

(Continued.)

CHAPTER XIII.
A MOONLIGHT NIGHT.

The description given me by Tom Discoe was sufficient to locate the old stone structure where I had agreed to meet him and Jake Huke. It was on the right in going to the Palisades, was reached by a plainly marked path, and near enough to the highway to be perceived during the daytime.

Situated among the trees, which at this season were in full bloom, it would not be visible at night. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for me to find it but for the fact that when I strolled past it some time before I was led by a natural curiosity to scrutinize it quite narrowly. My memory of places has always been good, and I felt little fear of a mistake.

I was fairly beyond the suburbs of Englewood, with the houses becoming few and widely separated, and was walking at a moderate pace, for there was plenty of time at command. Frequently I turned my head, stood still and listened. Now that the drama had opened I could not free myself of a vague fear that Covey Cone had managed to outwit me and was shadowing my movements.

It was when this feeling was the strongest that I made the disquieting discovery of which I have spoken. Somebody was following me.

At the moment of turning my head an obscuring mass of drifting vapour passed from before the bright moon, whose rays flooded the earth. The lighting up of the landscape showed me the outlines of a man in the path walking in the same direction with myself.

There was the possibility that he was an individual who held no interest in me. He might be on his way to visit a neighbour or someone taking the stroll for his own pleasure.

All this was possible, but the action of the stranger shut out such a comforting conclusion. He must have possessed keen eyes, for hardly had I stopped in my walk when he did the same.

Thus two men, separated by more than 100 yards, stood as motionless as statues, peering at each other through the gloom.

Suddenly the shadowy figure began to grow misty and uncertain. It flickered and danced in an odd way and then vanished altogether. Another cloud had so veiled the moon that darkness enveloped the stranger. The obscuration was only for a few seconds, when the ragged rift glided off and the earth was bathed again in silvery light.

I had not stirred in my position, but was still trying to pierce the darkness, waiting for my man to loom out to view. But he did not. The place which had so lately known him knew him no longer. He had taken advantage of the temporary deepening of gloom to slip out of sight.

"Maybe he is a country man, who was so startled by my stoppage and turning around that he fled homeward or climbed over the fence and hid. And yet I suspect that fellow is Covey Cone, though how he got on my track rases my comprehension."

Nothing was to be accomplished by standing at the roadside, and I resumed my walk at a still more deliberate pace, frequently glancing over my shoulder whenever the uncertain light offered the opportunity.

I had kept this up for perhaps ten minutes when a curious flicker drew my eyes to a point behind me, but on the other side of the highway. Something moved among the shadows, and but for the peculiar direction of my gaze I would not have perceived it.

When we look directly at the Palisades, we can count but six stars, but a careless glance shows the full seven. Had I been gazing at the point I would not have observed the odd flickering on the other side of the road. Looking straight at the point I saw nothing. Nevertheless I knew that in that brief interval when my man slipped from sight he had darted across the road and had been following me ever since from the other side.

One of the most uncomfortable sensations imaginable is that of knowing that someone is stealthily following us at night. The temptation to break into a run or to dart to one side and hide becomes almost irresistible. I have said that I carried no deadly weapon with me—nothing except my resistless strength—but in these moonlight days there are innumerable situations in which even so miraculous a gift is worthless. A tiny pistol bullet would be as fatal in my case as it would have been to the ancient Samson.

Still it was not to be supposed that the individual at my heels was seeking my life, and, while keeping an eye to his actions, I continued moving toward the Hudson.

Suddenly I became aware that strangers were in front. Not one man, but three. Instead of following the path, as I was doing, they were in the middle of the highway. They were big, strapping fellows, frouzy and ill-clothed, and members of the pestilent class of vagrants known as tramps.

I increased my pace, intending to hurry past them, but the burliest rogue, who was a pace or two in front of his companions, turned to one side so as to place himself directly in front of me. I moved to the right, but he intruded himself again. Evidently he meant to hold me in check.

"Good evening, boss!" he said, in a husky voice, at which his two companions paused in the middle of the road and watched him from under their slouched hats. They were ready to give help, but could not believe it necessary for the scamp confronting

me was a third greater in size and weight. "Good evening. What do you wish?" "Which way might you be goin'?" "Can't you see for yourself?" "Don't be imperlitt, boss. We're workin' the growler, and are in hard luck. Can't you give us a lift?" "I might, for I have a good pile of money with me, but I don't like to use it for buying drink for other folks. It wouldn't be right."

"Bless your innocent heart, we don't ax you to use it. It's us! Come, shell out!" And he advanced threateningly toward me. "No, I shall not let you have a dollar, though I have plenty with me."

"You won't, eh? Waal, that's good."

He made a plunge like a bull, half lowering his head, as if he meant to butt me. As he came within reach I grasped each of his upper arms and lifted him so quickly from his feet that they flew straight up, so that I held him head downward. Then I whirled him about several times, as if he were a flail, and leaving toward the snapping miscreants in the road whipped them with the legs of my man so violently that both were swept off their feet and sent sprawling in the middle of the highway.

They were partly stunned, but began climbing up again. Before they were erect I resumed thrashing them with my human flail, driving one far to the right and the other to the left. Then with terrified exclamations they fled at headlong speed in the direction of Englewood.

Meanwhile the big fellow in my grasp was wriggling and making terrifi-

all fear of the deadly reptiles. I moved more resolutely, and a minute later paused in front of the old stone structure, which stood in the middle of a small clearing.

Still it was prudent to make a reconnaissance before entering the building, which was to be the scene of an eventful meeting.

The thought had never come to me that the house was occupied. When observed on the previous Sunday, there were no signs of life about it, and Tom Discoe's references had not removed that impression.

But it was an error. Someone lived there, though the lower story consisted of but a single room, while a sloping ladder led to the rooms above. I saw through the open door the scanty furniture, with a large table in the middle of the apartment, and upon it stood a goody sized lamp, which shed a bright illumination through the interior.

But none of the three or four chairs was occupied. It looked as if the owner, after lighting the lamp, had departed and given over the place to the parties that had engaged it for the evening.

Perhaps I had mistaken the building, and yet that could hardly be.

While I stood in doubt and perplexity, hesitating whether to advance or to wait for further developments, I caught the odour of tobacco smoke. It was not a cigar that someone was smoking, but, the weed was cheap, strong, and rank.

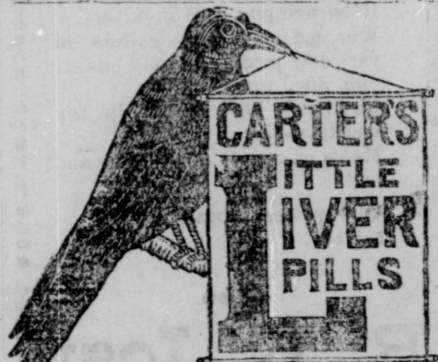
Then a tiny glow showed in the doorway, and it was explained. The owner or occupant of the house was seated there smoking his clay pipe.

"Good evening, boss."

The negro had heard me as I shifted my position and spoke without any misgiving. I walked forward, and as the short, heavily-built African rose to his feet to receive me I wondered how I had failed to see him from the first. "Good evening," I called in return, going forward to where the lamplight fell full on me. He scrutinized me closely as I approached and was disappointed.

"Yo' ain't de gemman dat I was lookin' for, but I guess yo's de gemman what was disumpected by de oder folks. Walk in, boss, and makes yo'self at home."

(To be Continued.)



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