Abner Daniel

By . . . Will N. Harben.

Author of "Westerfelt"

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I. The story opens with Alfred Bishop, a [illegible] planter, [illegible] a tract of [illegible] acres of [illegible] land. [illegible] II [illegible] Abner Daniel tells a story. [illegible] Bishop [illegible] that he [illegible] railroad. [illegible] tract of 2,000 acres [illegible] III.—Bishop goes to Atlanta to see Lawyer Perkins, who told him about the railroad. [illegible] returns home [illegible] or his daughter Adele, who is at [illegible] in Atlanta. IV.—[illegible] bought [illegible] acres of mountain land [illegible] Abner tells Alan [illegible] Rayburn Miller, a land speculator. V.—Miller tells Alan about a dance at Darley. Alan's sweetheart, Dolly Barclay, will be there. Frank Hillhouse is attentive to Dolly. Craig, the banker. VI.—Dolly tells Alan that her father objects to his love quest. Barclay has also been [illegible] on mountain land. VII and VIII.—Miller gives Alan cynical advice on love. Dolly's mother talks to her of her own love experiences. Dolly unhappy. IX.—Abner and Rev. Mr. Dole discuss religion. Pole Baker, ex-moonshiner, whom Alan has reformed. X.—Abner goes to Barclay's and Dolly talks to him of Alan. H[e] tells Alan of his own sweetheart who died and he still loves her. Alan will hope and wait. XI and XII.—Alan goes to Miller with a project for a railroad to the land. He redeems Pole Baker from the prison gang. XIII.—Miller sends news by Dolly to Alan about his railroad project. She disputes Miller's cynical views of love. XIV.—Miller interests Tillman Wilson, president of the Southern Land and Timber company, in the mountain road. Loan of $25,000 arranged on Bishop's tract. XV and XVI.—The deal finished with a verbal option for the company to take the land at $100,000. XVII and XVIII.—Miller meets Alan's sister Adele in Atlanta and is smitten. Craig's bank fails. Bishop loses his money. Dolly sends word to Alan that she loves him more than ever. XIX and XX.—Miller takes the news of the failure to the Bishops. Pole Baker and Abner suspect that Craig is hiding his money. XXI and XXII.—Pole Baker excites Craig's cupidity by a story about having found gold in the mountain. He takes the banker to his old moonshiner['s] cave and [illegible] him to [illegible] XX[illegible]

"Yes, I think I do," Miller [illegible] a moment. "In fact, I told my clients last month that the matter was not attracting your attention, and so they gave up counting on you."

Wilson so far forgot his pose that he looked up in a startled sort of way and began to study Miller's smoke wrapped profile.

"And say they are not—have not been counting on my company to—to buy their land?"

"Why, no," said Miller in accents well resembling those of slow and genuine surprise. "Why, you have not shown the slightest interest in the matter since the day you made the loan, and naturally they ceased to think you wanted the land. The only reason I called was that the note is payable today, and"—

"Oh, yes, by Jove! That was careless of me. The interest is due. I knew it would be all right, and I had no idea you would bother to run down for that. Why, my boy, we could have drawn for it, you know."

Miller smiled inwardly as he looked calmly and fixedly through his smoke into the unsuspecting visage upturned to him.

"But the note itself is payable today," he said, closely on the alert for a facial collapse, "and, while you or I might take up a paper for $25,000 through a bank, old fashioned people like Mr. and Mrs. Bishop would feel safer to have it done by an agent. That's why I came."

Miller in silent satisfaction saw the face of his antagonist fall to pieces like an artificial flower suddenly shattered.

"Pay the note?" gasped Wilson. "Why"—

Miller puffed at his cigar and gazed at his victim as if slightly surprised over the assumption that his clients had not all along intended to avail themselves of that condition in their contract.

"You mean that the Bishops are ready to"— Wilson began again on another breath—"to pay us the $25,000?"

"And the interest for six months," quietly added Miller, reaching for a match on the desk. "I reckon you've got the note here. I don't want to miss my train."

Wilson was a good business man, but his Puritanical training in New England had not fitted him for wily diplomacy.

"Of course they can take up their note today if they wish," he said, with alarmed frankness. "I was not counting on it, though." He rose to his feet. Miller's watchful eye detected a certain trembling of his lower lip. He thrust his hands into his pockets nervously, and in a tone of open irritation he said to the young man at the typewriter: "Brown, I wish you'd let up on that infernal clicking. Sometimes I can stand it, and then again I can't. You can do those letters in the next room."

When the young man had gone out, carrying his machine, Wilson turned to Miller. "As I understand it, you personally have no interest in the Bishop property?"

"Oh, not a [illegible]!" smiled the lawyer. "I'm only a [illegible] for them."

"Then"—Wilson drove his hands into his pockets again—"perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me if the Bishops are on trade with other parties. Are they?"

Miller smiled and shook his head. "As their lawyer, Mr. Wilson, I simply couldn't answer that question."

The blow was well directed, and it struck a vulnerable spot.

"I beg your pardon," Wilson stammered. "I did not mean to suggest that you would betray confidence." He reflected a moment, and then he said in a hurried tone, "They have not actually sold out, have they?"

Miller was silent for a moment, then he answered: "I don't see any reason why I may not answer that question. I don't think my clients would object to my saying that they have not yet accepted any offer."

A look of relief suffused itself over Wilson's broad face.

"Then they are still open to accept their offer to me?"

Miller laughed as if highly amused at the complication of the matter.

"They are bound, you remember, only so long as you hold their note."

"Then I tell you what to do," proposed Wilson. "Go back and tell them not to bother about payment for a few days, anyway, and that we will soon tell them positively whether we will pay their price or not. That's fair, isn't it?"

"It might seem so to a man personally interested in the deal," admitted Miller as the introduction to another of his blows from the shoulder, "but as lawyer for my clients I can only obey orders, like the boy who stood on the burning deck."

Wilson's face fell. The remote clicking of the typewriter seemed to grate upon his high wrought nerves, and he went and slammed the partly opened door, muttering something like an oath. On that slight journey, however, he caught an idea.

"Suppose you wire them my proposition and wait here for a reply," he suggested.

Miller frowned. "That would do no good," he said. "I'm sorry I can't explain fully, but the truth is this: I happen to know that they wish for reasons of their own to take up the note you hold and that nothing else will suit them." –

At this juncture Wilson lost his grip on all self possession and degenerated into the sullen anger of sharp and unexpected disappointment.

"I don't feel that we are being fairly treated," he said. "We most naturally assumed that your clients wanted to—to extend our option on the property for at least another six months. We assumed that from the fact that we had no notification from them that they would be ready to pay the note today. That's where we feel injured, Mr. Miller."

Rayburn threw his cigar into a cuspidor. His attitude of being a noninterested agent was simply a stroke of genius. Behind this plea he crouched, showing himself only to fire shots that played havoc with whatever they struck.

"I believe my clients did feel, I may say, honor bound to you to sell for the price they offered, but—now I may be mistaken—but I'm sure they were under the impression, as I was, too, that you only wanted the property provided you could build a railroad from Darley to it, and"—

"Well, that's true," broke in Wilson. "That's quite true."

"And," finished Miller, still behind his inevitable fortification, "they tell me that you have certainly shown indifference to the project ever since the note was given. In fact, they asked me pointedly if I thought you meant business, and I was forced conscientiously to tell them that I thought you seemed to have other fish to fry."

Wilson glared at the lawyer as if he wanted to kick him for a stupid idiot who could not do two things at once—work for the interests of his clients and not wreck his plans also. It had been a long time since he had found himself in such a hot frying pan.

"So you think the thing is off?" he said desperately, probably recalling several purchases of land he had made in the section he had expected to develop. "You think it's off?"

"I hardly know what to say," said Miller. "The old gentleman, Mr. Bishop, is a slow going old timer, but his son is rather up to date, full of energy and ambition. I think he's made up his mind to sell that property."

Wilson went to his desk, hovered over it like a dark human cloud and then reluctantly turned to the big iron safe against the wall, obviously to get the note. His disappointment was too great for concealment. With his fat pink hand on the silver plated combination bolt he turned to Miller again.

"Would you mind sitting down till I telephone one or two of the directors?"

"Not at all," said Miller, "if you'll get me a cigar and the Constitution. The Atlanta baseball team played Mobile yesterday, and I was wondering"—

"I don't keep track of such things," said Wilson, coming back to his desk with an impatient frown to ring his call bell for the office boy.

"Oh, yes, I believe football is your national sport," said Miller, with a dry smile. "Well, it's only a difference between arms and legs—whole bones also casualties."

Wilson ordered the cigar and paper when the boy appeared, and, leaving the lawyer suddenly, he went into the room containing the telephone, closing the door after him.

In a few minutes he reappeared, standing before Miller, who was chewing a cold cigar and attentively reading. He looked up at Wilson abstractedly.

"Bully for Atlanta!" he said. "The boys made ten runs before the Mobiles had scored"—

"Oh, come down to business," said the New Englander, with a ready made smile. "Honestly, I don't believe you drowsy southerners ever will get over your habit of sleeping during business hours. It seems to be bred in the bone."

Miller laughed misleadingly. "Try to down us at a horse race, and we'll beat you in the middle of the night. Hang it all, man, you don't know human nature, that's all! How can you expect me on my measly fees to dance a breakdown over business I am transacting for other people?"

"Well, that may account for it," admitted Wilson, who seemed bent on being more agreeable in the light of some fresh hopes he had absorbed from the telephone wires. "See here. I've got a rock bottom proposal to make to your people. Now listen and drop that paper for a minute. By Jove! If I had to send a man from your state to attend to legal business, I'd pick one not full of mental morphine."

"Oh, you wouldn't?" Miller laid down the paper and assumed a posture indicative of attention roused from deep sleep. "Fire away. I'm listening."

"I already had authority to act for the company, but I thought it best to telephone some of the directors." Wilson sat down in his chair and leaned toward the lawyer. "Here's what we will do. The whole truth is we are willing to plank down the required one hundred thousand for that property, provided we can lay our road there without incurring the expense of purchasing the right of way. Now if the citizens along the proposed line want their country developed bad enough to donate the right of way through their lands, we can trade."

There was a pause. Then Miller broke it by striking a match on the sole of his boot. He looked cross eyed at the flame as he applied it to his cigar. "Don't you think your people could stand whatever value is appraised by law in case of refusals along the line?"

"Well?" he asked, almost under his breath.

"No," said Wilson. "The price for the land is too steep for that. Your clients have our ultimatum. What do you say? We can advertise a meeting of citizens at Springtown, which is about the center of the territory involved, and if all agree to give the right of way it will be a trade. We can have the meeting set for today two weeks. How does that strike you?"

"I'd have to wire my clients."

"When can you get an answer?"

Miller looked at his watch. "By 5 o'clock this afternoon. The message would have to go into the country."

"Then send it off at once."

A few minutes after 5 o'clock Miller sauntered into the office. Wilson sat at his desk and looked up eagerly.

"Well?" he asked, almost under his breath.

The lawyer leaned on the top of the desk. "They are willing to grant you the two weeks' time provided you sign an agreement for your firm that you will purchase their property at the price named at the expiration of that time."

"With the provision," interpolated Wilson, "that a right of way is donated."

"Yes, with that provision," Miller nodded.

"Then sit down here and write out your paper."

Miller complied as nonchalantly as if he were drawing up a bill of sale for a wornout horse.

"There you are," he said, pushing the paper to Wilson when he had finished.

Wilson read it critically. "It certainly is binding," he said. "You people may sleep during business hours, but you have your eyes open when you draw up papers. However, I don't care. I want the Bishops to feel secure. They must get to work to secure the right of way. It will be no easy job, I'll let you know. I've struck shrewd, obstinate people in my life, but those up there beat the world. Noah couldn't have driven them in the ark even after the flood set in."

"You know something about them, then?" said Miller, laughing to himself over the implied confession.

Wilson flushed and then admitted that he had been up that way several times looking the situation over.

"How about the charter?" asked Miller indifferently.

"That's fixed. I have already seen to that."

"Then it all depends on the right of way," remarked the lawyer as he drew a check from his pocket and handed it to Wilson. "Now get me that note," he said.

Wilson brought it from the safe.

"Turning this over cuts my option down to two weeks," he said, "but we'll know at the meeting what can be done."

"Yes, we'll know then what they can do with you," said Miller significantly as he put the canceled note in his pocket and rose to go.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE mass meeting at Springtown was a most important event. It was held in the courthouse in the center of the few straggling houses which made up the hamlet. The entire Bishop family, including the servants, attended. Pole Baker brought his wife and all the children in a new spring wagon. Darley society was represented, as the Springtown Gazette afterward put it, by the fairest of the fair, Miss Dolly Barclay, accompanied by her mother and father.

The courthouse yard was alive with groups of men, eagerly talking over the situation. Every individual whose land was to be touched by the proposed road was on hand to protect his rights. Pole Baker was ubiquitous, trying to ascertain the drift of matters. He was, however, rather unsuccessful. He discovered that many of the groups ceased to talk when he entered them. "Some'n's up," he told Alan and Miller in the big, bare looking courtroom. "I don't know what it is, but I smell a rat, an' it ain't no little one nuther."

"Opposition," said Miller gloomily. "I saw that as soon as I came. If they really were in favor of the road, they'd be here talking it over with us."

"I'm afraid that's it," said Alan. "Joe Bartell is the most interested, and he seems to be a sort of ringleader. I don't like the way he looks. I saw him sneer at Wilson when he drove up just now. I wish Wilson hadn't put on so much style—kid gloves, plug hat and a negro driver."

"No, that won't go down with this crowd," agreed Miller. "It might in the slums of Boston, but not with these lords of the mountains. As for Bartell, I think I know what ails him. He's going to run for the legislature and thinks he can make votes by opposing us—convincing his constituency that we represent moneyed oppression. Well, he may down us, but it's tough on human progress."

At the hour appointed for the meeting to open a young man who held the office of bailiff in the county and seemed proud of his stentorian voice opened one of the windows and shouted:

"Come in to court! Come in to court!" and the motley loiterers below began to clatter up the broad stairs and fall into the seats. Joe Bartell, a short, thickset man in the neighborhood of fifty, with a florid face and a shock of reddish hair, led about twenty men up the aisle to the jury benches at the right of the stand. They were the landowners whose consent to grant the right of way was asked. Stern opposition was clearly written on the leader's brow and more or less distinctly reflected on the varying faces of his followers.

"Ef we needed it, it ud be a different matter," Miller overheard him say in a sudden lull as the big room settled down into sudden quiet, "but we kin do without it. We've got along so fur an' we kin furder. All of us has got good teams."

Wilson in his crisp, brusque way made the opening speech. He and his capital were going to dispel darkness where it had reigned since the dawn of civilization. All that was needed, he finished, was the consent of the property owners appealed to, who, he felt confident, would not stand in their own light.

He had hardly taken his seat when Joe Bartell stood up. Alan and Miller exchanged ominous glances. They had at once recognized the inappropriateness of Wilson's speech and did not like the white, twitching sneer on Bartell's smooth shaven face. It was as if Bartell had been for a long time seeking just such an opportunity to make himself felt in the community, and there was no doubt that Wilson's almost dictatorial speech had made a fine opening for him.

"Fellow citizens an' ladies an' gentlemen," he began, "we are glad to welcome amongst us a sort of a second savior in our Sodom an' Gomorry of crackerdom. What the gentleman with the plug hat an' spike toe shoes ain't a-goin' to do for us the Lord couldn't. He looks nice an' talks nice, an', to use his words, I don't believe he deceives appearances. I'll bet one thing, an' that is 'at he won't deceive us. 'Accordin' to him we need 'im every hour,' as the Sunday school song puts it. Yes, he's a-goin' to he'p us powerful an' right off. An', fellow citizens, I'm heer to propose a vote o' thanks. He's from away up in Boston, whar, they tell me, a nigger sets an' eats at the same table with the whites. When his sort come this away durin' the war, with all the'r up to date impliments of slaughter, they laid waste to ever'thing they struck, shot us like rabbits in holes an' then went back an' said they'd had a good hunt. But they've been livin' high up thar sence the war, an' the'r timber is a-playin' out, an' they want some more now, an' they want it bad. So they send the'r representatives out to find it an' lay hold of it. How does he happen to come heer? As well as I kin make out, old Alf Bishop, a good man an' a southern soldier—a man that I hain't got nothin' agin, except maybe he holds his head too high—made up his mind awhile back that lumber would be in demand some day, an' he set to work buyin' all the timber land he could lay his hands on. Then, when he had more'n he could tote an' was about to go under, he give this gentleman an option on it. Well, so fur so good; but, gentlemen, what have we got to do with this trade? Nothin' as I kin see. But we are expected to yell an' holler an' deed 'em a free right of way through our property so they kin ship the timber straight through to the north an' turn it into cold Yankee coin. We don't count in this shuffle, gentlemen. We git our pay for our land in bein' glad an' heerin' car bells an' steam whistles in the middle o' the night when we want to sleep. The engynes will kill our hogs, cattle an' hosses an' now an' then break the neck o' some chap that wasn't hit in the war, but we mustn't forget to be glad an' bend the knee o' gratitude. Of course we all know the law kin compel us to give the right of way, but it provides for just and sufficient payment for the property used; an', gentlemen, I'm agin donations. I'm agin 'em tooth an' toe nail."

There was thunderous and ominous applause when Bartell sat down. Wilson sat flushed and embarrassed, twirling his gloves in his hands. He had expected anything but this personal fusillade. He stared at Miller in surprise over that gentleman's easy, half amused smile as he stood up.

"Gentlemen," he began, "and ladies," he added, with a bow to the right and left. "As many of you know, I pretend to practice law a little, and I want to say now that I'm glad Mr. Bartell ain't in the profession. A lawyer with his keen wit and eloquence could convict an innocent mother before a jury of her own children. [Laughter.] And that's the point, gentlemen. We are innocent of the charges against us. I am speaking now of my clients, the Bishops. They are deeply interested in the development of this section. The elder Bishop does hold his head high, and in this case he has held it high enough to smell coming prosperity in the air. He believed it would come, and that is why he bought timber lands extensively. As for the accused gentleman from the Hub of the universe, I must say that I have known him for several years and have never heard a word against his character. He is not a farmer, but a business man, and it would be unfair to judge him by any other standard. He is not only a business man, but a big one. He handles big things. This railroad is going to be a big thing for you and your children. Yes, Wilson is all right. He didn't fight in the late unpleasantness. He tells the women he was too young. Wilson is here to build a railroad for your good and prosperity, and he can't build one where there is nothing to haul out. If he buys up timber for his company, it is the only way to get them to back him in the enterprise. Now, gentlemen of the opposition, if there are any here today, don't let the thought of Wilson's possible profit rob you of this golden opportunity. I live at Darley, but, as many of you know, this is my father's native county, and I want to see it bloom in progress and blossom like the rose of prosperity. I want to see the vast mineral wealth buried in these mountains dug out for the benefit of mankind wherever God's sunlight falls."

Miller sat down amid much applause, a faint part of which came even from the ranks of Bartell's faction. After this a pause ensued in which no one seemed willing to speak. Colonel Barclay rose and came to Miller.

To be Continued.