

The Manager Of the B. & A.

By VAUGHAN KESTER

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(Continued from Wednesday.)

"Then there was something to the old man after all," said Mrs. Emory, whose sympathies were as generous as they were easily aroused.

"A good deal, I should say. He must have known that he was coming back to arrest and almost certain conviction."

Constance's glance searched her father's face. She wanted to hear more of Oakley. Her heart was hungering for news of this man who had risked his life to save them. All her lingering tenderness, the unwilling growth of many days, was sweeping away the barriers of her pride. "Mr. Oakley was not hurt?" she questioned breathlessly, pale to the lips.

"He is pretty badly shaken up, and no wonder, but he will be all right in the morning."

"Where is he now?" she asked. Her father turned to her. "Oakley— You look tired out, Constance. Do go to bed. I'll tell you all about it in the morning."

"Where is he now, papa?" she questioned, going to his side and clasping her hands about his arm.

"Down at the shop. They carried his father there from the train."

"Why didn't you have them bring him here?" said Mrs. Emory quickly. "After this I won't listen to a word against either of them. I would like to show the town just how we feel in the matter."

"I suggested it, but Oakley wouldn't hear to it. But don't worry about the town. It's gone wild. You should have seen the crowd on the platform when it saw Oakley in the engine cab. It went stark mad."

Again Constance's eyes swam with tears. The strike, the murder of Ryder, the fire, had each seemed in turn a part of the tragedy of her life at Antioch, but Oakley's return was wholly glorious.

Her father added, "I shall see Oakley in the morning and learn if we can be of any service to him."

A little later, when Constance went to her own room, she drew forward a chair and seated herself by the window. Across the town, on the edge of the "flats," she saw dimly the long, dark outline of the railroad shop, with its single tall chimney. She thought of Oakley as alone there keeping watch at the side of the grim old murderer who had so splendidly redeemed himself by this last sacrifice.

Great clouds of black smoke were still rolling over the town, and the woods were still blazing fiercely in the distance. Beyond her window she heard the cull of frightened birds as they fluttered to and fro in the dull red light, and farther off, in the north end, the muffled throbbing of the fire engines.

If she had had any doubts as to her feeling for Oakley these doubts were now a thing of the past. She knew that she loved him. She had been petty and vain. She had put the small things of life against the great, and this was her punishment. She tried to comfort herself with the thought that she should see him in the morning. Then she could tell him all. But what could she tell him? The time had gone by when she could tell him anything.

It was almost morning when she undressed and threw herself down on her bed. She was disconsolate and miserable, and the future seemed quite barren of hope or happiness. Love had come to her, and she had not known its presence. Yes, she would tell Oakley that she had been little and narrow and utterly unworthy. He had cared for her, and perhaps he would understand. She fell asleep thinking this and did not waken until her mother called her for breakfast.

"I am waiting for your father. He has gone down to see Mr. Oakley," Mrs. Emory said when she entered the dining room. Constance glanced at the table.

"Is he going to bring Mr. Oakley back with him?" she asked nervously.

"I am sorry, Constance, but I didn't know that you especially wanted to see him," said the doctor awkwardly, but with a dawning comprehension of what it all meant. She made no answer.

"What is it, dear?" he repeated. "Oh, nothing. I wanted to tell him about something, that is all. It doesn't matter now." She glanced up into his face with a sudden doubt. "You didn't see him; you are quite sure he went away without your seeing him; you are not deceiving me?"

"Why, of course, Constance, but he'll come back."

"No, he won't, papa," shaking her head sadly. "He's gone, and he will never come back. I know him better than you do."

And then she fled promptly upstairs to her own room.

This was the nearest Constance came to betraying her love for Oakley. She was not much given to confidences, and the ideals that had sustained her in her pride now seemed so childish and unworthy that she had no wish to dwell upon them, but whenever Dan's name was mentioned in her presence she looked frightened and guilty and avoided meeting her father's glance.

It seemed, indeed, that Oakley had taken final leave of Antioch. A new manager appeared and took formal charge of the destinies of the road. Under his direction work was resumed in the shops, for the strike had died a natural death. None of the hands was disposed to question the 10 per cent cut, and before the winter was over the scale of wages that had been in force before the strike was inaugurated was voluntarily restored. The town had no criticisms to make of Johnson, the new manager, a quiet, competent official; the most any one said was that he was not Oakley. That was enough. For Dan had come into his own.

Early in October there was a flutter of excitement when Turner Joyce and his wife left for the east to be Oakley's guests. When they returned some weeks later they had a good deal to say about him that Antioch was frankly curious to hear.

He had taken his father to Burton, where his mother was buried. Afterward he had joined General Cornish in New York.

While abroad the financier had effected a combination of interests which grouped a number of roads under one management, and Dan had been made general superintendent of the consolidated lines, with his headquarters in New York city. The Joyses were but vaguely informed as to where these lines were, but they did full justice to their magnitude, as well as to the importance of Oakley's new connection.

The dull monotony of those fall days in Antioch was never forgotten by Constance Emory. She was listless and restless by turns. She had hoped that she might hear from Oakley. She even thought the Joyses might bring her some message, but none had come. Dan had taken her at her word.

She had made no friends, and, with Ryder dead and Oakley gone, she saw no one and finally settled down into an apathy that alarmed the doctor. He, after some deliberation, suddenly announced his intention of going east to attend a medical convention.

"Shall you see Mr. Oakley?" Constance asked, with quick interest.

"Probably, if he's in New York when I get there."

Constance gave him a scared look and dropped her eyes. But when the time drew near for his departure she followed him about as if there were something on her mind which she wished to tell him.

The day he started she found courage to ask:

"Won't you take me with you, papa?"

"Not this time, dear," he answered. She was quiet for a moment and then said:

"Papa, you are not going to tell him?"

"Tell who, Constance. What?"

"Mr. Oakley."

tatively from her father's face to the window and back again, while her color came and went. There was a far-away, wistful look in her eyes and a sad little smile on her lips. At last she said softly: "Oh, he said a number of things. I can't remember now all he did say."

"Did Oakley tell you he cared for you?" Constance hesitated a moment, then, reluctantly:

"Well, yes, he did. And I let him go, thinking I didn't care for him," miserably and with a pathetic droop of her lids, from which the smile had fled. "I didn't know, and I have been so unhappy!"

"Oh!" Constance left the room abruptly. When he reached New York the first thing the doctor did was to look up Oakley. He was quick to notice a certain constraint in the young man's manner as they shook hands, but this soon passed off.

"I am awfully glad to see you," he had said. "I have thought of you again and again, and I have been on the point of writing you a score of times. I haven't forgotten your kindness to me."

"Nonsense, Oakley. I liked you, and it was a pleasure to me to be able to show my regard," responded the doctor, with hearty good will.

"How is Mrs. Emory and Miss Emory?"

"They are both very well. They were just a little hurt that you ran off without so much as a goodbye."

Oakley gave him a quick glance. "She is—Miss Emory is still in Antioch?"

The doctor nodded. "I didn't know but what she might be in the city with you," Dan explained, with evident disappointment.

"Aren't we ever going to see you in Antioch again?" inquired the doctor. He put the question with studied indifference. Dan eagerly scanned his face. The doctor adged awkwardly.

"Do you think I'd better go back?" he asked, with a perceptible dwelling on the "you."

The doctor's face became a trifle red. He seemed to weigh the matter carefully, then he said:

"Yes; I think you'd better. Antioch would like mightily to lay hands on you."

Dan laughed happily. "You don't suppose a fellow could dodge all that, do you? You see, I was going west to Chicago in a day or so, and I had thought to take a run on to Antioch. As a matter of fact, Cornish wants me to keep an eye on the shops. They are doing well, you know, and we don't want any falling off. But, you understand, I don't want to get let in for any fool hysterics," he added impatiently.

Notwithstanding the supposed confidence in which telegrams are transmitted, Brown, the day man at Antioch, generally used his own discretion in giving publicity to any facts of local interest that came under his notice. But when he wrote off Dr. Emory's message announcing that he and Oakley were in Chicago and would arrive in Antioch the last of the week he held it for several hours, not quite knowing what to do. Finally he delivered it in person, a sacrifice of official dignity that only the exigencies of the occasion condoned in his eyes. As he handed it to Mrs. Emory he said:

"It's from the doctor. You needn't be afraid to open it; he's all right. He'll be back Saturday night, and he's bringing Mr. Oakley with him. I came up to see if you had any objection to my letting the town know."

Mrs. Emory saw no reason why the knowledge of Oakley's return should be withheld, and in less than half an hour Antioch, with bated breath, was discussing the news on street corners and over back fences.

That night the town council met in secret session to consider the weighty matter of his reception, for by common consent it was agreed that the town must take official action. It was suggested that he be given the freedom of the city. This sounded large and met with instant favor, but when the question arose as to how the freedom of the city was conferred the president turned, with a slightly embarrassed air, to the member who had made the motion. The member explained, with some reserve, that he believed the most striking feature had to do with the handing over of the city keys to the guest of honor. But unfortunately Antioch had no city keys to deliver. The only keys that by any stretch of the imagination could be so called were those of the courthouse, and they were lost.

Here an appeal was made to the Hon. Job Barrows, who was usually called in to straighten out any parliamentary tangles in which the council became involved. That eminent statesman was leaning dreamily against a pillar at the end of the council chamber. On one of the cards he had already penciled the brief suggestion, "Feed him and have out the band." He handed the card to the president, and the council heaved a sigh of relief. The momentous question of Oakley's official reception was settled.

When Dan and Dr. Emory stepped from No. 7 Saturday night the station platform was crowded with men and boys. The brass band, which Antioch loved with a love that stifled criticism, perspiring and in dire haste, was turning the street corner half a block distant. Across the tracks at the railroad shops a steam whistle shrieked an ecstatic welcome.

Dan glanced at the doctor with a slightly puzzled air.

"What do you suppose is the matter?" he asked unobtrusively.

"Why, man, don't you understand? It's you!"

There was no need for him to say more, for the crowd had caught sight of Dan and a hundred voices cried:

"There he is! There's Oakley!"

And in an instant Antioch, giving way to wild enthusiasm, was cheering itself black in the face, while above the sound of cheers and the crash of music the steam whistle at the shops shrieked and pealed.

The blood left Oakley's face. He looked down at the crowd and saw Turner Joyce. He saw McClintock and Holt and the men from the shops, who were, if possible, the noisiest of all. He turned helplessly to the doctor.

"Let's get out of this," he said between his teeth. The crowd and the noise and the excitement recalled that other night when he had ridden into Antioch. As he spoke he swung himself down from the steps of the coach, and the crowd closed about him with a glad shout of welcome.

The doctor followed more slowly. As he gained the platform the Hon. Job Barrows hurried to his side.

"Where is he to go, Doc?" he panted.

"To your house or to the hotel?"

"To my house."

"All right, then. The crowd's spoiling the whole business. I've got an address of welcome in my pocket that I was to have delivered, and there's to be a supper at the rink tonight. Don't let him get away from you."

Meanwhile Dan had succeeded in extricating himself from the clutches of his friends and was struggling toward a closed carriage at the end of the platform that he recognized as the Emorys'.

In his haste and the dusk of the dull October twilight he supposed the figure he saw in the carriage to be the doctor, who had preceded him, and called to the man on the box to drive home.

As he settled himself he said reproachfully:

"I hope you hadn't anything to do with this."

A slim, gloved hand was placed in his own, and a laughing voice said:

"How do you do, Mr. Oakley?"

He glanced up quickly and found himself face to face with Constance Emory.

There was a moment's silence, and then Dan said, the courage that had brought him all the way to Antioch suddenly deserting him:

"It's too bad, isn't it? I had hoped I could slip in and out of town without any one being the wiser."

"But you can't," with a little air of triumph. "Antioch is going to entertain you. It's been in a perfect furor of excitement ever since it knew you were coming back."

"Well, I suppose there is no help for it," resignedly.

"Where is my father, Mr. Oakley?"

"I guess we left him behind," with sudden cheerfulness. He leaned forward so that he could look into her face.

"Constance, I have returned because I couldn't stay away any longer. I tried to forget, but it was no use."

She had withdrawn her hand, but he had not let it go again, and now his fingers closed over it and held it fast. He was feeling a sense of ownership.

"Did you come to meet me?" he asked.

"I came to meet papa."

"But you knew I was coming too."

"Oh, no!"

(To be continued.)

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