

His silence and the serious attitude of these other men were not reassuring. What with the weirdness of the night on the deep and the sharply grotesque shadows where the schooner's sails flapped to the night breeze, I was filled with a sudden sense of alarm.

What was I to expect, should Carnsworth not discover his mistake in time? I had not thought of that at all.

With fear came action.

I was standing alongside the man at the bow, who kept the boats together with the boat-hook while Carnsworth completed his deal with Tombo. I had not a very firm foothold, but my right fist met this fellow's chin with a nicety of which I am still proud; and as he went over the rail I snatched the iron-shod hook from him.

The boats drifted apart.

III.

What happened during the next few moments must have been an interesting spectacle to those aboard the schooner.

Armed with the captured boat-hook, I sprang back toward the other man, who had not yet left the cockpit. He did not seem to grasp the situation until I was well upon him; but what he lost by delay he more than made up in celerity.

When I could wield my weapon to strike a blow, he had closed with me and secured equal hold upon the hook. Then began a struggle, a college "game spruce" of mighty seriousness. And I found him no mean antagonist. Close-locked and spinning, we rolled our dispute of the hook about that cockpit.

Suddenly I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Carnsworth and the others aboard the schooner had put her power upon her, and were churning their way toward us as we drifted off.

At the same instant, I spotted beside me the control-lever of the motor, where it came up to hand by the steering-wheel. A soft whir told me that the engine had not been stopped, but was still running without load. I renewed my endeavours against my antagonist, and, directing the struggle toward the lever, succeeded in showing it clear over to the "ahead" position.

The gear responded instantly, and the boat shot forward. On we writhed, slipping about in the cockpit for the possession of the boat-hook.

I shot another quick glance over my shoulder. Immediately I realised that retreat had commenced too late; for the schooner was under way when I started the launch, and her momentum had brought her well upon our quarter.

At her bow stood a figure which I thought to be Carnsworth. I was right; for, the next second, I saw him raise his arm, and the pistol gleamed in the moonlight.

Not for a moment had either my antagonist or myself released our hold; but now I hurled him from me with all my strength. He struck the rear companionway and I dashed through the open doorway into the diminutive cabin.

I was none too quick. Carnsworth's shot rang out. A splinter flew from the rail of the cabin door, and—confound the luck!—the motor stopped on the instant.

My man had regained his feet; I saw that the jig was up, and yelled my surrender up the hatch.

Once more the schooner made up alongside; Carnsworth stepped into the launch and superintended the carrying aboard of the man whom I had thrown between the tents. This fellow was still dazed from the blow, but had escaped drowning through the timely rescue of the mulatto boy. They laid him on the starboard transom and pined him with a flask.

Carnsworth turned to me, as I stood under the gunwale of the man who had struggled so hard for that boat hook.

"I don't hear you any grudge, Elliston," he said. "You put up a game resistance; but our affair is of deeper concern, as you know. We'll speak no more of this troubling incident."

He turned to an examination of what had stopped the launch so opportunely for him. The man on the transom, who was evidently the boatman, whispered that the "spark" was the trouble. The other fellow followed up the wiring. Right under the sill of the door led the wires, and Carnsworth's bullet had severed one. A quick splice put the launch once more in order.

The wheel was cranked, and with feet accelerating speed we left the schooner out there in the moonlight. That was the last I ever saw of Fatty Tombo or of the mulatto, Joe.

IV.

Even in the situation in which I found myself, I could not but enjoy the motion of this modern craft as we slid into the shadows, mounting the easy rolls with a soft, sinuous ease which went far in praise of her designer. There was no barking to her contentedly purring engine, as there had been in the case of the schooner's cheap auxiliary. This boat glided, and Carnsworth—for he had grown even talkative—told me that we were doing eighteen miles.

We were nearing the shore, but no sign of lights showed a welcome. I saw Carnsworth put the wheel over a trifle and peer ahead. Finally I caught a glimpse of something along the water's edge.

"A green light?" I asked. "Yes," replied he. "Do you see one?" I indicated the direction. "Good!" he answered, and we made for it.

Close approach disclosed a narrow dock, from the end of which hung a green lantern. The launch was brought up alongside, and we landed.

The boatman had so far recovered that he regained his ability to look out for himself. Accordingly Carnsworth left him to sleep on the launch, which was moored fast to the dock.

Then the three of us—Carnsworth, the other fellow, and myself—under orders, walked ashore.

Nothing appeared as we reached land but a low, unpretentious structure, before which ran a shell road of splendid smoothness.

"Hustle up, Jacques," said Carnsworth. "We've lost time enough already."

Jacques, thus addressed, made for the low building, unlocked the door, and, two minutes after entering, backed out to us a touring-car of magnificent finish.

Into the limousine Carnsworth sprang; I, at his bidding, followed; and Jacques opened out into a pleasant speed.

The hull of the whistling wind in my ear sent me more than ever into the region of vagueness. I lost the sense of my unusual and dangerously perplexing position. I seemed to live by the moment.

The only thing I fully realised was that we are mounting to a higher altitude.

At a turn in the road, sharper even than a right angle, we sped through a massive gateway and into a tree-lined avenue.

The moon was low by now, and in the fast-fading dawn, things began to show more clearly. We had entered what was evidently an estate and an estate of no mean pretensions.

Another turn brought me further food for thought.

Before us, in an open clearing, stood the charred ruins of what must have been a magnificent building. The twisted pipes and writhing girders told their mute story.

"Rather a nasty piece of work, after all, wasn't it?" Carnsworth asked.

"A bad fire, if that's what you mean," I replied.

"Exactly—and more!"

He answered me with a hidden significance which I couldn't understand.

Beyond the ruins, and perhaps an eighth of a mile removed, stood what I took to be the stables and servants' quarters. These were on a scale commensurate with what must have been the magnificence of the house.

Towards one of these outbuildings Jacques drove the car with slightly checked speed, and we brought up before the door with the groan of the applied brakes.

A dignified old gentleman appeared at the doorway and stood peering at us with a perplexed, near-sighted squint.

"Get him, Carl?" he queried in a tone that bespoke more virility than his physique warranted.

"Yes, sir," answered Carnsworth cheerily, as he motioned me to enter.

Without a word, the old man turned and led the way up-stairs; I followed, knowing well that Carl Carnsworth's revolver would back any argument, as he brought up the rear.

We went into a room on the second floor. Upon our appearance, a middle-aged man in spectacles rose, searched me narrowly from top to toe with a glance I couldn't but resent, and, without a word, nodded to the old gentleman. Then he swung round and walked deliberately from the room.

The old man, in his turn, came close for a searching view of me. His near-sighted eyes suddenly glinted in a quiver of excitement.

He grabbed me by the shoulders as he peered into my face.

"Why, Carl," he cried, "this is not Jack Elliston!"

V.

Carl Carnsworth fell back in dismay, or in what was magnificent imitation of it.

"Surely it is, father!" he cried. "You're mistaken."

"Never!" retorted the old gentleman. "I know him too well."

"Then who are you?" blurted out the discomfited Carl.

"Grey—Tom Grey, as I told you before," I replied. "I said you'd wake to your mistake."

He seemed to have trouble adjusting himself to this new turn. Finally he spoke, rather lamely:

"I have done you great injustice. I am more than troubled about it. I'll try to make up for it. Excuse me a moment."

With this he left the room.

The old gentleman indicated an easy-chair for me, took one himself, and turned to explanation.

"Mr. Grey," said he, "the least I can do to make the first amends for Carl's mistake is to explain matters for you. To do this I must enter somewhat into family affairs—only so much, however, as will make you conversant with the situation."

"We, the Carnsworths, are Kentuckians, and are possessed of some wealth. You know of the family funds of that State?"

I nodded.

"I've heard," said I.

"Well," he went on, "such a feud exists between the Carnsworths and the Ellistons. Now, I am not by nature revengeful; so that when I came into my money I sought to put distance between the factions. Accordingly, I purchased this removed estate, and surrounded myself and children with all the comforts that could be brought to such a region. Here, for some years, we have lived, and have almost come to forget that such a family as Elliston existed."

But Jack Elliston in erited the hatred. The result?"

The old gentleman went to the window and pointed to the ruins of his home as they lay in the gleam of the rising sun.

"One week ago Jack Elliston kindled that blaze. Crisfield is the nearest town to us. Carl started in pursuit. He hadn't seen Jack Elliston for years. Of his mistake you are only too well aware."

"Now, Mr. Grey, I stand ready to make any amends in my power. I am awake to the fact that in the eyes of the law we have been guilty of a crime. But I trust that you will see matters in such a light that—"

Slam!

A door crashed below us.

Scurrying and scuffling of feet and banging of other doors ensued.

"Then, above all, rang aloud the one word:

"Fire!"

The old gentleman and I ran for the door. I reached it first. It resisted my pull at first, but finally yielded. I tottered back with my own surplus energy, before a cloud of black smoke from out of which a damp something smote me across the face and clung there.

Half-strangled, I tore vainly at my weird assailant. But in a moment I went down. I felt myself stretch my length of the matting with which the floor was covered.

Then the great black.

VI.

I drifted back into realities to the whirring of a mowing machine beyond the window by my bed.

I raised myself on my elbow and gazed about me, to find that I was in the same room where I had fallen. About the

door the woodwork was charred and blistered as from terrific heat. That was all I could learn within the house.

I turned to the window.

At the movement a sharp pain shot through me, and I awoke to the fact that I was bandaged in four or five places about the chest and sides. From out the edges of the bandages showed the wrinkled scars that come with burns.

From further investigations I was interrupted by the entrance of some other than Carl Carnsworth.

He approached the bedside with a look of complete sympathy in his not unhandsome face.

"Well, Grey, how're you feeling. You can understand me?"

"Yes," I answered. "What happened?"

"Why," he explained, rather grimly, "you simply got what was intended for me. Jack Elliston had remained hidden about the place, and had planned that fire-trap to rid the Carnsworths of an heir. You got the flames and have lost some of your flesh in places. But Jack Elliston no longer lives."

"I was on the stairs behind him." The snap of his lips told nothing of remorse.

"Mr. Grey," he went on, "money is the only solace we can offer you for the senry treatment you have received, but you have only to name your sum. Think it over. Meanwhile, everything possible will be done to make your recovery hasty and comfortable. Rest assured, you are in no critical condition. Dr. Jahl so assures us. Till I see you!"

With this he left me, while I turned a fevered intellect to a jarred review of fast-happening and mystifying events.

"Well, money at last," I smiled ironically, "even if I do pay for it with a pound of flesh! But—say I—to the Merry Mickdom with Kentucky funds!"

I glanced out of the window.

From below came the fresh odour of the newly-cut grass that had just fallen beneath the knives of the mowing machine. Across a fair-sized lawn stood another building like the one in which I lay. I took it for the garage of the estate. It, too, was built with considerable pretension for an outbuilding; and boasted a full-height, second storey, the windows of which were hung with lace curtains of no mean quality.

And, while I watched, the curtains at one window parted.

I had never believed in it before—but, by the time I had looked in that face of beauty for a period of ten slow counts, I was no longer a free man to go and come, happy in singleness.

And the smile?

I'm silent.

The curtain dropped. I fell back on my pillow; after a while I fell asleep.

The morning brought me a letter wrapped around a pebble which had been accurately tossed up through my window by a little kinky-headed picanniny.

Sir at the Window:

Who are you? I've met no one since the fire, from the effects of which they tell me I am fast recovering. I'm glad of it, for I think it will bring me to a further acquaintance with one I already know as Dick Grant. Am I right?

Send your answer as I sent this note.

Margaret Carnsworth.

That she should know me as Dick Grant made my mystification complete. Then came an explanation.

Dick Grant had been my stage-name. She had seen me act at some time.

I explained by a note which I scribbled on the back of hers with a pencil-stub I found in my waistcoat. And the correspondence continued through a week.

I knew well the hours when there were liable to be others in my room, bringing me meats, administering medicines, or changing my bandages. I warned her to send no letters at such times, and, though I feared continual discovery, she

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