

The Manager Of the B. & A.

By VAUGHAN KESTER

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(Continued from Thursday.)

Holt ran over the cuts again. Then he asked: "Who's going to stand for this? You or the old man? I hear he was in town last night."

"I stand for it, but of course he approves."

"I'll bet he approves," and the assistant treasurer grinned. "This is the sort of thing that suits him right down to the ground."

"How about the hands? Do you know if they are members of any union?"

"No, but there'll be lively times ahead for you. They are a great lot of kickers here."

"Wait until I get through. I haven't touched the shops yet. That's to come later. I'll skin closer before I'm done."

Oakley got up and lit his pipe. "The plant must make some sort of a showing. We can't continue at the rate we have been going. I suppose you know what sort of shape it would leave the town in if the shops were closed."

"Very poor shape, I should say. Why, it's the money that goes in and out of this office twice a month that keeps the town alive. It couldn't exist a day without that."

"Then it behooves us to see to it that nothing happens to the shops or road. I am sorry for the men I am laying off, but it can't be helped."

"I see you are going to chuck Hoadley out of his good thing at the Junction. If he was half white he'd be gone long ago. He must lay awake nights figuring how he can keep decently busy."

"How do you think it's going to work?"

"Oh, it will work all right, because it has to, but they'll all be cursing you," with great good humor. "What's the matter anyhow? Did the old man throw a fit at the size of the payroll?"

"Not exactly, but he came down here with his mind made up to sell the road to the M. and W."

"You don't say so!"

"I talked him out of that, but we must make a showing, for he's good and tired and may dump the whole business any day."

"Well, if he does that there'll be no marrying or giving in marriage for me this summer. It will be just like a Shaker settlement where I am concerned."

Dan laughed. "Oh, you'd be all right. Holt. You'd get something else, or the M. and W. would keep you on."

"I don't know about that. A new management generally means a clean sweep all round, and my berth's a pretty good one."

In some manner a rumor of the changes Oakley proposed making did get abroad, and he was promptly made aware that his popularity in Antioch was a thing of the past. He was regarded as an oppressor from whom some elaborate and wanton tyranny might be expected. While General Cornish suffered their inefficiency, his easy going predecessors had been content to draw their salaries and let it go at that, a line of conduct which Antioch held to be entirely proper. This new man, however, was clearly an upstart, cursed with an insane and destructive ambition to earn money for the road. Suppose it did not pay. Cornish could go down into his pocket for the difference, just as he had always done.

What the town did not know and what it would not have believed even if it had been told was that the general had been on the point of selling, a change that would have brought hardship to every one. The majority of the men in the shops owned their own homes, and these homes represented the savings of years. The sudden exodus of two or three hundred families meant of necessity widespread ruin. Those who were forced to go away would have to sacrifice everything they possessed to get away, while those who remained would be scarcely better off. But Antioch never considered such a radical move as even remotely possible. It counted the shops a fixture. They had always been there, and for this sufficient reason they would always remain.

The days wore on, one very like another, with their spring heat and lethargy. Occasionally Oakley saw Miss Emory on the street to bow to, but not to speak with. While he was grateful for these escapes he found himself thinking of her very often. He fancied—and he was not far wrong—that she was finding Antioch very dull.

He wondered, too, if she was seeing much of Ryder. He imagined that she was, and here again he was not far wrong. Now and then he was seized with what he felt to be a weak desire to call, but he always thought better of it in time and was always grateful he had not succumbed to the impulse. But her mere presence in Antioch seemed to make him dissatisfied and resentful of its limitations. Ordinarily he was not critical of his surroundings. Until she came, that he was without companionship and that the town was given over to a deadly inertia which expressed itself in the collapsed ambition of nearly every man and woman he knew had scarcely affected him, beyond giving him a sense of mild wonder.

He had heard nothing of his father, and in the pressure of his work and freshened interest in the fortunes of the Huckleberry had hardly given him a second thought. He felt that since he had sent money to him he was in a measure relieved of all further responsibility. If his father did not wish to come to him, that was his own affair. He had placed no obstacle in his way.

CHAPTER V.
LATE one afternoon, as Oakley sat at his desk in the broad streak of yellow light that the sun sent in through the west windows, he heard a step on the narrow board walk that ran between the building and the tracks. The last shrill shriek of No. 7, as usual, half an hour late, had just died out in the distance, and the informal committee of town loafers which met each train was plodding up Main street to the postoffice in solemn silence.

He glanced around as the door into the yards opened. He saw a tall, gaunt man of sixty-five, a little stoop shouldered and carrying his weight heavily and solidly. His large head was sunk between broad shoulders. It was covered by a wonderful growth of iron gray hair. The face was clean shaven and had the look of a placid mask. There was a curious repose in the man's attitude as he stood with a big hand—the hand of an artisan—resting loosely on the knob of the door.

"Is it you, Dannie?"
The smile that accompanied the words was at once anxious, hesitating and inquiring. He closed the door with awkward care and, coming a step nearer, put out his hand. Oakley, breathing hard, rose hastily from his chair and stood leaning against the corner of his desk, as if he needed its support. He was white to the lips.

There was a long pause while the two men looked into each other's eyes. "Don't you know me, Dannie?" wistfully, Dan said nothing, but he extended his hand, and his father's fingers closed about it with a mighty pressure. Then quite abruptly Roger Oakley turned and walked over to the window. Once more there was absolute silence in the room save for the ticking of the clock and the buzzing of a solitary fly high up on the ceiling.

The old convict was the first to break the tense stillness.

"I had about made up my mind I should never see you again, Dannie. When your mother died and you came west it sort of wiped out the little there was between me and the living. In fact, I really didn't know you would care to see me, and when Hart told me you wished me to come to you and had sent the money I could hardly believe it."

Here the words failed him utterly. He turned slowly and looked into his son's face long and lovingly. "I've thought of you as a little boy for all these years, Dannie, as no higher than that," dropping his hand to his hip. "And here you are a man grown. But you got your mother's look. I'd have known you by it among a thousand."

If Dan had felt any fear of his father it had left him the instant he entered the room. Whatever he might have done, whatever he might have been, there was no question as to the manner of man he had become. He stepped to his son's side and took his hand in one of his own.

"You've made a man of yourself. I can see that. What do you do here for a living?"
Dan laughed queerly.

"I am the general manager of the railroad, father," nodding toward the station and the yards. "But it's not much to brag about. It's only a one horse line," he added.

"No, you don't mean it, Dannie?" And he could see that his father was profoundly impressed. He put up his free hand and gently patted Dan's head as though he were indeed the little boy he remembered.

"Did you have an easy trip west, father?" Oakley asked. "You must be tired."

"Not a bit, Dannie. It was wonderful. I'd been shut off from it all for more than twenty years, and each mile was taking me nearer you."

The warm yellow light was beginning to fade from the room. It was growing late.

"I guess we'd better go uptown to the hotel and have our supper. Where is your trunk? At the station?"

"I've got nothing but a bundle. It's at the door."

Dan locked his desk, and they left the office.

"Is it all yours?" Roger Oakley asked, pausing as they crossed the yards to glance up and down the curving tracks.

"It's part of the property I manage. It belongs to General Cornish, who holds most of the stock."
"And the train I came on, Dannie—who owned that?"
"At Buckhorn Junction, where you changed cars for the last time, you caught our local express. It runs through to a place called Harrison—the terminus of the line. This is only a branch road, you know."

But the explanation was lost on his father. His son's relation to the road

was a magnificent fact which he pondered with simple pleasure.

After their supper at the hotel they went upstairs. Roger Oakley had been given a room next his son's. It was the same room General Cornish had occupied when he was in Antioch.

"Would you like to put away your things now?" asked Dan as he placed his father's bundle, which he had carried uptown from the office, on the bed.

"I'll do that by and by. There ain't much there—just a few little things I've managed to keep or that have been given me."

Dan pushed two chairs before an open window that overlooked the square. His father had taken a huge blackened merschaum from its case and was carefully filling it from a leather pouch.

"You don't mind if I light my pipe?" he inquired.

"Not a bit. I've one in my pocket, but it's not nearly as fine as yours."

"Our warden gave it to me one Christmas, and I've smoked it ever since. He was a very good man, Dannie. It's the old warden I'm speaking of, not Kenyon, the new one, though he's a good man too."

Dan wondered where he had heard the name of Kenyon before; then he remembered—it was at the Emorys'. "Try some of my tobacco, Dannie," passing the pouch.

For a time the two men sat in silence, blowing clouds of white smoke out into the night.

Roger Oakley hitched his chair nearer his son's and rested a heavy hand on his knee. "I like it here," he said. "Do you? I am glad."

"What will be the chances of my finding work? You know I'm a cabinet-maker by trade."

"There's no need of your working, so don't worry about that."

"But I must work, Dannie. I ain't used to sitting still and doing nothing."

"Well," said Oakley, willing to humor him, "there are the car shops."

"Can you get me in?"
"Oh, yes, when you are ready to start. I'll have McClintock, the master mechanic, find something in your line for you to do."

"I'll need to get a kit of tools."

"I guess McClintock can arrange that too. I'll see him about it when you are ready."

"Then that's settled. I'll begin in the morning," with quiet determination. "But don't you want to look around first?"

"I'll have my Sundays for that." And Dan saw that there was no use in arguing the point with him. He was bent on having his own way.

The old convict filled his lungs with a deep, free breath. "Yes, I'm going to like it. I always did like a small town anyhow. Tell me about yourself, Dannie. How do you happen to be here?"

Dan roused himself. "I don't know. It's chance, I suppose. After mother's death—"

"Twenty years ago last March," breaking in upon him softly; then, nodding at the starlit heavens: "She's up yonder now watching us. Nothing's hidden or secret. It's all plain to her."

"Do you really think that, father?" "I know it, Dannie." And his tone was one of settled conviction.

Dan had already discovered that his father was deeply religious. It was a

"Don't you know me, Dannie?"

faith the like of which had not descended to his own day and generation.

"Well, I had it rather hard for awhile," going back to his story.

"Yes," with keen sympathy. "You were nothing but a little boy."

"Finally I was lucky enough to get a place as a newsboy on a train. I sold papers until I was sixteen and then began braking. I wanted to be an engineer, but I guess my ability lay in another direction. At any rate, they took me off the road and gave me an office position instead. I got to be a division superintendent, and then I met General Cornish. He is one of the directors of the line I was with at the time. Three months ago he made me an offer to take hold here, and so here I am."

"And you've never been back home, Dannie?"

"Never once. I've wanted to go, but I couldn't."

He hoped his father would understand.

(To be continued.)

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