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CHAPTER I. OAKLEY was alone in the bare general offices of the Huckleberry line, as the Buckhorn and Antioch railroad was commonly called by the public, which it betrayed in the matter of meals and connections. He was loitering lazily over his desk with a copy of the local paper before him and the stem of a disreputable cob pipe between his teeth. The business of the day was done, and the noise and hurry attending its doing had given way to a sudden hush. Other sounds than those that had filled the ear since morning grew out of the stillness. Big drops of rain driven by the wind splashed softly against the unpainted pine door which led into the yards or fell with a gay patter on the corrugated tin roof overhead. No. 7, due at 5:40, had just pulled out with twenty minutes to make up between Antioch and Harrison, the western terminus of the line. The 6 o'clock whistle had blown, and the men from the car shops, a dingy, one story building that joined the general offices on the east, were straggling of home. Across the tracks at the ugly little depot the ticket agent and telegraph operator had locked up and hurried away under one umbrella the moment No. 7 was clear of the platform. From the yards every one was gone but Milton McClintock, the master mechanic, and Dutch Pete, the yard boss. Protected by dripping yellow oilskins, they were busy repairing a wheezy switch engine that had been incidentally backed in to a siding and the caboose of a freight. Oakley was waiting the return of Clarence, the office boy, whom he had sent uptown to the postoffice. Having read the two columns of local and personal gossip arranged under the heading "People You Know," he swept his newspaper into the wastebasket and pushed back his chair. The window nearest his desk overlooked the yards and a long line of shabby day coaches and battered freight cars on one of the sidings. They were there to be rebuilt or repaired. This meant a new lease of life to the shops, which had never proved profitable.

Oakley had been with the Huckleberry two months. The first intimation the office force received that the new man whom they had been expecting for over a week had arrived in Antioch and was prepared to take hold was when he walked into the office and quietly introduced himself to Kerr and Holt. Former general managers had arrived by special after much preliminary wiring. The manner of their going had been less spectacular. They one and all failed, and General Cornish cut short the days of their pride and display. Naturally the office had been the least bit skeptical concerning Oakley and his capabilities, but within a week a change was patent to every one connected with the road. The trains began to regard their schedules, and the slackness and unbrift in the yards gave place to an ordered prosperity. Without any apparent effort he found work for the shops, a few extra men even were taken on, and there was no hint as yet of half time for the summer months. He was a broad shouldered, long limbed, energetic young fellow, with frank blue eyes that looked one squarely in the face. Men liked him because he was straightforward, alert and able, with an indefinite personal charm that lifted him out of the ordinary. These were the qualities Cornish had recognized when he put him in control of his interests at Antioch, and Oakley, who enjoyed hard work, had earned his salary several times over and was really doing wonders. He put down his pipe, which was smoked out, and glanced at the clock. "What's the matter with that boy?" he muttered.

The matter was that Clarence had continued to take a head vacation. After leaving the postoffice he skipped a vacant lot and returned behind his regular job, where he applied himself diligently to his work. When the cigarette was finished the office boy returned at the question of his return. "How so, worked good?" he asked that he looked by the clock with all the speed of his feet. As he saw the clock he turned and saw that the boss was back in the office. "The matter with that boy?" he muttered.

So because he knew he had never seen his father out since that time had been a red, bloody gutter by street light he had gone through a process of being gnawed down to a mere ghostly figure he had returned by his mother's side, making best to live that.

At this stage there is a very, distinguished fashion with wide eyes and large wide mouthed, but the impression made upon him by his father had been lasting and vivid. He still sees him as he was then, with the slinky pants, yellow hair, the muscular form, a sturdy, manly man of training, come home and muscle plucked upon a man's skin through the bars of his cell door while his mother wept softly behind her shade. "The boy had thought of his own man in a way."

He wondered who that Hart was, for the name seemed familiar. At last he recalled him. He was the lawyer who had defended his father. The way he looked that Hart even, even in his old days, had been the same. He had thought of his own man in a way.

long to me," he added, with a candor he intended should disarm criticism. "Only a little over half an hour, Clarence. I guess you may as well go home now." "Good night, Mr. Oakley," with happy alacrity. "Good night, Clarence." The door into the yards closed with a bang, and Clarence, gleefully skipping the mud puddles which lay in his path, hurried his small person off through the rain and mist. Oakley glanced at his letters. One he saw was from General Cornish. It proved to be a brief note, scribbled in pencil on the back of a telegram blank. The general would arrive in Antioch that night on the late train. He wished Oakley to meet him. The other letter was in an unfamiliar hand. Oakley opened it. Like the first, it was brief and to the point, but he did not at once grasp its meaning. This is what he read:

Dear Sir-I inclose two newspaper clippings which fully explain themselves. Your father is much interested in knowing your whereabouts. I have not furnished him with any definite information on this point, as I have not felt at liberty to do so. However, I was able to tell him I believed you were doing well. Should you desire to write him, I will gladly undertake to see that any communication you may send care of this office will reach him. Very sincerely yours, EZRA HART.

It was like a bolt from a clear sky. He drew a deep, quick breath. Then he took up the newspaper clippings. One was a florid column and a half account of a fire in the hospital ward of the Massachusetts state prison and dealt particularly with the heroism of Roger Oakley, a life prisoner, in leading a rescue. The other clipping, merely a paragraph, was of more recent date. It announced that Roger Oakley had been pardoned.

Oakley had scarcely thought of his father in years. The man and his concerns—his crime and his tragic atonement—had passed completely out of his life, but now he was free, if he chose, to enter it again. There was such suddenness in the thought that he turned sick on the moment; a great wave of self pity enveloped him, the recollection of his struggles and his shame—the bitter, helpless shame of a child—returned. He felt only resentment toward this man whose crime had blasted his youth, robbing him of every ordinary advantage, and clearly the end was not yet.

ed to. Since Hart knew, there must be others also who knew. He took up the newspaper clippings again. By an odd coincidence they had reached him on the very day the governor of Massachusetts had set apart for his father's release.

CHAPTER II. OAKLEY drew down the top of his desk and left the office. Before locking the door, on which some predecessor had caused the words, "Department of Transportation and Maintenance; No Admittance Except on Business," to be stenciled in black letters, he called to McClintock, who, with Dutch Pete, was still fussing over the wheezy switch engine.

"Will you want in the office for anything, Milt?" The master mechanic, who had been swearing at a rusted nut, got up from his knees and, dangling a big wrench in one hand, bawled back, "No, I guess not." After turning the key on the department of transportation and maintenance, Oakley crossed the tracks to the station and made briskly off uptown, with the wind and rain blowing in his face.

He lived at the American House, the best hotel the place could boast. In Antioch Oakley was something of a figure. He was the first manager of the road to make the town his permanent headquarters, and the town was grateful. It would have swamped him with kindly attention, but he had studiously ignored all advances, preferring not to make friends. In this he had not entirely succeeded. The richest man in the county, Dr. Emory, who was a good deal of a patrician, had taken a fancy to him and had insisted upon entertaining him at a formal dinner. It was the most impressive function Oakley had ever attended, and even to think of it still sent the cold chills coursing down his spine.

That morning he had chanced to meet Dr. Emory on the street, and the doctor, who could always be trusted to say exactly what he thought, had taken him to task for not calling. There was a reason why Oakley had not done so. The doctor's daughter had just returned from the east, and vague rumors were current concerning her beauty and elegance. Now, women were altogether beyond Oakley's ken. However, since some responsive courtesy was evidently expected of him, he determined to have it over with at once. Imbued with this idea, he went to his room after supper to dress. As he arrayed himself for the ordeal he sought to recall a past experience in line with the present. Barring the recent dinner, his most ambitious social experiment had been a brakeman's ball in Denver years before when he was conductor on a freight.

It was still raining, a discouragingly persistent drizzle, when Oakley left his hotel and turned from the public square into Main street. This Main street was never an imposing thoroughfare, and a week of steady down-pour made it from curb to curb a river of quaking mud. It was lit at long intervals by flickering gas lamps that glowed like corpulent fireflies in the misty darkness beneath the dripping maple boughs. As in the case of most western towns, Antioch had known dreams of greatness, dreams which had not been realized. It stood stock still in all its raw, ugly youth, with the rigid angularity its founders had imposed upon it when they lacked and hewed a spot for it in the pine woods, whose stunted second growth encircled it on every side.

The Emory home had once been a farmhouse of the better class. Vari-



Will you want in the office for anything, Milt?

ous additions and improvements gave it an air of solid and substantial comfort unusual in a community where the prevailing style of architecture was a square wooden box built close to the street and of a narrow lot.

The doctor himself answered Oakley's question as he stepped into the parlor after relieving him of his hat and umbrella. "My wife you know, Mr. Oakley. This is my daughter."

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