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**The Manager
Of the B. & A.**

By VAUGHAN KESTER

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(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER XXII.
ANTIOCH had grown indifferent
to forest fires. They were of
almost annual recurrence, and
the town had come to expect
them each fall. As the Hon. Jeb
Barrows remarked with cheerful optimism,
voicing a popular belief, if it was in-
tended Antioch should go that way it
would have gone long ago.

But this summer the drought had
been of longer duration than usual. The
woods were like tinder, and the inevi-
table wadding from some careless
hunter's gun or the scattered embers
from some campfire far up in the
northern part of the state had started
a conflagration that was licking up
miles of timber and moving steadily
south behind a vast curtain of smoke
that darkened half the state. It was
only when the burned out settlers from
the north began to straggle in that
Antioch awoke to a proper sense of its
danger.

It was then that Antioch sent out its
first call for help. It needed fire en-
gines and hose, and it needed them
badly, especially the hose, for the lit-
tle reservoir from which the town
drew its water supply was almost
empty.

Antioch forgot the murder of Ryder.
It forgot Roger Oakley, the strike and
all lesser affairs. A common danger
threatened its homes, perhaps the lives
of its citizens.

A score of angry men were stamping
up and down the long platform across
from the shops or pushing in and out
of the ugly little depot, which had
taken on years in apparent age and
decay in the two days during which
no trains had been running.

They were abusing Holt, the railroad
and every one connected with it. For
the thousandth time they demanded to
know where the promised relief train
was—if it had started from Buckhorn
Junction, and, if it hadn't started, the
reason of the delay.

The harried assistant treasurer an-
swered these questions as best he
could.
"Are you going to let the town burn
without making a move to save it?"
demanded an excited citizen.
"You don't think I am any more
anxious to see it go than you are?"
retorted Holt angrily.

"Then why don't your road do some-
thing to prevent it?"
"The road's doing all it can, gentle-
men."

"That's a whole lot, ain't it?"
"We are cut off," said Holt help-
lessly. "Everything is tied up tight."
"You can wire, can't you?"
"Yes, I can wire; I have wired."
"Well, where's the relief train, then?"
"It's at the Junction."
"It's going to do us a lot of good
there, ain't it?"
"They'll send it as soon as they can
get together a crew."

"Strut them up again, Holt. Tell 'em
we got to have that hose and those en-
gines or the town's gone. It's a matter
of life and death."

Holt turned back into the depot, and
the crowd dispersed.

In the ticket office he found McClin-
tock, who had just come in from up-
town. The master mechanic's face was
unusually grave.

"I have been investigating the water
supply with the city engineer. Things
are in awful shape. The mains are
about empty, and there isn't pressure
enough from the standpipe to throw a
thirty-five foot stream."

"I wish Oakley was here," muttered
Holt.

"So do I. Somehow he had a knack
at keeping things moving. I don't
mean but what you've done your level
best, Byron," he added kindly.

"They've laid down on me at the
Junction," said the younger man bit-
terly.

He stepped to the door, mopping his
face with his handkerchief, and stood
looking down the track in the direc-
tion of Buckhorn.

"They made it so Oakley couldn't
stay, and now they wonder why the
relief train is hung up. All Durks says
is that he can't get a crew. I tell you
if Oakley was here he'd have to get
one."

Holt nodded wearily.
"It looks as though we were to be
left to face this situation as best we
can, without help from the outside,"
said the doctor uneasily.

Holt turned to McClintock.
"Isn't there some method of back
firing?"

"It's too late to try that, and, with
this wind blowing, it would have been
too big a risk."
He glanced moodily across the town
to the north, where the black cloud
hung low in the sky. He added:
"I have told my wife to keep the
young ones in, no matter what hap-
pens, but, Lord, they will be about as
well off one place as another when it
comes to the pinch."

"I suppose so," agreed the doctor. "I
am at a loss to know what precautions
to take to insure the safety of Mrs.
Emory and my daughter."
It was only 4 o'clock, but it was al-
ready quite dark in the town, a strange
half light that twisted the accustomed
shape of things. The air was close,
stifling, and the wind, which blew in
heavy gusts, was like the breath from
a furnace. The somber twilight car-
ried with it a horrible sense of depres-
sion. Every sound in nature was still.
Silence reigned supreme. It was
the expectant hush of each living thing.

The three men stepped out on the
platform. Holt and the doctor were
still mopping their faces with their
limp handkerchiefs. McClintock was
fanning himself with his straw hat.

When they spoke they unconsciously
dropped their voices to a whisper.
"Those families in the north end
should move out of their homes," said
the doctor. "If they wait until the fire
gets here they will save nothing but
what they have on their backs."

"Yes, and the houses ought to come
down," added McClintock. "There's
where the fire will get its first grip on
the town, and then heaven help us!"
Night came, and so imminent seem-
ed the danger that Antioch was roused
to something like activity.

A crowd composed almost exclusi-
vely of men gathered early on the square
before the courthouse.

They had by common consent given
up all hope that the relief train would
be sent from Buckhorn Junction. The
light in the sky told them that they
were completely cut off from the out-
side world. The town and the woods
immediately adjacent formed an is-
land in the center of an unbroken sea
of fire. The ragged red line had crept
around to the east, west and south, but
the principal danger would be from
the north, where the wind drove the
flames forward with relentless fury.

To the south and east Billy's Fork
interposed as a barrier to the progress
of the fire, and on the west was a
wide area of cultivated fields.

At regular intervals waves of light
flooded the square as the freshening
gusts fanned the conflagration or
whirled across the town great patches
of black smoke. In the intervals of
light a number of dark figures could
be seen moving about on the roof of
the courthouse. Like the square below,
it was crowded with anxious watchers.

The crowd jostled to and fro on the
square, restless and excited and incapa-
ble of physical quiet. Then sudden-
ly a voice was raised and made itself
heard above the tramp of feet.

"Those houses in the north end must
come down!" this voice said.

There was silence and then a many-
toned murmur. Each man present
knew that the residents of the north
end had sworn that they would not
sacrifice their homes to the public
good. If their homes must go they
much preferred to have them burn, for
then the insurance companies would
have to bear the loss.

"Those houses must come down!" the
voice repeated.

It was Mr. Emory who had spoken.
"Who's going to pull 'em down?"
another voice asked. "They are ready
to fight for them."

"And we ought to be just as ready to
fight if it comes to that," answered the
master mechanic. "Yes, for the com-
mon good."

"Fall in!" he shouted, and at least a
hundred men fell in behind him,
marching two abreast. Here and there
as they moved along a man would for-
sake the line to disappear into his own
gate. When he rejoined his neighbors
he invariably carried an ax, pick or
crowbar.

From the square they turned into
Main street and from Main street into
the north road, and presently the head
of the procession halted before a clus-
ter of small frame houses resting in a
hollow to their right.

"These must come down first," said
McClintock. "Now, we want no noise,
men. We'll pass out their stuff quietly

as we can and take it back to the
square."

He swung open a gate as he spoke.
"Williams keeps a team. A couple of
you fellows run around to the barn
and hook up."

Just then the front door opened, and
Williams himself appeared on the
threshold. A dog barked, other doors
opened, lights gleamed in a score of
windows, and the north end threw off
its cloak of silence and darkness.

"Keep quiet and let me do the talk-
ing," said McClintock over his shoul-
der. Then to the figure in the door-
way:

"We have come to help you move,
John. I take it you will be wanting to



He presented the muzzle of a shotgun.
leave here shortly. We'll give you a
hand." And the master mechanic push-
ed through the gate and took a step
down the path.

"Hold on!" cried Williams, swinging
out an arm. "I got something to say
about that?"

There was a sound as of the click-
ing of a lock, and he presented the
muzzle of a shotgun.

"Oh, say," said McClintock gently,
"you had better not try to use that! It
will only make matters worse. Your
house has got to come down. We got
to save what we can of the town."

Williams made no answer to this, but
McClintock saw him draw the butt of
the gun up toward his shoulder.

The men at his back were perfectly
still. They filled the street and, breath-
ing hard, pressed heavily against the
picket fence, which bent beneath the
weight of their bodies.

"You'd better be reasonable. We
are losing precious time," urged Mc-
Clintock. "In an hour or two this place
will be on fire."

"I've got no kick coming if it burns,
but it shan't be pulled down."
"Put up your gun, and we'll give you
a lift at getting your stuff out."

"No, you won't."
McClintock kept his eyes on the
muzzle of the shotgun.

"It ain't the property loss we are
thinking of—it's the possible loss of
life," he said mildly.

"I'll chance it," retorted Williams
briefly.

"Well, we won't."
Williams made no reply. He merely
fingered the lock of his gun.

"Put down that gun, John!" com-
manded McClintock sternly.

At the same moment he reached
around and took an ax from the hands
of the nearest man.

"Put it down," he repeated as he
stepped quickly toward Williams.

The listening men pressed heavily
against the fence in their feverish anx-
iety to miss nothing that was said or
done. The posts snapped, and they
poured precipitously into the yard. At
the same moment the gun exploded,
and a charge of buckshot rattled harm-
lessly along the pavement at McClin-
tock's feet.

Then succeeded a sudden pause, deep,
breathless and intense, and then the
crowd gave a cry—a cry that was in
answer to a hoarse cheer that had
reached them from the square.

An instant later the trampled front
yard was deserted by all save Wil-
liams in the doorway. He still held the
smoking gun to his shoulder.

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