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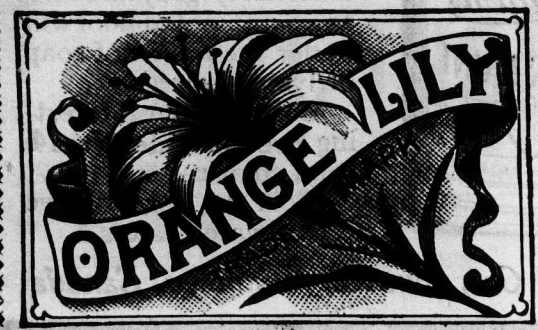


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tecting himself, gave much evidence which otherwise must have been concealed by Ted Burton's absence and Lethington's illness—now Boyd Oliver had borrowed and borrowed, from Ted Burton particularly and others also, until he practically lived on them, how he had slowly made a profitable gambling house of his rooms, and had twined the net so closely about them all that his interests were theirs, and their safety in his hands, what round sums he had made there each night. This had evidently been a canny servant, with a keen ear to keyholes, for he told of overheard conversations that went far to incriminate his master and to clear the boy who had fled of any greater crime than a headstrong folly. He told how Lethington, hitherto unknown to these rooms, had come that night and inquired for Mr. Burton, how his master had taken the card and instructed him to send Lethington quietly away, how Lethington had insisted that he heard Burton's voice within and finally had brushed him aside and gone in, just an instant before the police had come upon them. Others among the shamed culprits testified to the quarrel between Oliver and Burton, for what cause they knew not, and the sharp giving of the lie, just as Lethington had appeared. The revolver was identified as Oliver's, always, his man said, in his pocket on these nights of high play. Boyd Oliver now was practically a convicted criminal, and there was no one who did not believe that it was only by pure accident that the boy he had flattered and almost ruined had shot Tom Lethington.

But how to find Ted Burton, and tell him how nearly his name was cleared? His financial affairs were bad enough, but were being energetically brought into better shape. Still he was a fugitive, a self-convicted murderer, tormented by a thousand pangs of fear and remorse, if indeed he lived at all.

Then a letter came to Leila Burton, scribbled in pencil on an odd bit of paper, as though the writer either had no money to buy better or shrank from going where he might buy it. It was postmarked from an obscure western town:

"DEAR LEILA: Forgive me if you can. I can't forgive myself. I swear it was an accident. I was struggling for the revolver with another man, and it went off as I jerked it from him. When the lights were turned on again I found I had killed Tom. I can't get away from the sight of him as he lay there; it is driving me mad. Won't you tell Nina? I dare not write her myself, but I'd like her to know that much. I've been a beast about the money, too, but I turn over my share of the estate to you. I shall never be back again. Good-bye. I am sorry for all the trouble and disgrace I have brought on you."

"TED"

A dozen detectives were put on the trail of this letter, a hundred newspapers throughout the West came out day after day with "personals" begging Ted Burton to return, but there was no answer, no trace. The deep waters had closed over his head, and there was scarcely a ripple now to show where he had gone down.

There came a message to Leila one day. Nina brought it, for Ted's remorseful and incoherent letter had brought forth its own explanation, and all the stifled love in Leila Burton's heart welled out now to the girl who had suffered as much as she, the girl who should have been her sister, in more senses than one. Tom had asked for her, Nina said, and she went, half eager, half afraid of the interview before her. The doctor met her at the door.

"You may speak freely with him. He remembers now, and suspense might be harmful. I have told him practically all that the public knows. It seemed best."

She went in, found him alone this time, for the nurse had slipped out on her arrival.

Where was the barrier between them, that fiction of cool friendship, only friendship, built up by his poverty and pride, and her wealth? It seemed to have vanished somehow, for he held out his thin hands eagerly, and she

came, kneeling beside the bed in the circle that his arms made for her.

"Dear little girl, dear little girl," he whispered. "I tried so hard to save you suffering, and failed."

"No, no!" she protested, vehemently. "You have not failed. It will come right, it must come right!"

A precious hour slipped by as they went step by step over the whole story. He saw the letter, pondered it carefully, and gave it back.

"Poor Ted, he is reaping a bitter harvest, but this is more than he deserves. We can't let him go on like this. Sweetheart, I want you and Nina to look after each other for a while. I am going away Monday to find Ted, and, if he is living, some day I will bring him back to you."

"Oh, but your wound, your weakness—" she said, fearfully, half joyful and half tormented at the thought of his going. He gently caressed the fingers in his clasp, and shook his head.

"Men have travelled with wounds less healed than this, and I'll be none the stronger for lying here fretting. I shall start on Monday, doctor or no doctor. It may be a long hunt, but it will be worth while. Oh, my dear, my dear! Kiss me once more—I have waited so long."

"Come in and take a hand, Kid."

"No, I'd rather not."

"Rather not! Say, boys, ain't he sociable? Maybe his mamma don't let him play cards. Come on, let's yank the Kid in and teach him the game!"

The speaker made a lunge forward, with the evident jocular intention of dragging his man bodily inside the "hotel" to the game he had refused, but another said, "Let him alone!" with gruff authority, and "the Kid" went his way, unmolested. These were the men by whose side he worked every day at rough, hard labor, and who frankly called him a "freak" for his unsociable ways. He was tall, and might have been well built, but he seemed to have lost much flesh, and his eyes burned restlessly in a gaunt face shaggy with an unkempt beard. Here in this isolated mining settlement among the hills men were rough and strong and often violent, but always friendly after their own fashion, and the taciturnity of this young stranger, and his evident distaste for their society, had made him a thing apart.

He was soon through the little, rough town of one street, past the raw "hotel" where his fellow miners gambled and drank their earnings away, past the gaudy little "dance hall" where screaming laughter drifted out to him, past the rough cabins where a few women and children sat. Into the encircling strip of woods beyond the clearing he plunged for solitude. Here the noisy mirth of the town did not reach, the air was filled with fresh night odors, and the black shadow of clustered trees alternated with the white radiance of moonlight in the clearings.

He threw himself heavily down in the shadow, his head on his arm. He heard the creaking and rumbling of the stage, three hours late, on the road below him, but had no care for who might come or go by it. How he loathed it all, the sights, the sounds, the turmoil in his own brain! He was exhausted in body, too, yet it was only in this back-breaking labor that he could forget. A criminal! A murderer! A fugitive! A hundred times he had decided to end it all and go back to give himself up, this silent, taciturn boy whom his fellow laborers called the Kid, and as many times he had revolted fiercely from it. Go through that trial, the curious horror of his former friends, the bitter disgrace to his family, the loathing of one other, whose face in these days was seldom absent from his thoughts? No, he could not. This was bad enough, but that was worse.

He lay there for several hours, and meanwhile, in the town he had left, a man who had arrived that night strolled quietly from one place to another in the little noisy settlement, seemingly bent only on his own en-