

THE HIGHGRADER

By Wm. MacLeod Raine

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CHAPTER XIII—Continued

She laughed. "I did think perhaps you knew where he was."

"Well, I don't—and I don't want to," he snapped. "The less I see of him the better I'll be satisfied."

The superintendent of the Verinder properties had found a note addressed to him in one of the sacks of quartz taken from Kilmeny. The message, genial to the point of impudence, had hoped he had enjoyed his little experience as a holdup. To Bleyer, always a serious-minded man, this levity had added insult to injury. Just now the very mention of the highgrader's name was a red rag to his temper. It was bad enough to be bested without being jeered at by the man who had set a trap for him.

It was well on toward evening before Colter paid his promised visit to Miss Dwight. She found him waiting for her upon her return from a ride with Captain Kilmeny, Verinder and Joyce.

Moya, as soon as she had dismounted, walked straight to him.

"What have you found out, Mr. Colter?"

"Not much. It rained during the night and wiped out the tracks of wagon wheels. Don't know now far Jack got or where he went, but the remains of the wagon are lying at the bottom of a gulch about two miles from the Jack Pot."

"How did it get there?"

"I wish you could tell me that. Couldn't have been a runaway or the mules would have gone over the edge of the road too." He stepped forward quickly as Verinder was about to pass into the hotel. "I want to have a talk with you."

The little man adjusted his monocle. "Ye-es. What about, my man?"

"About Jack Kilmeny. Where is he? What do you know? I'm going to find out if I have to tear it from your throat."

Verinder was no coward, but he was a product of our modern super-civilization. He glanced around hastily. The captain had followed Joyce into the lobby. Moya and he were alone on the piazza with this big savage who looked quite capable of carrying out his threat.

"Don't talk d—d nonsense," the mine owner retorted, flushing angrily.

Colter did not answer in words. The strong muscular fingers of his left hand closed on the right arm of Verinder just below the shoulder with a pressure excruciatingly painful. Dobyans found himself moving automatically toward the end of the porch. He had to clench his teeth to keep from crying out.

"Let me alone, you brute," he gasped.

Colter paid no attention until his victim was backed against the rail in a corner. Then he released the millionaire he was manhandling.

"You're going to tell me everything you know. Get that into your head."



"Not Much. It Rained During the Night and Wiped Out the Tracks of Wagon Wheels."

Or, by G—d, I'll wring your neck for you."

The Englishman had never before been confronted with such a situation. He was a citizen of a country where wealth hedges a man from such assaults. The color ebbed from his face, then came back with a rush.

"Go to the devil, you big bully," he flung out sharply.

Moya, taken by surprise at Colter's abrupt desertion of her, had watched with amazement the subsequent flare-up. Now she crossed the porch toward them.

"What are you doing, Mr. Colter?"

"None of your funeral, ma'am," the miner answered bluntly, not for a moment lifting his hard eyes from Verinder. "Better unload what you know. I've had a talk with Quini Saladay. I know all he knows, that Bleyer and you and him with two other lads held up Jack and took his ore away. The three of them left you and Bleyer

guarding Jack. What did you do with him?"

"It's a bally lie. I didn't stay with Bleyer to guard him."

"That's right, you didn't. You came back with the others. But you know what Bleyer did. Out with it."

"I don't admit a word of what you say," said Verinder doggedly.

Colter had trapped him into a half admission, but he did not intend to say any more.

Moya spoke a little timidly.

"Wait a minute, please, Mr. Colter. Let me talk with Mr. Verinder alone. I think he'll tell me what you want to know."

Jack's friend looked at her with sharp suspicion. Was she trying to make a dupe of him? Her candid glance denied it.

"All right. Talk to him all you like, but you'll do your talking here," he agreed curtly before he turned on his heel and walked away a few steps.

"You must tell him what he wants to know, Mr. Verinder," urged the young woman in a low voice. "Something has happened to his friend. We must help clear it up."

"I'm not responsible for what has happened to his friend. What do you want me to do? Peach on Bleyer, is that it?"

"No. Send for him and tell Mr. Colter the truth."

"I'll see him hanged and quartered first," he replied angrily.

"If you don't, I'll tell what I know. There's a life at stake," Moya cried, a trace of agitation in her voice.

"Fiddlesticks!" he shrugged. "The fellow's full of tricks. He worked one on us the other night. I'm hanged if I let him play me again."

"You must. I'll tell Captain Kilmeny and Lord Farquhar. I'll not let it rest this way. The matter is serious."

"I'm not going to be bullied into saying a word. That's the long and short of it," he repeated in disgust. "Let Bleyer tell the fellow if he wants to. I'll have nothing to do with it. We're not responsible for what has happened—if anything has."

"Then I'll go and get Mr. Bleyer."

"Just as you please. I'd see this ruffian at Halifax first, if you ask me." The angry color flushed his face again as he thought of the insult to which he had been subjected.

To Colter Moya explained her purpose. He nodded agreement without words.

After two or three attempts she got the superintendent on the telephone at the Mollie Gibson mine and arranged with him that he was to come to the hotel at once. A few minutes later he drove up in his car.

Moya put the case to him.

Bleyer turned to his employer. "You want me to tell Colter what I know?"

"I don't care a turn of my hand whether you tell the fellow or not," drawled Verinder, ignoring the presence of Colter.

The superintendent peered at Moya in his near-sighted fashion over the glasses on his nose. "Can't see that it matters much, Miss Dwight. I'm not worrying a bit about Jack Kilmeny, but, if Colter and you are, I'm willing to tell what I know on condition that you keep the facts to yourselves."

"I'll keep quiet if you haven't injured Jack in any way," Colter amended.

"We haven't. He was sound as a new dollar when I left him Tuesday night. Want to hear the particulars?"

"That's what I'm here for," snapped Colter.

Bleyer told the whole story so far as he knew it.

CHAPTER XIV

Spirit Rapping

Farquhar and Captain Kilmeny left next day for another short hunting trip. The captain had offered to give it up, but Moya had urged upon him that it would not be fair to disappoint his companion. He had gone reluctantly, because he saw that his fiancée was worried. His own opinion was that his cousin Jack had disappeared for reasons of his own.

Colter did not relax in his search. But as the days passed hope almost died within him. Jack had plenty of enemies, as an aggressive fighter in a new country always must have. His friend's fear was that some of them had decoyed Kilmeny to his death. The suspicions of the miner centered upon Peale and Trefoy, both because Jack had so recently had trouble with them and because they knew beforehand of his intention to remove the ore. But he could find no evidence upon which to base his feeling, though he and "Curly, in company with a deputy sheriff, had put the Cornishmen through a grilling examination.

It had been understood that the young women should take a trip through the Never Quit before they left Goldbanks, but for one reason or another this had been postponed until after the captain and Farquhar had started on their final hunting expedition. The second afternoon after their departure was the one decided upon for the little adventure.

Verinder, with the extravagance that went hand in hand with an occasional astonishing parsimony, had ordered oilskin suits and waterproof boots made especially for his guests. A room was reserved for the young ladies at the mine, equipped for this one occasion to serve as a boudoir where they might dress in comfort.

The mine owner's guests donned, with a good deal of hilarious merriment, the short skirts, the boots and the rubber helmets. The costumes could not have been called becoming, but they were eminently suited for the wet, damp tunnels of the Never Quit.

After they had entered the cage it was a little terrifying to be shot so rapidly down into the blackness of the mine.

"Don't be afraid. It's quite safe," Bleyer told them cheerfully.

At the tenth level the elevator stopped and they emerged into an open space.

"We're going to follow this drift," explained the superintendent.

They seated themselves in ore cars and were wheeled into a cavern lighted at intervals by electric bulbs. Presently the cars slowed down and the occupants descended.

"This way," ordered Bleyer.

They followed in single file into a hot, damp tunnel, which dripped moisture in big drops from the roof upon a rough, uneven floor of stone and dirt where pools of water had occasionally gathered. The darkness increased as they moved forward, driven back by the candles of the men for a space scarce farther than they could reach with outstretched hands.

Moya, bringing up the rear, could hear Bleyer explain the workings to those at his heel. He talked of stopes, drifts, tunnels, wage scales, shifts, high-grade ore and other subjects that were as Greek to Joyce and India. The atmosphere was oppressively close and warm, and the oilskins that Moya wore seemed to weigh heavily upon her. She became aware with some annoyance at herself that a faintness was stealing over her brain and a mistiness over her eyes. To steady herself she stopped, catching at the rough wall for support. The others, unaware that she was not following, moved on. With a half articulate little cry she sank to the ground.

When she came to herself the lights had disappeared. She was alone in the most profound darkness she had ever known. It seemed to press upon her so ponderably as almost to be tangible. The girl was frightened. Her imagination began to conjure all sorts of dangers. Of cave-ins and explosions she had heard and read a good deal. Anything was possible in this thousand-foot-deep grave. In a frightened, ineffective little voice she cried out to her friends.

Instantly there came an answer—a faint tapping on the wall almost at her ear. She listened breathlessly, and caught again that faint tap—tap—tap—tap—tap.

Instinctively her hand went out, groping along the wall until it fell upon a pipe. Even as she touched this the sound came again, and along with it the faintest of vibrations. She knew that somebody at a distance was hitting the pipe with a piece of quartz or metal.

Stooping, she found a bit of broken rock. Three times she tapped the pipe. An answer came at once.

Tap—tap—tap—tap—tap—tap! She tried two knocks. Again the response of seven taps sounded. Four blows brought still seven. Why always seven? She did not know, but she was greatly comforted to know that her friends were in communication with her. After all, she was not alone.

A light glimmered at the end of the tunnel and moved slowly toward her. Bleyer's voice called her name. Presently the whole party was about her with sympathetic questions and explanations.

She made light of her fainting attack, but Verinder insisted on getting her back to the upper air in spite of her protests. He had discovered that Joyce was quite ready to return to the sunlight, now that her curiosity was satisfied. A very little of anything that was unpleasant went a long way with Miss Seldon, and there was something about this underground tomb that reminded her strongly of an immense grave.

At dinner Verinder referred to the attack of vertigo. "Feel quite fit again, Miss Dwight?"

"Quite, thank you," Moya was a little irritated at the reference, because she was ashamed of having given way to physical weakness. "It was nothing. I was a goose. That's all."

Bleyer, a guest for the evening, defended the young woman from her own scorn. "It often takes people that way the first time, what with the heat and the closeness. I once knew a champion puglist to keel over while he was going through a mine."

"Were you afraid when you found yourself alone?" Joyce asked.

"I was until you tapped."

India looked puzzled. "Tapped. What do you mean?"

"On the pipe."

"What else?"

"The one that ran through the tunnel."

Miss Kilmeny shook her head. "I didn't see anybody tap. Perhaps one of us touched it by chance."

"No. That couldn't be. The tap came seven times together, and after I had answered it seven times more."

"Seven times?" asked Bleyer quickly.

"Yes—seven. But, if you didn't tap, who did?"

"Sure it wasn't imagination?" Verinder suggested.

"Imagination! I tell you it was repeated again and again," Moya said impatiently.

"Spirit rapping," surmised Joyce lightly. "It doesn't matter, anyhow, since it served its work of comforting Moya."

"It might have been some of the workmen," Lady Farquhar guessed.

"Must have been," agreed Bleyer. "And yet—we're not working that end of the mine now. The men had no business there. Odd that it was seven taps. That is call for help. It means danger."

A bell of warning began to toll in Moya's heart. It rang as yet no clear message to her brain, but the premonition of something sinister and deadly sent a sinking sensation through her.

Verinder sat up with renewed interest. "I say, you know—spirit rapping. Weren't you telling me, Bleyer, that



"No. I know now who called for help. It was Jack Kilmeny."

there was a big accident there some years ago? Perhaps the ghosts of some of the lost miners were sending a message to their wives. Eh, what?"

"The accident was in the Golden Nugget, an adjoining mine. The property was pretty well worked out and has never been opened since the disaster."

The color had ebbed from Moya's lips. She was a sane young woman not given to nerves. But she had worried a great deal over the disappearance of Jack Kilmeny. This, coming on top of it, shook her composure. For she was fighting with the dread that the spirit of the man she loved had been trying to talk with her.

Joyce chattered gaily. "How weird! Moya, you must write an account of your experience for the Society for Psychological Research. Put me in it, please."

"Of course, it must have been some of the men, but I don't see—"

Moya interrupted the superintendent sharply. An intuition, like a flash of light, had illuminated her brain. "Where does that pipe run, Mr. Bleyer?"

"Don't know. Maps of the workings at the office would show."

"Will you please find out?"

"Glad to look it up for you, Miss Dwight. I'm a little curious myself."

"I mean now—at once."

He glanced at her in quick surprise. Was she asking him to leave the dinner table to do it? Lady Farquhar saw how colorless Moya was and came to the rescue.

"My dear, you are a little unstrung, aren't you?" she said gently. "I think we might find something more cheerful to talk about. We always have the weather."

Moya rose, trembling. "No. I know now who called for help. It was Jack Kilmeny."

Verinder was the first to break the strained silence. "But that's nonsense, you know."

"It's the truth. He was calling for help."

"Where from? What would he be doing down in a mine?"

"I don't know. . . . Yes, I do, too."

Moya corrected herself, voice breaking under the stress of her emotion. "He has been put down there to die."

"To die?" Joyce echoed the words in a frightened whisper.

Dobyans laughed. "This is absurd. Who under heaven would put him there?"

A second flash of light burned in upon the girl. "That man, Peale—and the other ruffian. They knew about the shipment just as you did. They

waylaid him . . . and buried him in some old mine." Moya faced them tensely, a slim wreath of a girl with dark eyes that blazed. She had forgotten all about conventions, all about what they would think of her. The one thing she saw was Jack Kilmeny in peril, calling for help.

But Lady Farquhar remembered what Moya did not. It was her duty to defend her charge against the errant impulses of the heart, to screen them from the callous eyes of an unsympathetic world.

"You jump to conclusions, my dear. Sit down and we'll talk it over."

"No. He called for help. I'm going to take it to him."

Again Verinder laughed unpleasantly. Moya did not at this moment know the man was in existence. One sure purpose flooded her whole being. She was going to save her lover.

India wavered. She, too, had lost color. "But—you're only guessing, dear."

"You'll find it's true. We must follow that pipe and rescue him. Tonight."

"Didn't know you were subject to nerve attacks, Miss Dwight," derided Verinder uneasily.

Moya put her hands in front of her eyes as if to shut out the picture of what she saw. "He's been there for five days . . . starving, maybe." She shuddered.

"You're only guessing, Miss Dwight. What facts have you to back it?" Bleyer asked.

"We must start at once—this very hour." Moya had recovered herself and spoke with quiet decision. "But first we must find where the pipe leads."

Bleyer answered the appeal in Lady Farquhar's eyes by rising. He believed it to be a piece of hysterical folly, just as she did. But some instinct of chivalry in him responded to the call made upon him. He was going, not to save Kilmeny from an imaginary death, but to protect the girl that loved him from showing all the world where her heart was.

"I'll be back inside of an hour—just as soon as I can trace that pipe for you, Miss Dwight," he said.

"After all, Moya may be right," India added, to back her friend.

"It's just possible," Bleyer conceded.

CHAPTER XV

The Acid Test

Jacy Kilmeny opened his eyes to find himself in darkness utter and complete except for a pinpoint of light gleaming from far above. His head was whirling and throbbing painfully. Something warm and moist dropped into his eyes, and when he put his hand up to investigate the cause he knew it must be blood from a wound.

Faintly the sound of voices and of harsh laughter drifted down to him. Presently this died away. The stillness was almost uncanny.

"Something laid me out, I reckon. Must have been a bad whack." His finger found a ridge above the temple which had been plowed through the thick curly hair. "Looks as though a glancing bullet hit me. Golden luck it didn't finish the job."

He moved. A sharp pain shot through his lower right leg. Trying to rise, he slipped down at once from a badly sprained ankle. Every muscle in his body ached, as if he had been jarred by a hard fall.

"Better have a look around first," he told himself.

Groping in his pocket, he found a match case and struck a light. What he saw made him shudder. From the ledge upon which he lay fell away a gulf, the bottom of which could only be guessed. His eyes, becoming accustomed to the darkness, made out that he was in some sort of shaft, thirty feet or more below the surface. Rotten from age, the timberings had slipped and become jammed. Upon some of these he was resting. The sprained ankle, by preventing him from moving, had saved him from plunging down the well.

He held out a silver dollar and dropped it. From the time the coin took to strike Jack judged he was a hundred feet from the bottom.

The flare of a second match showed him a wall ladder leading down, but unfortunately it did not extend above him except in rotting fragments. What had happened he could guess. Supposing him to be dead, his enemies had dropped the body down this deserted shaft. Not for a moment did he doubt who they were. The voices had been unmistakably Cornish, and even without that evidence he would have guessed Peale and his partner as the guilty ones.

Since he could not go up he went down, moving warily so as not to jar loose the timbers upon which he lay. Every rung of the ladder he tested with great care before he put his weight upon it. Each step of the journey down sent a throb of pain from the ricked ankle, even though he rested his weight on his hands while he lowered himself. From the last rung—it was by actual count the one hundred forty-third—he stepped to the ground.

Another match showed him a drift running from the foot of the shaft. Along this he dragged himself slowly, uncertain of direction but determined to find out what possibility of escape his prison offered. For two hundred yards the tunnel led forward and brought him up sharply at an impasse. A cave-in blocked further advance.

"Check," Jack told himself aloud grimly.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Inconsiderate

The meanest man in the world is the warden who puts a tack in the electric chair.—Hiscox.

WRIGLEYS

After Every Meal

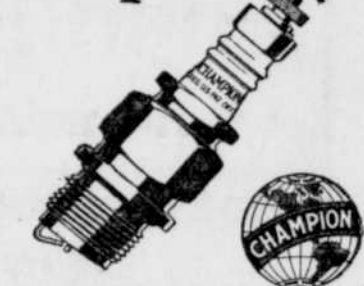
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