

## TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS.

BY JAMES T. M'RAY.

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I.

"Will you ever be done collecting, Prent?"

"Oh, I hope so, Nell. I think I'll get through the best of it today. I expect to bring you home \$20,000 to-night."

"Hush!" she said. "You're foolish to talk so. I wish you were well out of the business, Prent."

"Fallow, Nell!" he answered, "there's no danger. I'd like to leave it in Bath &amp; Westbury's safe in Caranmore, but Bath told me yesterday they wouldn't have any more. There's been a safe robbery down west, and they're afraid. I don't blame 'em, though."

"Where are you going today?"

"I'm going south, through Dixon and Camthorpe to Shore, and then west by the south country road to Seaville and Plumley, and then home by Caranmore. It is a long pull, but I haven't much work to do, and I guess Driver'll do it by dark."

He got up from the breakfast table and prepared to go out.

"Well, don't be rash, Prent."

"Oh, I'll look out. Don't you fear. Good-bye, Nell."

She saw him ride brown Driver through the gate and trot away down the south road.

At 10 Prent rode out to Shore, and held on east along the ridge south of it. They come by different trains, didn't know each other at all, at first, but got very thick before the night was out. The first one gave him a name as William Paddelbox, and when the other fellow saw it on the back, he put his hand down James M. Widdings' beam. Last week, too, there was a fellow in here prettier than any he was agent for Bellamy tobacco company. I asked him some quizzing questions that showed he wasn't up to the tobacco trade at all, he swore. I saw him examine the lock of the building when he went out. I'm mighty mistaken if somebody ain't broke into before long. Leastways, you must take that package out of our safe to-night. I've changed off the small money for you and got it into as small bills as I could. And, look here, Broom, "he added, "the money being in our safe's been talked of over to Widdings' and it's no more'n right you to bring in there and happen to mention its been took out."

"Well," said Broom, "if you say so. I don't want you to run any risk by me."

There were one or two persons in the store as he passed through, took the package from Bath, and buttoned it under his coat.

"You ought to be heard, Broom," Bath whispered.

Prent opened his coat a little way, the lock of a pistol showed on his left breast. A cigar at the bar. Widdings came up.

"How do, Broom! Comin' over the safe to-night? Lemme get you a ticket, only a dollar!"

"No, guess not," says Prent. "Got to go to the city."

"Going to take them ten thousand? Ben Bath's got in his safe of yours?"

"Bath hasn't no ten thousand nor ten cents of mine," said Broom.

He went out and started on. The sun was set. He had fifteen miles to do yet. He kept Driver going manly, though he began to lag a little with his long day's tramp. The road lay north, through level, waste plain lands, covered with stunted pines, scrub oak, and smaller timber undergrowth. The road was a single wagon track out through the thin surface soil into the white, fetlock deep sand underneath. It was a dreary, idle enough. Broom kept his horse at a steady pace, trying him now and then a little faster. Nell would be looking for him now, and eighteen miles with a tired horse between them yet. Four miles of the same monotonous waste; then, far away across the level, he caught sight of the buildings of Caranmore station on the line of the railway. He heard the whistle of a train coming west, and presently saw it roll in and stop. It moved over, hissing and clanging, just as he came up. Crossing the track, he was halted by a man he knew. "Hello, Broom!" he said.

He stopped and the man came out.

"Look here, Broom," he said, "half an hour ago I got this telegram. 'What the deuce does it mean?' It was dated, 'Half past six, Brammerley,' ten miles south on the line. It was addressed to Henry Tarrow, and read thus: 'Prentiss Broom will pass through C— about 7. Tell him this: Don't go beyond Brame's to-night.'"

It was signed 'A. Friend.'"

"I don't know what it means. Good night, Tarrow. I've got fourteen miles before me."

He rode on, keeping Driver well up to his work. It was five miles to Squire Brame's tavern; five miles of the same dreary waste around and the same gloomy sand under foot. The road bent more to the west now; it was fast growing dark.

Two miles short of Brame's he caught sight of a wagon also going north. He pushed the brown ahead to overtake it, and coming up recognized the sturdy person and gray hair of the stout old squire himself. The squire was a fast friend of Prent's, and he was glad enough to see him joggling home.

"Hold up, square," he called. "What's your hurry?"

"Whoa, Bill," answered the squire, in his heavy voice. "Well, now, if it ain't Prent Broom."

"Give 'a ride, square. I been in the saddle all day."

He dropped off Driver and got in with the squire.

"I want some advice, square," he said. "Look here—or hold on; you can't see it now, but I'll tell you what it is."

He read and explained the message. "Don't go beyond Brame's to-night," the squire repeated. "Well, that's good advice any way, Prent. How much have you got on you?"

"Nineteen thousand dollars and odd."

"Where?" the old man whistled. "You better take a friend's advice. Don't go beyond Brame's to-night. Your horse is tired, too. Look how he hangs back."

"But I've got to go home. Nell's all alone."

"Then you better leave the money with me."

"No, no, square, I ain't going to get you into any trouble like that. And, besides, I'm going to town with it in the morning. I won't lose sight of it any way."

"Well, Prent, if you won't do that, I'll tell you what. Put up Driver at your house. I'll put your saddle on my roan mare, Skylark, and she'll take you that nine miles in forty-five minutes easy. Slip that package under the seat here. You get on to Driver and ride in slow. I'll out round by Big Pines and come in on the other road. I'll show the money under the saddle for you; it'll be safer there. Come, tumble out. Whoa, Bill."

"Good, square, I'll do it, and thank you. I'm blest if you ain't the cleverest old trump that's going."

"Oh, so? So's cheap, Prent. None of that sort."

He whipped up his horse and skurried away through the sand. Prent came among the hills now; the land was much better the sand and scrub pines and oaks dropped behind. There were cultivated fields on either hand, here and there a house. He came to the Big Pines cross-roads, and could dimly see Bill's fresh tracks turning off to the left. He held straight on a mile, over the Madon hills, and so down to where the road ends at the broad middle pike. Then west half a mile to little hamlets of Elmora, and Brame's tavern in the center. As he rode up to the door old Brame came out of the courtyard at the left. He came up.

"How do, Prent?" he called, in his loud, round voice. "Glad to see ye. Where y' come from? Been rather givin' it to Driver, ain't ye? Have him rubbed down and eat some oats 'fore y' go on."

There were several riders hanging about Broom took his cue. He said nothing about roan mare.

"Well, square, guess I will come in a bit," he said.

The hostler took away Driver to the stable. They went in.

"Come inside and have a bite," says the squire.

And Prent followed him through the bar into an inner room.

"Prent," said the squire, "I don't like the looks of things at all. There's been a stranger here to-night in a buggy. He was dressed in the best; had a heavy coat, and leg of mutton whiskers and long hair. Look at him! Been rather givin' it to persons don't gaily sit in hotel parlors and smoke cigars, with their legs on to eat some oats 'fore y' go on."

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A bright glare flashed in my eyes! A crash in the bushes—the mare sided and plunged. A man's form, dimly seen, was hanging by her bits. I struck my heels in her flanks, drew my pistol—fired. The mare was plunging wildly; I was blind with the glare in my eyes—I missed. I felt myself grasped from behind, drawn heavily backward. I felt the mare going from under me. I kicked at her furiously—flung the pistol at her head as I fell. She snorted and plunged, made one great, frightened leap high in the air, flung the head that held her heavily into the fence, and shot away up the hill.

As I fell the light glanced one side from my face and showed me the man who held me full and plain. Tall and light made, with small, white hands, pale face, black, silky side beard and mustache, keen gray eyes, thin lips and perfect teeth, long hair, glossy and jet black. He was dressed in fine black cloth, linen spose and unruined, and a high silk hat. I saw the light glance from his polished boots, from a diamond ring on his hand. He had a eager in his mouth. There was no passion or excitement in his face. He looked as cool, as fearless as devilish as ever I hope to see the face of man, as he dragged me back and threw me on the ground—held me down by the throat.

"Jiber!" he called. "Quick, will you!"

I did not fight. The mare was off with the money. I knew there were two other men at hand. I was unarmed. I knew they could quiet me quickly enough. I knew that that cold, white, cruel face above me would kill me without remorse if it came to his face. He plainly studied to hide it—kept it in the shadow or turned away. He seemed younger, than either of the others—not stout, but, like and quick as a cat.

"There was only a minute's time from the first flash till I was lying quiet on my back in the road, with that white face, and with his hand holding me down and the others kneeling by us. They called him the person. They called the rough one, and the third, and the fourth, and the fifth, and the sixth, and the seventh, and the eighth, and the ninth, and the tenth, and the eleventh, and the twelfth, and the thirteenth, and the fourteenth, and the fifteenth, and the sixteenth, and the seventeenth, and the eighteenth, and the nineteenth, and the twentieth, and the twenty-first, and the twenty-second, and the twenty-third, and the twenty-fourth, and the twenty-fifth, and the twenty-sixth, and the twenty-seventh, and the twenty-eighth, and the twenty-ninth, and the thirtieth, and the thirty-first, and the thirty-second, and the thirty-third, and the thirty-fourth, and the thirty-fifth, and the thirty-sixth, and the thirty-seventh, and the thirty-eighth, and the thirty-ninth, and the fortieth, and the forty-first, and the forty-second, and the forty-third, and the forty-fourth, and the forty-fifth, and the forty-sixth, and the forty-seventh, and the forty-eighth, and the forty-ninth, and the fiftieth, and the fifty-first, and the fifty-second, and the fifty-third, and the fifty-fourth, and the fifty-fifth, and the fifty-sixth, and the fifty-seventh, and the fifty-eighth, and the fifty-ninth, and the sixtieth, and the sixty-first, and the sixty-second, and the sixty-third, and the sixty-fourth, and the sixty-fifth, and the sixty-sixth, and the sixty-seventh, and the sixty-eighth, and the sixty-ninth, and the seventieth, and the seventy-first, and the seventy-second, and the seventy-third, and the seventy-fourth, and the seventy-fifth, and the seventy-sixth, and the seventy-seventh, and the seventy-eighth, and the seventy-ninth, and the eightieth, and the eighty-first, and the eighty-second, and the eighty-third, and the eighty-fourth, and the eighty-fifth, and the eighty-sixth, and the eighty-seventh, and the eighty-eighth, and the eighty-ninth, and the ninetieth, and the ninety-first, and the ninety-second, and the ninety-third, and the ninety-fourth, and the ninety-fifth, and the ninety-sixth, and the ninety-seventh, and the ninety-eighth, and the ninety-ninth, and the hundredth, and the hundred-first, and the hundred-second, and the hundred-third, and the hundred-fourth, and the hundred-fifth, and the hundred-sixth, and the hundred-seventh, and the hundred-eighth, and the hundred-ninth, and the hundred-tenth, and the hundred-eleventh, and the hundred-twelfth, and the hundred-thirteenth, and the hundred-fourteenth, and the hundred-fifteenth, and the hundred-sixteenth, and the hundred-seventeenth, and the hundred-eighteenth, and the hundred-nineteenth, and the hundred-twentieth, and the hundred-twenty-first, and the hundred-twenty-second, and the hundred-twenty-third, and the hundred-twenty-fourth, and the hundred-twenty-fifth, and the hundred-twenty-sixth, and the hundred-twenty-seventh, and the hundred-twenty-eighth, and the hundred-twenty-ninth, and the hundred-thirtieth, and the hundred-thirty-first, and the hundred-thirty-second, and the hundred-thirty-third, and the hundred-thirty-fourth, and the hundred-thirty-fifth, and the hundred-thirty-sixth, and the hundred-thirty-seventh, and the hundred-thirty-eighth, and the hundred-thirty-ninth, and the hundred-fortieth, and the hundred-forty-first, and the hundred-forty-second, and the hundred-forty-third, and the hundred-forty-fourth, and the hundred-forty-fifth, and the hundred-forty-sixth, and the hundred-forty-seventh, and the hundred-forty-e