

THE LASH OF CIRCUMSTANCE
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"It is a Plain, Unmitigated, Unadulterated Forgery."

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Abner Halliday, a miserly millionaire, is found gagged, bound and insensible in his room, his safe rifled and \$500 missing. The thread of the story is taken up by his nephew Tom, living in the same house as other relatives; reckless Bruce Halliday and pretty Clare Winton. It is Tom who discovers his uncle, his condition surrounded with mystery at every point.

CHAPTER II—A retrospect shows that Bruce, who is a bond broker, has been trying to raise \$10,000 to put through a deal and save himself from financial ruin. He has applied to his miserly uncle and to others for the loan but has been refused.

CHAPTER III—Tom sends for an old-time friend connected with a detective agency. This is William Le Duc, who starts out to unravel the mystery. He decides that some one living in the house, at least some one having a key to the house, committed the deed.

CHAPTER IV—Tom in relating the story reverts to his acquaintance with a fascinating Mrs. Dace, a wealthy widow. Her business agent is one Richard Mackay, a hoodler prince and political boss.

CHAPTER V—Tom is jealous of Mackay and is deeply in love with Mrs. Dace. He practically makes a proposal of marriage to her, but she artfully evades giving him any definite encouragement to his suit.

CHAPTER VI—Mrs. Dace warns Tom that Mackay is a leopards, and advises him to shun her as an adventuress. Tom sees Mrs. Dace and Mackay together, follows them and in an elevator apparently sees Mackay put his arm around the woman. Later Mrs. Dace explains this by saying she fainted and Mackay simply assisted her.

CHAPTER VII—Tom meets Mrs. Dace at a horse race. He happens to mention to her that his friend Bruce had a tip on the winner and she gives him \$500 to place on the race. The tip goes wrong and she loses her money, much to the mortification of Tom.

CHAPTER VIII—Tom invests in stocks, makes some money, and returning the lost \$500 to Mrs. Dace becomes more firmly established in her good graces. It is in this juncture that the theft of the \$40,000 from old Abner Halliday occurs.

CHAPTER IX—The detective Le Duc while investigating the rifling of the miser's safe, meets Clare and Bruce. He learns that the key which Clare had to the house is missing. The mystery deepens.

CHAPTER XII.

A few days later there happened a little incident so inexplicable and irritating in its character that it caused me considerable annoyance and thought. It was one of those peculiar occurrences that one does not care anything about in itself, yet which exasperates him because of his inability to explain it. It so happened that I desired to wear a certain suit of clothes which I had purchased a short while before, and with that purpose before me went into the closet where I kept my spare apparel hanging in order to get it out. I could not find it. Growing more and more impatient as I searched among my things I at last removed all that the closet contained, article by article, and laid them on the bed. The suit that I was looking for was certainly missing.

I sat down and thought. I remembered distinctly the last time I had worn it, and had an equally clear recollection of replacing it in its accustomed place at the end of the day. I was positive that I had not touched it since that time and its absence now, as far as I was able to reason, could only be explained on the theory of theft. I went downstairs to Mrs. Tebbets to question her about it, and happening to recall that she had expressed her admiration of it upon seeing it upon me for the first time, I now described it to her as the suit which I had worn on Derby day. She answered me very promptly:

"Why, yes. That is the one you sent me word about yesterday. I let the man have it as you told me to in the note."

I looked at her in mystification, knowing that I had sent her no note and being at a loss to grasp her meaning. "What note—what man?" I demanded. She stood rubbing her damp hands with a towel and seemingly a little impatient at my stupidity.

"The note on your card which you sent me only yesterday saying that I was to give it to the tailor," she retorted. I could only repeat somewhat more emphatically that I had done no such thing.

She threw down her towel with a sniff and began rummaging about among the odds and ends of a shelf. Presently she picked up a small piece of cardboard, which she handed me with an expression of triumph. "Very well. Just read it for yourself then. If that is not your card and writing I cannot trust my eyes, and if I cannot trust my eyes the Lord knows

what I can trust. And that is all I have got to say about that." I seized the piece of paper and glanced at it. It was certainly either one of my cards or a perfect imitation, and having satisfied myself on that point I turned it over and saw written on the back a few lines, which while certainly bearing a strong resemblance to my chirography when I scribble in a hurry, were as certainly not mine. They read: "Mrs. Tebbets: Please to deliver to the bearer, who is in the employ of my tailor, the suit of clothes I wore on Derby day that he may press the same. Thomas Halliday."

For a moment I was too surprised to do more than turn it over in mute incredulity. Then I turned upon her sharply.

"What kind of a looking man brought this?"

"He was short and fat. I guess he was about as old as you are. I thought at the time that he looked like a man in the eyes, but I did not let him in the house and did not pay attention to him. I am always

careful about admitting strangers, you know. It is all right, isn't it?"

"No, there isn't anything right about it. It is a plain, unmitigated, unadulterated forgery. Did he say anything more to you?" Her chin dropped.

"Well, of all things! To think of the impudence of people nowadays. No, sir, he said scarcely a word and I never did like the looks of him. He just took the clothes and went away as fast as he could, and I never thought of it again. But that is certainly your card, isn't it, Mr. Tom? It looks just like those I used to see on your dresser." It was plain that she was beginning to be distressed and I hastened to reassure her.

"The card is either mine or a very clever imitation. I am not quite certain of which as yet. But in all probability it is one of mine. The writing is also a fair counterfeit. Anyway, it is good enough to fool almost any one, and I do not blame you in the least for having been deceived. Don't feel worried about it, for it is not your fault at all. Nevertheless, there is something wrong about it and I don't understand it." I thrust the card into my pocket and returned to my rooms a great deal more perplexed than I had been when I left them. Hastily I attempted to run over in my mind the people who could by any possibility have had access to my private stationery, but was obliged to dismiss that thought when I realized that my cards were scattered throughout the entire list of my acquaintances and that my card case containing a number of them was still missing. The field of possibilities in this direction was too large for me to form even a remote conjecture, and I was drawn to the conclusion that it in all probability was the work of some clever sneak thief who had found my card case and then written the note upon it. But even that was an explanation which explained nothing. Granting that a petty rascal had picked up the cards containing my name and address, how was he able to so closely counterfeit my handwriting; and more mysterious than all else, how did he know that I had been to the Derby or had worn any especial suit upon that day? The more I cudgelled my brains over it the more benumbed they became, until at last I picked up my hat and rushed out of the house. Having but little idea that I would learn anything by so doing, I nevertheless immediately boarded a car and going to the shop of my tailor threw the note on the counter before him. "What do you know about that note, Johnson?" I demanded.

He picked it up, adjusted his eyeglasses and read it with a slowly forming and negative pursing of his mouth. Then he held it forth. "Nothing at all. What is there about it?" I took the card from him and replaced it carefully in my pocket as I made my reply.

"Only this—that it is a forgery. And while I did not for a moment think that you had any information about it, I went to the pains of coming here to ask you. Neither do I suppose you know anything concerning the whereabouts of the clothes mentioned." His answer furnished me the second surprise of the day.

"Oh, yes, I do. The suit is here all right. It was brought in yesterday by a strange man who said you wished me to press it for you. I have done so and it is now in perfect condition." I looked at him with the incredulity with which one faces a person who makes an incredible statement with a straight face and under the guise of seriousness.

"Let me see the suit," I ordered.

He did so, and I inspected it criti-

ally. I could discover nothing amiss with it externally, and searching the pockets found they were empty. However, that was to be expected, as I could remember having nothing in them when I had hung it away, certainly nothing of any value to anybody but myself. I had only succeeded in thickening the mystery which enveloped this extraordinary transaction, and puzzled beyond expression. I arranged with the tailor that in the future he should allow none of my clothes which he happened to have in his possession to leave his hands upon an order ostensibly written by me unless the order contained a secret mark which we then and there agreed upon. Then instructing him that if any one called for the suit in question and presented an order for the same not bearing the minute token of its genuineness which we had just invented, that he was to detain him until he could summon an officer and have him arrested, I departed. What possible object any person could have had in wishing to secure possession of a suit of my clothes which contained nothing of the slightest worth, and who having secured possession of it should go to the trouble of conveying it from my house to the tailor shop was utterly beyond my comprehension. The forger had not injured the clothes, as some petty-minded enemy might have done out of a spirit of spite, and altogether I could conceive of no possible benefit or satisfaction any one could have derived from such an elaborate and criminal subterfuge. Utterly baffled, I determined to say nothing more about it for the time, quietly awaiting any new developments that might arise.

The next morning another strange thing had happened. I was dressing for the day at my customary hour for arising when suddenly the housekeeper's knuckles fell upon the door in a series of nervous taps. She almost never came to the upper floor before the breakfast hour, and I therefore searched her face with some curiosity as I told her that she might enter. She immediately burst forth in an excited volubility.

"Oh, Mr. Tom! The house has been burglarized again in the night. What on earth are we coming to with such people prowling all around in the darkness? I never was so frightened in my life. I declare I nearly fell in a faint when I discovered it. Please come with me and I will show you."

Dumfoundedly, and with my necktie still dangling from my hand, I followed her squat figure as she climbed down the front stairs, waddled through the dining room and kitchen and then one foot at a time descended the steep stairs that led to the basement. There was only one door entering from the outside into these lower regions and that was never used—in fact, had been bolted ever since my occupancy of the premises. The aperture in the side of the house through which the coal supply was dumped from the drive into the bin was protected by an iron grating which was always carefully locked after such an operation, and the low windows which admitted light to the furnace room had fixed iron bars on the outside. The police, LeDuc and myself had gone over this region thoroughly in our search and had found that the locks had not been tampered with nor the gratings disturbed; the dust and the rust had proven that beyond contention. Now to my amazement I saw that the door had been forced by some powerful instrument that had torn the receiving socket for the bolt bodily from its fastenings. My hair arose with a cold tingling of my scalp, much as it might have done had I been suddenly confronted by some uncanny object in the dead of night.

"And the door at the head of the stairs which leads from here into the kitchen, was that disturbed?" I asked her as my first sensations faded. She was panting from excitement and the haste of her movements.

"No, the door was locked and just as I left it last night with the key still on the inside. He could not have gone up higher than the head of the basement stair. It just happened to remember that I had left a broom down here yesterday, and when I came down after it I noticed this door right away. Who on earth do you suppose could have done it?" She was wringing her hands weakly, the perspiration of nervousness popping from her forehead.

Being in total darkness myself, I made no attempt to enlighten her as I carefully examined the place. Outside of the scanty supply of coal that remained from last winter's supply the basement contained little save an accumulation of odds and ends and an old chest of mine that contained articles that I had stored away years before. However, I still retained the key to it, and I now opened it and made a careful inspection of its interior. So far as I could discover by a minute scrutiny the articles within it had remained untouched since I had last placed them there, and satisfied on that point I shut and locked it again without having as yet received the faintest ray of light to assist my search. I must have spent at least half an hour in my examination of the place and my questions of the housekeeper, but at the end of that time was compelled to give up with absolutely nothing learned that I had not known to start with. Another thing that perplexed me somewhat was as to whether or not I should inform my uncle of this new crime. I did not see that anything would be gained by telling him, while it would most certainly agitate him and lead to further outbursts; therefore I decided to leave him in ignorance of it and requested Mrs. Tebbets to do the same. I also decided to see LeDuc and get

his opinion on the matter, and repairing the outraged doors as best I could



"Furthermore, He is Carrying on His Operations Under Some Name Which Does Not Sound at All Like His Own."

with hammer, boards and nails, and soothing the housekeeper by my assurances that the incident was a trifling to which she need pay no further attention, I went upstairs and sat down to my breakfast with Uncle Abner as usual. But an hour later when I had reached my office I telephoned the detective with the request that he meet me at the noon hour. He readily assented and I then went about my daily work.

He met me at luncheon and I explained the matter to him without prelude. He looked serious minded as I finished. "What do you think of it?" I asked. In his abstraction he delayed his reply for perhaps 30 seconds.

"It seems peculiar. But I am more inclined to consider it as a separate and distinct offence rather than as an aftermath of the original happening. Further than that I don't believe I have any theory to advance as yet. However, it may all come out in the final solution, provided there is one, and in the meantime I would dismiss it from my mind if I were you. If you find that difficult, you may look upon it in this light. If I remember, we had a sharp shower last night—the thunder awoke me. It is not unreasonable to assume that some back-yard prowler caught in the storm may have forced his way in merely to secure a dry nest in which to sleep." While I did not take much stock in that explanation and so informed him, I added that being in a receptive mood I would file it in my mind for future reference, and then began interrogating him as to his own movements since we had last foregathered. But when it came to that he had little to say and at first seemed disinclined to part with even that. Later on as we ate, however, he became a trifle more communicative. Under the warming influence of tobacco and coffee he began to make more satisfactory replies to my quizzings, but if he had learned anything of importance he did not betray it. Since the day upon which he had taken an active interest in the case and I had heard his low whistle at the mention of Mackay's name, curiosity had filled my mind as to what his researches would be in that direction. I had gone to Mrs. Dace's with the mention of LeDuc's name that she might understand why I had repeated to him conversations which had occurred between herself and myself, that she might not feel that I had tattled about our private talks without explaining the reason to her. But though I had paved the way by which he might have had a confidential business chat with her, if he had availed himself of the opportunity it had not come to my knowledge. That LeDuc might now have full information of what I had done and feel at liberty to interview her should be desired, I now told him of my talk upon the subject with her; telling him that she had denied absolutely having repeated my half confidences to any one, and had seemed to be amused at the idea that Janet was anything more or less than an automaton. This information he received without comment beyond the paradoxical remark that he could not remember that he had forgotten anything. "What else have you got to tell me?" I urged in finishing. He closed his lips so tightly around his cigar that it resembled a nail driven into a crack and appeared to be filling himself to his toes with smoke as he reflected. Presently he expelled the smoke from his mouth after the manner of a nursery dragon.

"I don't know whether I am acting wisely or not, but under your promise to divulge nothing you may learn from me without my consent I am going to risk it. I know that you believe in your cousin Bruce's honesty."

"Implicitly."

"But do you happen to know that he has somehow or other managed to come into active control of enough money to resume his operations on 'change on a rather liberal scale'?" he queried with a thin smile. I was astonished and told him so.

"Well, he has," he pursued assertively. "Furthermore, he is carrying on his operations under some name which does not sound at all like his own. You look surprised. That's the way I felt when I first found this out."

I ruminated. "But certainly he would not be fool enough to openly and notoriously and under our very noses begin the use of money dishonestly obtained almost the day after the commission of a crime which he knows he has not absolved himself

of?" I cried. LeDuc looked at me queerly.

"That is what almost any one would think under first impulse. But when you are dealing with criminals you must remember that they do not reason and act just as do honest men. When a sane man takes his life and liberty in his hand and commits a desperate crime, he is of necessity more or less regardless of consequences, as well as being driven by strong pressure. And in nearly all cases it is because of this recklessness that we catch him. He may commit the crime itself with a skill and caution that is almost more than human, yet the next day is apt to go out and do something so foolish that it instantly attracts attention to him. For instance, having had no money before, he now begins to spend it lavishly; or becoming under the influence of liquor boast or let things drop that sound queer. If it were not for these peculiarities of the criminal make up, and the fact that he generally makes a confidant of some woman who betrays him, the road of the criminal would be comparatively safe and that of the detective an unhappy one."

"But I cannot believe that there is anything crooked about Bruce. Deceit is foreign to his whole nature." My friend thrust one hand in his pocket.

"Does he ever smoke cigarettes?" he smiled.

"Frequently."

"Any particular brand?"

I paused to reflect. "I think so. As I remember, those that I have seen were invariably a Turkish abomination with a serrated gilt band for a mouthpiece. What is your reason for asking me that?" He withdrew his hand from beneath the table and tossed a half-smoked specimen of the species which I had been describing on the table before me. I looked at him inquiringly.

"I found that in the hallway of your house near the closet where your uncle had been confined. Perhaps you noticed at the time that I picked up something which I did not show you."

Silently I sat trying to read his blank eyes. But as for divining what lay behind them I might as well have gazed at windows back of which the shades were drawn.

CHAPTER XIII.

Directly after this seance with LeDuc the stock which I had margined began that series of kangaroo leaps upward which will never be forgotten by those, who by reason of their interest, watched the marvel. I probably called my broker up not less than half a dozen times a day during this period, and it was seldom indeed that his last quotation was not higher than the one of say half an hour before. It went darting skyward in the eccentric zig-zags with which a kite mounts in a gale, and within a fortnight I found myself richer by thousands added to thousands. The glittering heights of fortune seemingly hung close over me; the end of the rainbow with its great bag of gold was within mathematical striking distance; and taking greater chances than ever for the sake of greater gains, I plunged wildly as I restated my winnings on every throw. And day by day the Midas touch was mine and I won, won, won. Then grown money reckless by my constant success, I permitted myself another piece of extravagance for the allurements of the woman I loved and the greater opportunities it would give me to be with her. I bought a handsome motor car upon which I had had my eyes for some time, housing it in a public garage and telling nobody but her that I had purchased it.

I took Mrs. Dace out on the first evening after I had mastered my new acquisition for a long ride countryward. The weather was ideal, the roads in splendid condition and we sped along to the low whir of the machine with the soft night air fanning our faces. It had long been understood between us that she was to carefully guard all my confidences, and I kept few things from her. Exultantly I spoke of my increasing wealth and magnificent prospects. Her arm slipped under mine.

"Good, good," she cried with a schoolgirl's enthusiasm. "I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. It makes me happy to know about it. I told you that I should exercise my sorcery to command your success. When you win I feel that I have won also."

Her tact confession that she considered herself as a close partner of mine, and that she was backing me to the winning of a prize which we should share together in the long time to come, combined with the delicious sense of comradeship awakened by her arm pressure, became as an intoxicant. In that moment I would have pawned my soul to have possessed her. I threw my arms about her and held her to my breast almost fiercely. "My God, how I love you, Mattie. Tell me that you will marry me," I urged. "I found her lips and drained them as a drunkard drains his cup. Her arm hung upon my shoulder; her upturned lips seemed to be clinging to mine; I could feel the ebb and swell of her bosom so closely was she drawn to me, and in that position I held her until a slight warning swerve of the machine temporarily restored my sanity. I quickly removed my right arm and clutched the wheel, but still kept the other around her waist as I begged her in the name of my great passion to make me the happiest man on earth by her answer. Impassioned I recalled to her my long nights and days of torture when I was half sick with despair of ever possessing her. For the first time since our ac-

quaintance began she was visibly agitated by my pleadings.

"You say that you love me with all this great love and tell me that I must answer your question, Tom, dear," she said very softly. "Very well, I will answer you. I will marry you upon one condition."

"And that?" I cried wildly, feeling myself grow weak in the suspense.

"That you will not importune me now to fix the date. You must leave that entirely to my discretion. When I think the right time has come I will manage in some way to let you know that I am ready. Until then you must be patient with me like the dear boy that you have always been."

"Then we are really engaged?" I gasped it out with the unbelief of one who by a seeming miracle sees the dead restored to life. She patted my cheek.

"You may so consider us if you wish—under that condition. But it must for the time being remain strictly our secret."

Half doubting that I was still of this earth I steered onward as in a trance. Then, suddenly my senses were tricking me, this most glorious of women was to become my close companion through all the days to come; the one whose head should rest upon my shoulder through the long nights; whose bosom should pillow my face in hours of weariness; who should be my wife, the mother of my children. My eyes filled with the moisture of happiness and through the mist the chalky roadway blurred before me. A feeling almost of awe filled my soul. Never again will such a great thankfulness possess me, and silently I blessed God that in his infinite goodness he had permitted me to be born.

In front of an out-of-doors garden frequented by the better class we stopped and dismounted. Long lines of motor cars and carriages extended away on either side, and the music of an European orchestra floated over the walls of the enclosure. We passed through the palm-lined entrance and took our seats at a table beneath a tree whose low hanging limbs almost brushed it. A thousand well-dressed people were eating and drinking around us as they chatted or listened to the music. It was the soul of Beethoven throbbing in our ears out of his grave. I ordered champagne in honor of our betrothal.

I seemed to be floating in the air. All weight, all consciousness of the physical left me, and the music was ethereal vibrations wafted to me from infinite distance. I could only liken my sensations to those of one occasion long before when feeling badly I had by mistake taken a slight overdose of a drug, and for some hours thereafter had soared amongst the clouds in an ecstasy which the earthly born are incapable of experiencing except through the wizardry of the chemist. Her hand lay idly upon the table close beside mine, and with a quick glance around to make sure that no one was observing us I covered it with my own. "The ring, sweetheart, you shall have tomorrow. During my day dreams I have sometimes amused myself by looking at them in the diamond shops as in my imagination I selected one for you. And only the other day I found the one you shall have. It is flawless;

as perfect in its beauty as a gem as you are as a woman. In the uncountable centuries of the past when the world was being molded this stone was created for you, and yours it shall be. But you must loan me one of yours for a few days that I may have it fitted to you."

She laughed in her low, delicious way as I slipped a diamond from her finger. "Of course, I shall be proud to wear it—proud and happy. But please don't be too extravagant, Tom. Remember I do not want you to go to extremes," she cautioned. In my then state of mind money was but glittering dross, worthless except in its power to bring her pleasure. Had I possessed a million I would have poured it over her as prodigally as Bruce deluged Clare with roses.

"And of course the car is yours," I went on with the recklessness of a Croesus. "I will so instruct them at the garage, and when you wish it you will have but to telephone and have it brought to you." It was a present made under the impulse of the moment and absolutely without thought.

(Continued on page eight.)



"And of Course the Car is Yours," I Went on With the Recklessness of a Croesus.

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(Continued on page eight.)

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