

The Manager Of the B. & A.

By VAUGHAN KESTER.

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(Continued from Friday.)

"You, my dear, are the only one here but her grave. I wish she might have lived. You'd have been a great happiness to her, and she got very little happiness for her portion any way to look at it. We were only just married when the war came, and I was not four years. Then there was about seven years when we were getting on badly. We had money put by and owned our own home. Can you remember it, Dannie, the old brick place corner across from the post-office? A new Methodist church stands now. It was sold to get money for a lawyer when the big trouble came. I hope you haven't forgotten this book, Dannie," tapping it softly with a heavy forefinger.

"I don't know," said Dan gently. "But I'll try to get some of it. I'll try to get some of it."

"The law sets out to punish it with the guilty only. When you go to her grave and see these flowers growing on it and that the man who cared for it told me what she was a very brave woman. You know that was an angel about Sharp."

"I turned toward him quickly. 'Why do you speak of it? It's all dead now.'

"I'd sort of like to tell you about it." There was a long pause, and he continued:

"Sharp and I had been enemies for a long time. It started back before the war, when he wanted to marry your mother. We both enlisted in the same regiment, and somehow the trouble got alive. He was a bit of a bully, but I was counted a handy man with my fists too. The regiment was always trying to get us into the ring together, but we knew it was dangerous. We had sense enough for that. I never say he would have done it, but I never felt safe when there was a fight in all those four years. It's easy enough to shoot the man in front of you and no one to be the wiser. Many a score's been settled that way. When we got home again we didn't get along any better. He was a drinking man and I had no control over myself when liquor was the best of him. I did my share in keeping the feud alive. What he said to me and what I said of him reached both of us in time, and it was a fancy."

"I joined the church, and I added it wasn't right to hate a man the way I hated Sharp, for you never really done anything to me."

"I stopped in at the smithy as a blacksmith—to have a talk with him and see if we couldn't patch somehow and be friends. It was a hard afternoon, and he'd been working more than was good for him. He hadn't hardly got the first words when he came at me with a big sledge in his hand, all in a rage and saying he'd have my life. I pushed it and started for the door. I saw no use to try to reason with him when he came at me again, and this time he struck me with his sledge. It hurt, but I didn't mind it. I pushed him out of my way and backed it toward the door. The lock was tight, and before I could open it he was within striking distance again, and I had to turn to defend myself. I snatched up a bar of iron perhaps a foot long. I had kept my temper down until then, but the moment I had a weapon in my hand it got clean away from me, and in an instant I was fighting—just as he was fighting—to kill."

"Roger Oakley had told the story of a murder in a hard, emotionless voice, but Dan saw in the half light that his face was pale and drawn. Dan found it difficult to associate the thought of violence with the man at his side, whose whole manner spoke of an unusual restraint and control. That he had killed a man, even in self-defense, seemed preposterous and inconceivable."

"There was a part of the story Roger Oakley could not tell and which his son had no desire to hear."

"People said afterward that I'd gone there purposely to pick a quarrel with Sharp, and his helper, who, it seems, was in the yard back of the smithy setting a wagon tire, swore he saw me through a window as I entered and that I struck the first blow. He may have seen only the end of it and really believed I did begin it, but that's a sample of how things got twisted. Nobody believed my motive was what I said it was. The jury found me guilty of murder, and the judge gave me a life sentence. A good deal of a fuss was made over what I did at the fire last winter. Hart told me he'd sent you the papers."

Dan nodded, and his father continued:

"Some ladies who were interested in mission work at the prison took the matter up and got me my pardon. It's a fearful and a wicked thing for a man to lose his temper, Dannie. At first I was bitter against every one who had a hand in sending me to prison, but I've put that all from my heart. It was right I should be punished."

"He rose from his chair, striking the floor with his shoe."

"Ain't it very late, Dannie? I'll just put away my things, and then we can go to bed. I didn't mean to keep you up."

Oakley watched his precise and orderly arrangement of his few belongings. He could see that it was a part of the prison discipline under which he had lived for almost a quarter of a century. When the contents of his bundle were disposed of to his satisfaction he put on a pair of steel rimmed spectacles with large, round glasses and took up a well thumbed Bible, which he had placed at one side.

"I hope you haven't forgotten this book, Dannie," tapping it softly with a heavy forefinger.

CHAPTER VI.

ROGER OAKLEY went to work in the car shops the day following his arrival in Antioch.

Dan sought to dissuade him, but he was stubbornness itself, and the latter realized that the only thing to do was to let him alone and not seek to control him.

After all, if he would be happier at work, it was no one's affair but his own.

It never occurred to the old convict that pride might have to do with the stand Dan took in the matter.

He was wonderfully gentle and affectionate, with a quaint, unworldly simplicity that was rather pathetic. His own anxiety was to please Dan, but in spite of this anxiety once a conviction took possession of him he clung to it with unshaken tenacity in the face of every argument his son could bring to bear.

Under the inspiration of his newly acquired freedom he developed in unexpected ways. As soon as he felt that his place in the shops was secure and that he was not to be interfered with he joined the church. Its services occupied most of his spare time. Every Thursday night found him at prayer meeting. Twice each Sunday he went to church, and by missing his dinner he managed to take part in the Sunday school exercises. A social threat him into a flutter of pleased expectancy. Not content with what his church offered, irrespective of creed, he joined every society in the place of a religious or temperance nature and was a zealous and active worker among such of the heathen as flourished in Antioch.

There was a stern Old Testament flavor to his faith. He would have dragged the erring from their peril by main strength and have regulated their morals by legal enactments. Those of the men with whom he came in contact in the shops treated him with the utmost respect partly on his own account and partly because of Dan.

Half of all he earned he gave to the church. The remainder of his slender income he divided again into two equal parts. One of these he used for his personal needs, the other disappeared mysteriously. He was putting it by for Dannie.

It was a disappointment to him that his son took only the most casual interest in religious matters. He comforted himself, however, with the remembrance that at his age his own interest had been merely traditional. It was only after his great trouble that the awakening came. He was quite certain Dannie would experience this awakening, too, some day.

It was a hot, breathless morning in May. The machinery in the shops droned on and on, with the lazy, softened hum of revolving wheels or the swish of swiftly passing belts. A freight was cutting out cars in the yards. It was rather noisy and bumping discordantly in and out of the sidings.

Dan Oakley was the sole tenant of the office, but presently McClintock wandered in from the hot out of doors to talk over certain repairs he wished McClintock in the shops. He was a typical American mechanic, and Oakley liked him, as he always liked the man who knew his business and earned his pay.

They discussed the repairs, and then Oakley asked, "How's my father getting along, Milt?"

"Oh, all right! He's a little slow, that's all."

"What's he on now?"

"Those blue line cars that came in last month."

"There isn't much in that batch. I had to figure close to get the work. Keep the men moving."

"They are about done. I'll put the painters on the job tomorrow."

"That's good."

McClintock went over to the water cooler in the corner and filled a stemless tumbler with ice water.

"We'll be ready to send them up to Buckhorn the last of next week. Is there anything else in sight?"

He gulped down the water at a single swallow.

"No, not at present, but there are one or two pretty fair orders coming in next month that I was lucky enough to pick up in Chicago. Isn't there any work of our own we can go at while things are slack?"

"Lots of it," wiping his hands on the legs of his greasy overalls. "All our day coaches need paint and some want new upholstery."

"Well, better go at that, then."

"All right. I'll take a look at the cars in the yards and see what I can put out in place of those we call in. There's no use talking, Mr. Oakley, you've done big things for the shops," he added.

"Well, I am getting some work for them, and while there isn't much profit in it, perhaps, it's a great deal better than being idle."

"Just a whole lot," agreed McClintock.

"I think I can pick up contracts enough to keep us busy through the summer. I understand you've always had to shut down."

"Yes, or half time," disgustedly.

"I guess we can worry through without that; at any rate, I want to," observed Oakley.

"I'll go see how I can manage about our own repairs," said McClintock.

He went out, and from the window Oakley saw him with a bunch of keys in his hand going in the direction of a line of battered day coaches on one of the sidings. The door opened again almost immediately to admit Griff Ryder. This was almost the last person in Antioch from whom Dan was expecting a call. The editor's cordiality as he greeted him made him instantly suspect that some favor was wanted. Most people who came to the office wanted favors. Usually it was either a pass or a concession on freight.

As a rule, Kerr met all such applicants. His manner fitted him for just such interviews, and he had no gift for popularity, which suffered in consequence.

Ryder pushed a chair over beside Oakley's and seated himself. By sliding well down on his spine he managed to reach the low sill of the window with his feet. He seemed to admire the effect, for he studied them in silence for a moment.

"There's a little matter I want to speak to you about, Oakley. I've been intending to run in for the past week, but I have been so busy I couldn't."

Oakley nodded for him to go on.

"In the first place, I'd like to feel that you were for Kenyon. You can be of a great deal of use to us in this election. It's going to be close, and Kenyon's a pretty decent sort of a chap to have come out of these parts. You ought to take an interest in seeing him re-elected."

Oakley surmised that this was the merest flattery intended to tickle his vanity. He answered promptly that he didn't feel the slightest interest in politics one way or the other.

"Well, but one good fellow ought to wish to see another good fellow get what he's after, and you can help us if you've a mind to. But this isn't what I've come for. It's about Hoadley."

"What about Hoadley?" quickly.

"He's got the idea that his days with the Huckleberry are about numbered."

"I haven't said so."

"I know you haven't."

"Then what is he kicking about? When he's to go he'll hear of it from me."

"But, just the same, it's in the air that there's to be a shakeup and that a number of men, and Hoadley among them, are going to be laid off. Now, he's another good fellow, and he's a friend of mine, and I told him I'd come in and fix it up with you."

"I don't think you can fix it up with me, Mr. Ryder. Just the same, I'd like to know how this got out."

"Then there is to be a shakeup?"

Oakley bit his lips. "You seem to take it for granted there is to be."

"I guess there's something back of the rumor."

"I may as well tell you why Hoadley's got to go."

"Oh, he's to go then? I thought my information was correct."

"In the first place he's not needed, and in the second place he's a lazy loafer. The road must earn its keep. General Cornish is sick of putting his hand in his pocket every six months to keep it out of bankruptcy. You are enough of a business man to know he won't stand that sort of thing forever. Of course I am sorry for Hoadley if he needs the money, but some one's got to suffer, and he happens to be the one. I'll take on his work myself. I can do it, and that's a salary saved. I haven't any personal feeling in the matter. The fact that I don't like him, as it happens, has nothing to do with it. If he were my own brother he'd have to get out."

"I can't see that one man more or less is going to make such a difference, Oakley," Ryder urged, with what he intended should be an air of frank good fellowship.

"Can't you?" with chilly dignity.

Oakley was slow to anger, but he had always fought stubbornly for what he felt was due him, and he wished the editor to understand that the management of the B. and A. was distinctly not his province.

Ryder's eyes were half closed, and only a narrow slit of color showed between the lids.

"I am very much afraid we won't hit it off. I begin to see we aren't going to get on. I want you to keep Hoadley as a personal favor to me. Just wait until I finish. If you are going in for reform I may have it in my power to be of some service to you. You will need some backing here, and even a country newspaper can manufacture public sentiment. Now if we aren't to be friends you will find me on the other side and working just as hard against you as I am willing to work for you if you let Hoadley stay."

Oakley jumped up.

"I don't allow anybody to talk like that to me. I am running this for Cornish. They are his interests, not mine, and you can start in and manufacture all the public sentiment you please." Then he cooled down a bit and felt ashamed of himself for the outburst.

(To be continued.)

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