This is unfair," he objected. "I can't let you go like this."

She stood looking down at him, one gray-gloved hand resting on the back of the front seat. Her blue gaze was very serene and very impersonal; her poise was the soul of cool self-assurance.

"Will you let me out, please?"

Her tone was unmistakable. He could not misconstrue it. The chauffeur had opened the tonneau door, and Kelcey stepped out and offered her his hand. As she fluttered to the pavement, lithe and slender and girlish, he likened her to some rare, exotic flower. Later he was puzzled to recall what brought the simile to mind. He had observed, vaguely, that she was clothed in soft tones of gray and blue, and somehow her clothing seemed an integral part of her, harmonizing delightfully with her white skin and lovely brown hair.

Her slim hand rested in his for the fractional part of an instant and then, with a low-spoken, "Thank you," she turned to go.

But he detained her. "It is I who should thank you. I haven't forgotten my indebtedness to you."

Her eyebrows lifted inquiringly. He noticed that they nearly met at the apex of her nose, and he decided this was one of the things that gave piquancy to her face.

He lowered his voice: "I can't forget that I owe my life to you."

Her level gaze, as it met his eyes, was still impersonal and serene.

"Please try to forget it," she said. "Because," she added, dropping her eyes, "it will be best—for both of us."

With a hurried farewell, she left him. She seemed to have grown, all at once, rather flustered. Her admirable self-confidence had suddenly flown to pieces. His eyes followed her as he lifted his hat and—he could never account for this—he imagined her in his home. The fancy vanished as quickly as it came, but abruptly it occurred to him that he had once before had the same whimsical thought while watching her.

CHAPTER V.

Her words, "It will be best for both of us," bothered him a great deal during the next few weeks and increased his desire to see her again. The desire began to weigh on him heavily. He tried to forget it, but could not. Why did he want to see her? What was there about her that attracted him? He could answer neither question.

His mother and sister saw that something was amiss with him, and they ran over a list of girls he might be "interested in." They settled, as they supposed, upon the one who was responsible for his melancholy, and they were not alarmed. The girl was desirable from every viewpoint. So they said nothing to Kelcey, content to allow matters to take their natural course. Of course the girl would accept him in the end. What girl would not? Everybody knew Tom Kelcey was one of the best catches in Lake Forest. Many maids and matrons had tried to land him and a few had nearly succeeded.

As his arm knitted Kelcey turned his attention to the sport that had broken it. He bought a seven-thousand-dollar biplane and, after several practise flights with the aviator who designed it, he started out alone across Wisconsin. He strove for a course parallel with his first one, but he lost his way in the air and when he got home that evening his gloom was uncommonly pronounced.

He went to a dance that night and danced with the usual girls, who made the usual flirtations advances. And his mother and sister, observing him furtively, had to reconstruct their prior assumption. His indifference to the girl they had chosen for his wife puzzled them.

But they were no more puzzled than he. Many of these young creatures palpitating around him

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