

The Blind Road

(Continued from page 15)

Mr. Tadlow. And still no sound came from the cupboard.

Presently, his nerves on edge with the silence and the uncertainty, he closed the shutters over the window, secured the door of his office by propping a chair against it, and flung the cupboard open.

It was dark inside, but stooping he could make out that the man lay huddled on the ground pretty much as he had placed him, and he was suddenly shocked by the twinkle of two dull, ruminant eyes gazing steadily up at him.

"Oh, I'm not dead!" John Denver laughed mirthlessly. "If you're not disappointed it's only because you wouldn't have known how to get rid of the body, eh?"

He supported himself shakily with a hand against the wall, then sank into the elbow-chair that stood by the table; his face was ghastly; it was streaked with blood, and an ugly gash showed redly in his short, iron-grey hair. Still, without speaking, Mr. Tadlow poured out what remained of the brandy, and he accepted it and drained the glass. He sat thereafter pulling himself together, and when his casual glances fell on the wash-stand in a corner of the room, he made his way to it unsteadily, and washed the blood from his face, and bathed the scalp-wound, and tore the towel into strips for bandages.

"I've bungled," he said, returning to the chair. "I've done you as little harm as you've done me. I heard the lies you were telling to the police-officer as I lay in that cupboard, and I was very nearly shouting out, and then telling him why I came here, but I wondered what your game was and kept quiet. Perhaps if I'd had more sense I should have shouted. Your lies, and your hiding me there would have been proof in my favour."

"What is it you want?" asked Mr. Tadlow, tremulously. "If—if it is money, you shall see my books, and I am willing to give you half of all I possess."

Denver eyed him narrowly. "You crawling cur!" he snarled. "Half of the dirtiest money a scoundrel and a hypocrite ever put into his money-bags! No! I didn't come for your money. I came for my honour; for the woman who should have been my wife; for the fifteen years of my life that you robbed me of!"

"I swore in the dock when they sentenced me," he went on, his tones alternating between self-compassion and gusty wrath, "that as soon as I was free again, if I could not bring you to justice and clear myself I would kill you. I should have been free five years ago, but it was hard to bear it—the long, shameful imprisonment—knowing I was innocent; and I have had to suffer for my rash attempts to escape. I did escape once, and I longed for you to hear of it, for I could fancy how you would go sneaking in fear and trembling till I was caught again. If I hadn't smashed at one of the warders with a pick I should have been out and able to meet you four or five years ago. Now—"

He paused, and passed a gaunt hand wearily across his eyes.

"My spirit's broken," he said, heavily, "and I don't seem so well able to carry out what I had planned. I've bungled—but you've not done with me yet!" The smouldering fires flamed up in him again. "You know that I am innocent, and that I've suffered for the crime that was yours—yours and that blackguard's—who worked with you—I've been to him already, and he confesses it. Barry has confessed to it. It was my books that were tampered with; my books that were falsified; but it was you and he

that falsified them; and you and he that manufactured the evidence that brought the forgeries home to me. It was you two that embezzled all those thousands, and did it in such a way that the suspicion should fall on me, and I, like the young fool I was—like the poor fool I've always been—I played into your hands. I trusted you; I never had a doubt of you, till you stood in the witness box and told those lies that sent me to gaol for fifteen years."

He lifted his hands to his throat as if his passion were throttling and suffocating him.

"Barry has confessed, I tell you," he added. "I can prove his guilt and yours, and I can prove my innocence."

"I should be glad to help you to do it," said Mr. Tadlow, after an interval, "if it affected only myself."

"You got everything you schemed for," cried Denver, hardly. "You could never have won Margaret to marry you if you had not proved me to be a thief and a villain, and sent me to a convict-cell. No woman's belief could stand against the cunning evidence you built up against me, and so you had your own way—you married her."

"Her people wished it, and I—I succeeded. But she told me she had no love for me; and I have never been able to win her love to this day," said Mr. Tadlow, grimly. "That has been the curse of my life. I have wronged you, but everything I have gained by it has turned to dust in my hands and bitterness in my mouth."

"You have only yourself to blame for that," Denver said, with a laugh. "You have broken her life and mine. You have deceived her all along. She does not know the truth even now. If she knew the truth—"

"She does," Mr. Tadlow interrupted.

"You were always a liar!" exclaimed Denver. "Why, I know her—if Margaret knew the truth, all the world would know it by now. She loved me. She never loved you; you have said so; and if she knew the truth she would hate you—she would hate and despise you; and, by heaven, she shall know it! I will tell her, and she shall choose between us—whether she will stay here with the scoundrel she despises, or whether she will try to begin life afresh with me on the other side of the world. She shall judge between us, and it shall be as she says."

"I have told her the whole truth," Mr. Tadlow insisted dully. "She knows it all. I was ill some few years ago, and she nursed me. I betrayed myself in delirium, and when I was better she charged me with having committed the crime you were condemned for, and I was too weak and miserable to deny it. I told her all."

"You were always a liar," Denver laughed again. "I know her, I tell you, and if she knew I was innocent she would have cleared me before this."

"I have been less than nothing to her ever since," Mr. Tadlow continued. "I left her free to expose me or to remain silent, and she hated me for it, but was merciful."

"But not to me!" shrieked Denver. "You are lying, I say. She does not know, but she shall know. You shall take me to her, or bring her here to me, and she shall judge between us. If she asks it, I will even forgive you for her sake, but she won't ask that—she can never ask that, when she knows!"

"She knows all," Mr. Tadlow repeated, stubbornly.

"Come!" Denver rose, holding by the chair. "You shall take me to her, and I will tell her myself."

But Mr. Tadlow shook his head and stood immovable.

"She has suffered enough. We will

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