

The Bradys Beyond Their Depth; Or, The Great Swamp Mystery

Francis Worcester Doughty



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CHAPTER I.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

"Help! Police! Murder!"

It was a dark, rainy night in March when this thrilling cry, in a man's voice, came from a house in West Thirty-sixth street, New York.

Two detectives were passing along from Seventh avenue, toward Broadway, when the wild appeal brought them to a sudden pause.

"Hark, Old King Brady!" one of them exclaimed. "Did you hear that cry?"

"Somebody in distress, Harry," replied the tall, gaunt old man, as he shot a keen glance around. "This is a dangerous neighborhood."

The stylishly-dressed youth of twenty nodded, felt to see if he had a revolver in his pocket, and pointed at an undertaker's wagon standing in front of one of a row of houses opposite.

"Queer hour for that fellow to be doing business!" he remarked. "There isn't a light in any of that row of houses, yet the undertaker must be in one of them."

"Help! Help!" came the mysterious voice in smothered tones once more.

This time the Secret Service men located the sound.

It came from the house before which the wagon stood.

"By Jove, the undertaker must be making a job for himself!" exclaimed Old

King Brady, pushing his big white hat back, and exposing a strong-featured, smooth-shaven face, in the light of a street lamp.

He unbuttoned the old blue frock-coat he wore, disclosing a standing collar and stock, drew out his watch and fob, and added:

"It's just eight o'clock."

"Shall we go over and investigate those cries?" asked Harry Brady, the youth.

"No, not yet. Get in this area. I see the house door opening."

They glided swiftly into the area of a flat house, and keenly watched proceedings.

Old and Young King Brady, as the pair were called, were the two most celebrated detectives in the Secret Service. They were not related.

On the contrary, they came of different families. But, since the time James Brady took an interest in Harry, and taught him his profession, they had been partners, and made themselves dreaded by all evil doers.

Both were shrewd, brave and daring to a fault, and Harry's ambition made him strive to excel his tutor in every way.

The boy was first to catch view of a man in the open doorway opposite, and he dimly observed that he was tall, thin, dressed in black, wore a high hat, and had a mustache and a pair of bushy side-whiskers.

"Looks like an undertaker," Young King Brady commented in a whisper.

"He's carrying something," added the old detective. "Ah—it's a coffin, ain't it?"

"A wooden box shaped like one. There's another man on —— the other end of it," said Harry, whose interest was aroused. "They're coming out."

The second man was a short, roughly-clad negro.

As they staggered under the weight of the box, the detectives inferred that it was heavy. The Bradys could now see a rope tied around it.

The two men carried it down to the wagon, the back doors of which stood open.

Just as they shoved the box into the vehicle, Old King Brady darted across the street, and tapped the tall, thin man on the arm.

He gave a start, a cry of alarm, and wheeled around, glaring at the officer.

"What have you got in that box?" demanded the detective, abruptly.

"My dear sir, really, that is none of your business," replied the other.

"You are mistaken," said Old King Brady, exhibiting his badge. "I am an officer. We heard cries of murder emanate from that building, and this is a singular hour for an undertaker to be removing a corpse."

The tall, thin man nodded, and smiled blandly.

Taking something from his pocket, he handed it to the officer.

"My card, sir," he said, politely. "Name of Solomon Gloom. This is a case of smallpox. House has been quarantined. Here's my Health Board permit to remove the corpse. The rule is to take 'em at night."

He handed over a permit, but it was too dark for Old King Brady to read it.

"Well," said the officer, hesitatingly, "that part may be all right. Who is dead?"

"Albert Reid, the old cotton broker, sir. Got him in a metallic casket in this box. Going to take him to the crematory at Fresh Pond."

"Did he live here?"

"Yes, sir. You can get the particulars inside, if you like."

"How do you account for those yells for help?"

"Came from old Reid's crazy son. He didn't want us to cart away the body. Had a regular fight with him to drive him away. He yelled and fought like a tiger. Really, I thought he'd arouse the whole neighborhood. Had to lock him in a closet."

"Who's in the house with him?"

"No one. We are coming back later, to release him."

"Just wait here. I'll go in and question him."

"Certainly, my dear sir, certainly. Sim, wait in the wagon for me a moment and I'll go up and show the gentleman in. But really, sir, you're running a great risk. It's a contagious disease, and——"

"Oh, I'll chance it," quietly said Old King Brady, as he took a chew of tobacco, and eyed Harry, who was still lurking in the area, opposite.

"As you please, sir. Come ahead," said Mr. Gloom, and as they went up the steps into the big front yard, the man called Sim swung himself up on the driver's seat, and took the whip and reins in his hands.

Beside the undertaker, Old King Brady mounted the front stoop.

Mr. Gloom seized the knob, pushed open the door and said, affably:

"Go right in, sir. The hall is dark, but——"

"Oh, I ain't afraid of that," said the old detective. "I've got matches."

He stepped into the gloomy vestibule ahead of the undertaker, when Mr. Gloom suddenly struck him in the back with both hands.

The old detective was knocked forward, plunged into the hall and fell upon his hands and knees.

Quick as a flash the undertaker darted back, slammed the door shut, fastened it with a key already in the lock and rushed down the steps.

"Go like fury!" he cried, as he sprang upon the wagon.

But Harry had seen him lock Old King Brady in the house, and was at that moment rushing across the street toward them, crying:

"Stop, you scoundrels, or I'll shoot you!"

He had his pistol in his hand.

The undertaker saw him and whipped a revolver out of his hip-pocket.

"Perdition! There's another of them!" he hissed in tones of alarm.

The next moment he aimed his weapon at Young King Brady and fired.

Bang!

The shot echoed loudly through the silent street.

Up went Harry's hands, and he fell prostrate, with blood streaming from a wound on the side of his head.

The driver lashed the horse furiously.

With a snort, the galled beast sprang forward and raced madly along the street toward Broadway, from whence a policeman was running.

"Hello!" yelled the patrolman. "Who fired that shot?"

"Man lying wounded up the street!" shouted the undertaker.

Away dashed the policeman to investigate and the wagon kept on to Sixth avenue, swung around the corner and dashed downtown, under the elevated road.

In the meantime, Old King Brady had risen to his feet.

Realizing that he had been victimized by Mr. Gloom, he tried to open the door.

Finding that it resisted all his efforts, he lit a match, and going hastily into the house, he was astonished to find it empty and untenanted.

In the middle of the parlor floor lay a curious-looking dagger, which looked as if it had been buried in a human body, and the bare boards were stained with the same life fluid.

"There's been a murder committed here," flashed through the detective's mind, as he picked up the knife and put it in his pocket, "and those men have carried away

their victim's body in that box!"

He rushed to one of the parlor windows and flung it open, just in time to see Harry get shot. The sight made Old King Brady frantic with fury.

"They've killed the boy and escaped!" he roared.

Then he sprang out the window and landed on his feet in the yard.

It only took him a moment to reach his pupil's side, and lifting the limp form in his arms, carried him to the sidewalk, under the lamp-post.

Here he examined Harry's wound very carefully.

It was only scalp deep, and the rain beating down on his face revived him.

Before the policeman reached the boy, he had regained his senses, and found Old King Brady wiping his face and sticking court-plaster over the cut.

Most of the neighbors had their heads out their windows to see what caused the pistol shot, and the policeman came up panting.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, recognizing the detectives. "It's the Bradys."

"Yes. We had a fuss with the driver of an undertaker's wagon," the old detective explained. "Harry got shot, but it's only a flesh wound."

"I see. How are you feeling now, Young King Brady?"

"A little sore, but otherwise all right," replied the boy, pluckily suppressing a faint feeling, and getting upon his feet. "Where are they?"

"I saw that wagon swing into Broadway and dash downtown," said the policeman.

"Are you able to pursue it, Harry?" asked Old King Brady, in restless tones.

"I think so," the boy replied. "Ride, if you can. It's a suspicious case, Old King Brady. They wouldn't attempt murder to prevent us from prying into this affair, unless they had a powerful reason for it. The policeman had better search that

house while we are gone."

"Come on then, my boy. I've got evidence that a dark crime was just committed in that empty house. We'd better verify my suspicions."

And they hastened over to Broadway, boarded a car and were rapidly carried to Fourteenth street, where they alighted to make inquiries.

CHAPTER II.

THE BODY IN THE BOX.

A cabman was standing beside his horse at Union Square, and the old detective approached him and asked, hastily:

"Did you see an undertaker's wagon just go by here?"

"Oi did, sor, tin minutes ago," promptly replied the driver.

"In which direction did it go?"

"Turned inter Broadway, an' wint downtown."

"Drive us after it as fast as you can."

"Yis, sor. Get in."

They entered the cab and were driven to Courtlandt street, as different people they spoke to said they had seen the undertaker's wagon as far as that point.

A policeman was seen on the corner, and Harry accosted him with:

"Hello, Bob!"

"Why—Harry—how are you? What are you chasing?"

"After an undertaker's wagon."

"One just left a box in the baggage room at the Pennsylvania depot."

"Look like a coffin?"

"Yes," replied the policeman. "I just came from there. Two men had it. I'll describe them."

And he gave a good description of Sim and Solomon Gloom.

"Thanks. That's the gang we're after," said Harry, when he finished.

And away went the Bradys to the Pennsylvania depot at the foot of Courtlandt street.

It was a suspicion of the Bradys that the mysterious box would be shipped out of the city by rail, that led them to see if the wagon had gone to the depot.

They did not find the box in the baggage room.

But they learned that a man answering Solomon Gloom's description had checked it through to Savannah, Georgia, and it had been sent over the river and was put in the baggage car.

"How soon does that train leave?" asked Harry, quickly.

"The connecting boat goes in three minutes, sir," replied the porter, glancing at his watch.

"Old King Brady, we must go out on that train," said the boy, quickly. "It's our only chance to find out what's in that box."

"Run for the ticket office, then," said the veteran, promptly. "Mr. Gloom is evidently going out on the train with it. If there's any crooked work going on here we may be able to arrest him."

They rushed to the office, procured tickets, and just had time to jump aboard the boat as it pulled out of the slip.

Reaching the Jersey side, they boarded the train.

Seeing nothing of Mr. Gloom in that car, they sat down to map out a course of action, as everything had hitherto been done on the spur of the moment.

Just then the train started.

"This is a most singular case, Harry," the old detective exclaimed. "We may be on a wild-goose chase, or we may be on the eve of exposing a revolting crime. Everything up to the present moment leads me to believe in the latter idea. We can only verify our suspicion by opening that big box and looking at the contents. This I intend to do."

"Our safest course will be to capture Solomon Gloom first, and then confront him with the contents of the box," replied Harry. "If we find a corpse there, we may learn whose it is and why the man was killed."

"Very true," assented Old King Brady, with a nod, as he pushed his white hair back from his massive brow. "And if we don't find a corpse in the box we'll have the satisfaction of arresting Gloom for shooting you."

"The man lied outrageously to you, in order to fool you," said Harry. "So there isn't much reliance to be placed on anything he said, till we prove it."

"Let's see his business card," said the old detective, "now that I've got a light."

He drew the pasteboard from his pocket and glanced at it.

To his surprise he found that it really was the business card of one Solomon Gloom, undertaker, of Seventh avenue.

"This seems to be all right," he remarked.

"How about the permit from the Health Department?"

Old King Brady drew the paper from his pocket and glanced at it keenly.

Once more he was surprised to discover that it was a genuine printed form stating that Mr. Gloom was permitted to remove the corpse of Albert Reid from the Thirty-sixth street house to the Fresh Pond Crematory. The permit added that the broker had died of small-pox.

"We can't say he lied about this, either," commented the old detective.

"But how about the gory dagger you said you found in the empty house?"

"Here it is. And it's a very unique weapon."

Old King Brady held up the knife.

It had a double-edged blade, eight inches long, as thin as paper, and was embossed with the initials P. V., in frosted letters.

"What an ugly-looking weapon!" Harry commented, with a shudder.

"It's an oddity," replied the old detective. "But it isn't a certainty that these are the initials of the person who last used it."

"You'd better keep those three things," advised Harry, thoughtfully. "They may come in handy if this case amounts to anything."

"If they serve us no better purpose, we can show them to our chief when we get back to New York, so he will have evidence of what we are doing," said Old King Brady, with a faint smile.

"He expected a report from us to-night, on the case he put us on, but he won't get it," said Harry, grimly.

The boy referred to some work they had been doing before they stumbled upon the Thirty-sixth street affair.

Information had reached the Central Office that Oliver Dalton, a Broad street broker, suspected his nephew, Ronald Mason, of robbing his mail.

The detectives had gone to the broker's house in West Thirty-eighth street to get the particulars privately. But the man's daughter, Lizzie, told them her father had not yet come home. They waited for him till nearly eight o'clock, and as Mr. Dalton did not appear, they were going back to headquarters when they stumbled upon the suspicious case already recorded here.

Old King Brady smiled at Harry's remark.

"There's no great hurry about that case," he remarked.

"Well," said the boy, "are you ready to go through the cars on a hunt for Solomon Gloom? We must make sure of our man before he has a chance to

alight at a way station and elude us."

Old King Brady bent nearer to Harry, to reply, when suddenly a cloth was thrown over their heads by a man who sat behind them.

The cloth was saturated with chloroform.

While the detectives were struggling to extricate their heads, they inhaled the deadly fumes and were overcome by the drug.

Not until they were fast asleep did the man remove the cloth.

No one had seen the deed, as they occupied the last seats in the aisle and not an undue noise had arisen to attract attention.

Seeing the detectives stupid from the drug, a low chuckle escaped the man, and he rose to his feet and muttered:

"Sleep, you dogs! Tracked me, eh? Well, it won't do you any good. You'll be snoring long after we reach Georgia. And when you do arouse yourselves, you'll find the box gone from this train. This must be a mighty good disguise, if you failed to recognize Solomon Gloom in it—really, a very clever disguise."

And he chuckled again, glanced at the gray suit and bicycle cap he wore, felt of the false beard covering his face and walked into one of the forward cars where he had a chance to remain until the opportunity came for him to alight at his destination.

The lightning express train went thundering along over the rails and the Bradys slept on until mid-day.

When they aroused themselves, the cars had left Charleston.

Their fury knew no bounds, and Old King Brady said, bitterly:

"It must have been Gloom who did that."

"If it were, he was cleverly disguised and must have been the fellow who sat behind us apparently reading a newspaper," replied Harry.

"Perhaps he's on the train yet."

"If he is, we'll find him."

"All I want is to get my hands on the rascal!"

"Are you ready to search for him?"

"Come ahead," replied Old King Brady, rising to his feet.

They passed slowly through the car, carefully studying each passenger.

There were two more passenger coaches, a smoking car and a baggage car ahead, and the detectives searched them thoroughly for the undertaker.

But to their disgust he was not found.

They paused on the platform of the baggage car and Harry exclaimed:

"He must have checked the box through on a ticket he bought for Savannah, and then hid somewhere on this train."

"Which shows what a foxy gentleman we have to contend with," muttered Old King Brady, grimly. "He feared pursuit."

"No doubt of it."

"Here comes the conductor. We can explain matters to him and open the box."

They had no trouble to persuade the conductor of the importance of seeing what the box contained, and they all had a talk with the baggage master.

He held them off until nightfall.

As the Bradys promised to have him absolved from blame, he finally gave his permission to them to open the box.

Harry cut the rope that bound it and Old King Brady pried off the lid with an axe taken from one of the racks.

The conductor held a lantern over the box.

As the lid fell off, they were startled to see the body of a man lying in the box.

His face was partly averted, as he lay upon his side.

But the detectives saw that he was a man of about fifty, his portly form clad in a dark suit of clothes. His head was partly bald on top and his hair was gray. There was a closely-trimmed mustache of the same color on his upper lip, and his flesh, although pallid, had not yet changed to the waxen hue of death.

It was evident that he was a victim of foul play, for his hands were bound behind his back, and his ankles tied together, while a gag was secured over his mouth as if to stifle his outcries.

The detectives had no chance to observe any more, just then, for there suddenly sounded a quick danger signal of the locomotive's whistle.

The engineer shut off steam, put on the brakes, and the startled conductor rushed from the car with the lantern, leaving the place in gloom.

"What can be the matter?" muttered Old King Brady.

"There's a fire on the track ahead!" said Harry, peering out the side door.

"Where are we?" queried the baggage master, hastily.

"Next to a big swamp," replied Harry. "And, by Jove—see—see! There's an obstruction—a heap of sleepers piled across the rails beyond the bonfire."

"What the deuce can that mean?" muttered Old King Brady. "Bandits trying to rob this train? It don't seem possible, in this neighborhood."

The train paused and they all alighted.

Some of the brakemen ran ahead, and under the conductor's direction they removed the obstructions from the rails.

The fire seemed to have been built where it was to show the engineer the pile of sleepers, and the brakemen scattered it, when the barrier was removed.

As the bell rang, every one got aboard and the cars slowly went ahead.

The Bradys and the baggage master returned to the latter's car.

"We'll finish our examination of that body," said Old King Brady.

"Yes," said Harry, "and——Good gracious! Where's the box gone?"

Box and body had vanished.

Every one was astounded.

Then, like a flash, the truth suddenly dawned upon Harry's mind, and he cried:

"Now I see through it. Those obstructions were put on the rails to stop the train at this point so that the body could be removed from this car."

"By whom?" demanded the startled baggage master.

"Accessories of the villain who killed that man!" cried the boy. "They've carried the body off in the swamp to hide the evidence of their crime. Come, Old King Brady, alight here and see if we can trace it."

The detectives made a rush for the door and leaped from the train.

They landed beside the roadbed, and the cars went on without them.

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT SWAMP MYSTERY.

Heavy banks of dark clouds were flying across the lowering sky. Occasionally the big silvery moon burst from the rifts and flooded the landscape with its mellow light.

During one of these intervals the two detectives gazed around.

The train had disappeared in the distance.

Not far away from where the Bradys stood they saw the big box lying beside the track, turned over on its side.

They ran back and hastily examined it.

"Empty!" ejaculated Harry, in some surprise.

"What has become of the man it contained?" asked Old King Brady.

"Search. He may have fallen out."

They carefully examined the ground within a wide radius.

But they found nothing of the missing body.

"Mysterious, what became of him!" Old King Brady exclaimed.

Harry was completely at his wits' end.

"I'm afraid we are beyond our depth, Old King Brady," he remarked. "This

mystery keeps growing all the time, and we can't seem to fathom it."

Just then the moon appeared again.

It showed them a river on one side and a broad expanse of gloomy swamp land on the other.

Night insects were chirping amid the weeds, and frogs were croaking dismally among the waving reeds and rushes.

Off in the centre of the swamp were some tangled trees and bushes, heaps of rocks overgrown with moss and trailing vines, and an object which had the dim outline of being an old rookery of some sort.

It was a dismal, lonesome scene.

Young King Brady moved along the edge of the boggy ground with its little pools of water, tufts of coarse grass and tracts of black, oozing mud.

An old, rotten board walk from the railroad bed to the trees, caught his view and he suddenly called to the old detective:

"I see a light among those trees. Here's a path. Let's follow it into the swamp."

"Be cautious!" warned the old detective. "If those rascals have carried the body from the box to the midst of those trees, they will be on the lookout for any possible pursuers and may give us a warm reception."

"We need not let ourselves be seen," replied the boy.

"How are you going to avoid it?"

"By creeping along the path on our hands and knees. The reeds on each side will hide our bodies from view."

"Go ahead, then."

They went down on their haunches and crept along in single file, out into the dismal swamp, and drew near the oasis.

In a few minutes they reached firm land.

From behind a clump of bushes they beheld an old wooden shanty, in the windows of which there glowed a dim light.

The detectives keenly watched it, hoping they might catch view of some human beings about the place.

At the end of quarter of an hour, they were suddenly startled by hearing a wild, piercing cry in human tones, of:

"Help! Police! Murder!"

The Bradys were intensely startled.

It was the same voice, using the very same words they had heard the night before in West Thirty-sixth street, New York!

"Good gracious! That's queer!" exclaimed Old King Brady, in tones of intense astonishment. "Did you hear it, Harry?"

The boy was thinking.

A startling idea flashed across his mind and he muttered:

"That cry was uttered by the same person we heard in New York, and I'm convinced that it was the man called Albert Reid."

"But he was murdered——"

"You only suppose so. There was circumstantial evidence that he was. But after all he may yet be alive."

This was a startling view to take of the matter.

Old King Brady shot a quick glance at Harry and exclaimed:

"You may be right. The man in the box may not have been dead after all. Perhaps he was alive, under the influence of a drug. The man who drugged us may have drugged him, too, you know.

"Hark!"

A chorus of fierce cries came from the hut.

There was the noise of a scuffle, then a voice which sounded very much like that of a negro roared in furious tones:

"Keep still, or I'll kill you!"

Old King Brady rose to his feet, very much agitated.

"I can't stand this much longer, Harry!" he muttered.

"Come on to the hut and we'll investigate the row," replied the boy.

Casting aside all caution, they rushed toward the old building.

Not half the intervening distance had been covered, when suddenly the noise ceased and the light went out.

The detectives halted.

"Were we seen?" panted Harry.

"Perhaps. Listen a moment."

They remained perfectly still and the trees cast a dark shadow over the scene which the moon could not dispel.

Five minutes passed.

Hearing and seeing nothing unusual, Harry said:

"Come on."

"Wait till I light my lantern."

"I'll stand guard with my pistol."

Old King Brady drew out a match and lit his bull's-eye.

Moving forward, they reached the hut and made a circuit of it.

The door was wide open.

They boldly entered the building.

It contained only one room, and to the amazement of the officers, it was empty.

Staring around, Old King Brady observed that there was only one door and the two windows they had been watching—one at the rear and the other at the side of the little building.

The door was at another side.

"Gone!" ejaculated the old detective.

"Where?" asked the astonished boy.

"Heaven only knows."

"Search outside."

Old King Brady dashed out the door.

He saw by the moonlight that the little island on which the hut stood was in the midst of the swamp.

If any one left it, he was bound to see them.

But not a soul met his view.

No one could leave the hut, cross the swamp and reach the mainland so quick that he could not see them escaping in such a short space of time.

Yet he failed to see any one in the swamp.

That convinced him that no one left the oasis.

And nobody was on the solid island of earth.

He could not have failed to observe them if they were there.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he gasped in bewilderment.

Then he finally returned to his partner.

"See any one?" eagerly asked the boy.

"Not a soul. And you?"

"I've searched this place, but no one is here."

"Then where did they disappear to so mysteriously?"

"Blessed if I know."

"You heard two human voices here, didn't you?"

"Of course I did."

"Have you thoroughly examined this place?"

"Every inch of it, and couldn't find them."

Old King Brady made a round of the room and came back.

He plainly saw that the walls were not double, and that the floor was merely covered with common dirt.

There was not a piece of furniture nor a lamp in the place.

Yet the detectives had seen a light distinctly.

"They ain't here, sure enough," said the old detective, "and they didn't leave here. Now, how could they vanish, and where did they go?"

"I'm completely rattled. Beyond my depth entirely."

"So am I. This mystery is too much for me to solve."

"See! Daylight is breaking."

"Let's search the place again."

They went at it with renewed zest, and spent two hours vainly searching for the means those speakers employed to drop out of sight.

Finally they desisted.

The great swamp mystery was too much for them.

By this time the sun had risen and flooded the scene, dispelled the vapors that hung over the bog and lighted up the surrounding country.

"We'd better get out of here," said Old King Brady. "I see a fine old residence over there on the mainland. Let's get over there and get our breakfast. I'm going to keep at this swamp till I solve that mystery."

Crossing the board walk, they made a detour and reached the house.

It was a fine country residence with many acres of ground, part of which was formed by the swamp.

They saw a big negro in overalls standing at the gate and Harry asked him:

"Say—who lives here?"

"Oliver Dalton, the Broad street broker, sir," replied the colored man.

This reply startled the detectives, for the owner was the very man whose case of mail robbery had been placed in their hands.

They glanced significantly at each other, and that look spoke volumes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MR. DALTON.

"See here, my friend," said Old King Brady to the darky, "do you know anything about that little hut standing out there in the swamp?"

"Dat hut? Sho'. Nobuddy nebber go in no mo'. Useter be fo' Massa Dalton when he go out shootin' reed birds."

"Then it isn't in use any more?"

"No, sah."

"Does Mr. Dalton live here all the year round?"

"Golly, no. Only in de winter. Comes heah wif Missy Lizzy an' his nephew, Ronald. Me an' my ole gal keep de house fo' dem de rest ob de time."

"I see. Then you don't expect them here for a long time, do you?"

"Dey only jes' lef' heah las' month, an' went back to York. But Lawdy, whut should Massa Ronald do but come back all ob a sudden las' night wif dat ornary niggah cuss, Sim Johnson, an' git bilin' drunk, an' dey gwine out an' didn' come back till de roosters crowed dis mawnin'."

"Who is Sim Johnson?"

"Massa Dalton's valet."

"And does the broker know his nephew drinks?"

"Mah goo'ness, no. If he did, dey would be a fight sho's yo' bo'n, sah."

"Is Ronald Mason in the habit of going on sprees with his uncle's negro valet?"

"Nebber done seed dem so thick befo'."

"Does he intend to remain here long?"

"Spec's not, kase dey didn't bring no luggage."

"Did they explain why they came back so unexpectedly?"

"Not to me."

"I'd like to see Mr. Mason."

"Better come back later, sah. He am too full now."

"Very well. What's your name?"

"George Scott."

"Can you tell me where we can get our breakfast?"

"Right heah, if yo' like, sah."

"Thanks. We'll accept and pay you for your trouble. Is there a town near?"

"De railroad station ob Swamp Angel, two miles down dis road."

"I suppose we could find board there?"

"Yassah. Dar am a little hotel neah de depot. Come in, sah—come in."

He led the detectives up a path to the house and when they were seated in the kitchen, his big, fat wife, Dinah, bustled around and soon had a savory breakfast set before them.

The detectives praised her cooking and paid the old servants so well for their attention that the faithful pair voted them as fine gentlemen.

Soon afterward the detectives started for Swamp Angel.

"The action of Ronald Mason in coming here so oddly with his uncle's valet strikes me very strangely," remarked Old King Brady, as they trudged along the road toward the station. "In fact, it is a most singular proceeding. He evidently poses before his rich uncle as a paragon of virtue. Behind the old man's back he is evidently a high roller."

"Then he must be a deceitful man," said Harry.

"Of course, for he's deceiving his trusting uncle."

"You are suspicious of him, ain't you?"

"Well, yes. It takes plenty money for a young man to lead a riotous life. If Mason draws a big salary in his uncle's office, where he is employed as a clerk, he may be able to afford it. If he is poorly paid, he may be at the bottom of the mail robberies we were called upon to investigate. See the point?"

Harry nodded and smiled; then he thought for a moment.

"You're pretty keen," he remarked. "It's a fair presumption, though."

"I think we had better keep an eye on that frisky young gentleman when we return to New York," continued the old detective, wisely. "It may lead to a solution of the problem we are so anxious to solve for the broker."

"Are you going back to Dalton's to see him?"

"Yes, this afternoon. I merely wish to size him up."

"How long do you intend to remain here?"

"I'd like to unravel the great swamp mystery before we go."

"Perhaps we may in a few days."

"Well, we'll give the matter a fair trial, anyhow."

Upon reaching Swamp Angel, they soon located the little hotel and there turned into bed for a few hours' sleep.

It was late in the afternoon when they returned to Dalton's.

Here they met the old negro again and he said:

"Yo's come back too late, gemmen."

"How so?" asked Old King Brady, in puzzled tones.

"Massa Mason an' Sim done gone an hour ago."

"Where to?"

"York."

The detectives were keenly disappointed.

However, they did not complain, and went away to search the swamp again for some trace of the missing body.

No success crowned their efforts.

In fact, after a useless search, covering a period of three days, they at length gave up the hunt in despair and returned to New York.

It was useless to remain prowling around that bleak swamp trying to dig up a mystery that baffled all their ingenuity.

"We went beyond our depth," said Harry, when they reached New York. "The game was too hard to solve. The mystery of the murdered man in the box must remain unsolved. It can go on record as one of the many strange cases that have baffled the detectives before. It's our duty now to report the matter to our chief, drop it, and resume our attempt to locate the broker's mail thief."

"Then come to headquarters at once," said Old King Brady, as they left the cars.

They met the chief in his office and he smiled pleasantly, and asked:

"Well, where have you two been keeping yourselves hidden during the past week? I haven't seen or heard from you lately."

The Bradys told him what they had been doing.

He listened attentively, with a grave look upon his face, while they were giving him the facts, and said when they finished:

"Then that murder mystery was too much for you, and you went beyond your depth trying to solve it, eh? Well, it's just as well you let it drop."

"Anything new going on?"

"Yes. Something relating to your mail robbery case."

"Indeed! What was it?"

"Oliver Dalton has disappeared."

"Where to?"

"Nobody seems to know."

"That is very strange."

"You had better go up to his house and get the particulars from his daughter. She is frantic to find her father. Some points might be gained in the broker's Broad street office."

"We'll follow your advice, sir," said Old King Brady.

The chief did not seem to have many facts in relation to the case, so the detectives finally left him.

Going to the broker's office, they found it occupied by half a dozen clerks.

Having asked for Mr. Dalton, the office boy said to them:

"You'd better see Mr. Mason about that matter, sir."

"Is the broker's nephew in?" asked Harry.

"Yes. He's the boss here now. Got your card?"

Harry handed him a business card and he carried it into a private office in the rear. A few minutes later he came out, with a smile on his face, and said to the

detectives:

"Mr. Mason says for you to come in."

He ushered the Bradys into the private office and they there beheld Ronald Mason, the broker's nephew, sitting at his desk.

About thirty years of age, his tall, thin figure clad in stylish clothing, Ronald Mason was a clean-shaven individual, with hard features.

He had cold, gray eyes, and a haughty, overbearing appearance.

When the detectives came in, they saw him bending a queer, searching look at them, and he then asked in low tones:

"Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you to-day?"

Neither of the detectives were favorably impressed with his appearance.

They had seen the odd look he gave them, and set him down for a tricky and dangerous man to deal with.

Old King Brady took him in hand by saying:

"You are Mr. Mason, I believe?"

"That is my name, Mr. Brady."

"We have heard that your uncle has mysteriously disappeared."

"That's correct. We've reported the matter to the police. I presume you are here to get information about him, ain't you?"

"Yes. What do you know about the case?"

"Simply this: Last Monday he left this office at five o'clock and proceeded to the Union Club. At about eight o'clock, after his dinner, a telegram was brought in to him. He showed some agitation, put on his hat, took his umbrella and hastily departed. No one seems to know where he went. That was the last we've seen or heard of him since. We informed the police and nothing has yet come of it."

"Did he have any domestic or business trouble?"

"None that I'm aware of."

"Ever speak of suicide?"

Mason assumed a very mysterious air, bent near the detectives and replied:

"Yes! Several times. And I fear he has kept his threat at last."

The Bradys were startled at this unexpected reply.

CHAPTER V.

THE PICTURE ON THE WALL.

Ronald Mason was keenly watching the effect his words produced upon the detectives, and he noted their looks of astonishment.

When Old King Brady recovered from the shock, he demanded:

"Can you tell me why your uncle contemplated suicide?"

"Yes. He was afflicted with an incurable disease. He never told any one about it except me. He had the consumption."

"I see," said the old detective, nodding. "It made him despondent?"

"Yes. He sometimes had no desire to live, only to perish in the end of a lingering malady, which was bound to prove fatal, anyway."

"Didn't his daughter know anything about it?"

"Not a thing. He kept it a secret from her so she would not worry."

"Presuming he killed himself, who would benefit by his death?"

"His daughter and I. We are his only relatives."

"You are his nephew, I believe?"

"Well, yes. By adoption, but not by blood."

"How do you mean?"

"I was his dead sister's adopted child. Legally, I'm his nephew."

"Since he vanished, have you been conducting his business?"

"Oh, yes. I'm capable of doing it. In fact, even when he was here I've been in the habit of attending to most all of it. He recently hasn't done much more than sign checks."

"Since he vanished, have you been here every day?"

"Certainly I have."

"Haven't been out of town at all, eh?"

"I had no occasion to."

"No?" asked the detective, with a smile.

"No!" retorted Mason, sharply.

"Do you know Sim Johnson, your uncle's valet?"

"Of course I do."

"Are you in the habit of going on sprees with that colored man?"

A startled look flashed across Mason's face, an expression of deep fear shone for an instant in his cold eyes, and he sprang to his feet.

By an effort of will he subdued his alarm, a dark frown mantled his brow and he glared furiously at the detectives and demanded:

"Do you mean to insult me?"

A chuckle escaped the old detective and he replied, blandly:

"Insult you? By no means."

"Then what do you mean by asking such an impertinent question, sir?" haughtily

demanded Mason.

"Only this," replied Old King Brady, calmly. "We were down at your uncle's place at Swamp Angel, in Georgia, the other night, and learned there that you and Sim Johnson were on a toot there together."

"It's an infernal lie!" yelled Mason, losing his temper.

Old King Brady smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps," he assented. "But if it isn't, I'll tell you how you may know that we were aware of it. My partner and I are the two who called there to see you, and couldn't, as you were then supposed to be sleeping off your jag."

Mason had a queer expression upon his face.

He looked puzzled, angry and curious, and finally asked:

"How did you happen to go way down there to my uncle's place in Georgia, looking for me, I'd like to know?"

"Important business brought us to that neighborhood, Mr. Mason."

"May I inquire what it was?"

"You may, but we won't tell you."

"Insolent!" exclaimed the young man, bristling up again.

"Your question was worse!"

"Well, to bring this interview to a close, I deny your ugly insinuation, and declare that I was not out of New York since my uncle vanished. Now, if you have nothing to say except to cast aspersions upon my character, I will wish you good-morning, as I am busy and my time is valuable."

"That's a polite hint for us to go, I presume?"

"I'll be frank with you. It is."

"Very well, Mr. Mason. We'll trouble you no further—for the present."

And bowing low, the detectives walked out of the office.

A cab was awaiting them out in Broad street and they entered it, and were driven rapidly uptown on the west side.

"You've got him guessing," laughed Harry, as they sped along.

"He knows I've caught him in a lie," Old King Brady answered.

"Going to the broker's house now?"

"Yes. I wish to question his daughter and the valet."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about Mason?"

"His face, and voice, and actions seemed strangely familiar to me."

"That's what I mean, exactly."

"Haven't we met him before?"

"Well," said Harry, "if he were dressed like an undertaker, wore false side-whiskers and called himself Solomon Gloom, don't you think he would resemble the villain who shot me in Thirty-sixth street?"

"Thunder!" ejaculated Old King Brady, slapping his knee with his hand.

The keen boy's discernment startled him.

What Harry said was the truth.

Mason certainly bore a startling resemblance to the man who had shipped the box of human remains to Georgia.

Harry laughed, and asked:

"You notice the resemblance then, do you?"

"I do, indeed. It's startling."

"Do you think he's the same man?"

"The Lord knows. It's hard to say. But I suspect he is. If he and Mr. Gloom were the same person, what possible object could he have had in putting that man out of the way?"

"We may find out later on."

The cab brought them to the palatial residence the missing broker had occupied, and a ring at the bell brought a negro flunky to the door.

He stared at the detectives, and they stared at him.

Then he uttered a startled cry, and retreating into the hall, he made a movement as if he were going to close the door in their faces.

Harry was too quick for him.

The boy sprang in and caught him by the throat.

Despite the fact that the coon now wore a dress suit, the detectives recognized him as the driver of the undertaker's wagon, whom "Mr. Gloom" had addressed as "Sim."

A gurgling cry escaped the black man.

"Let me go!" he gasped.

"I've got you now, you villain!" cried Harry, grimly.

"Fo' de Lawd sakes, what yo' doin'?" groaned the darky.

"You are the undertaker's helper. We know you."

"No, I ain't, boss. No, I ain't!" protested the man in alarmed tones.

"Don't you lie to me! We know you, I tell you, and by Jove we are going to make you tell who that man was you murdered!"

The negro was terribly frightened.

In fact, he was so scared he could hardly speak.

Seeing this, Harry went on in excited tones:

"It was Ronald Mason with you, disguised. We know that. You and he were down at Swamp Angel together, on a spree. We know that, too. And now, you black scoundrel, we want to know who that man was you murdered, blast you! We saw the box and body stolen at the swamp near Mr. Dalton's winter residence, and we know now that you and Mason were at the bottom of that mysterious piece of rascality. What does it all mean, confound you?"

Harry's excited voice brought a beautiful, stylishly-clad young girl down the stairs, and there was a look of surprise in her big, dark eyes.

"Sim Johnson," she cried, "what does this mean?"

"Oh, sabe me, Miss Lizzie, sabe me!" implored the frightened coon.

"Gentlemen——" she began.

"Pardon me, Miss Dalton," interrupted Old King Brady. "We are officers of the law. This man is mixed up in a suspicious case. We want him to confess his villainy. Don't interfere, please."

"But I protest!" cried the young lady in angry tones.

"It is useless. We must do our duty."

"Why, what has Sim done? Now I remember you. You were here a week ago."

"Been away several days with Mason, hasn't he?" asked Harry, with a nod.

"Yes. Out West they told me——"

"And lied. They were at your father's place in Georgia."

"My gracious! I hope they have done nothing wrong."

"Well, they have. We are bound to find out about it, too."

"Can you tell me what this all means?"

"Of course we can. But we are going to arrest this man."

"Come into the parlor so the neighbors won't hear you."

They dragged the darky into the parlor.

The crayon picture of a man hanging on the wall met Harry's glance, and pointing excitedly at it, he cried:

"See, Old King Brady! There's a photograph of the murdered man we saw in the box this coon was handling!"

Old King Brady was startled.

He noticed that Harry had made no error about it.

Lizzie Dalton quickly glanced at the picture.

"Why," she exclaimed, "that's my father's likeness!"

The Bradys glanced at each other in amazement.

"Then Oliver Dalton was the murdered man!" Harry muttered.

CHAPTER VI.

TRACING SOME CLEWS.

When Old King Brady heard what Harry said, he felt convinced that the boy made no error. He plainly saw that the crayon portrait was an excellent picture of the man whose body vanished in the swamp.

Lizzie Dalton overheard Young King Brady's remark.

Her face turned as pale as death, and she sank into a chair, gasping:

"Was my father murdered?"

"Such is our suspicion," replied the old detective, gently.

"But you are not positive of it?"

"No," answered Old King Brady, shaking his head.

"In that case, you may be mistaken."

"Yes. There's some doubt about it."

"Will you kindly tell me what made you believe he was dead?"

"Certainly. Listen. Here's what happened in the past few days."

And he recited all that transpired from the time they first heard that cry for help in Thirty-sixth street, up to the present moment.

The girl listened intently and when he finished, she said, in tones of relief:

"Then you have reason to believe that the man was alive when you heard his voice coming from that old hut in the swamp?"

"Just so," assented Old King Brady, admiring her fortitude and cool judgment.

"And you believe my cousin Ronald and this negro were at the bottom of the whole thing?" continued the girl.

"We do. It's our opinion that Mason sent your father a decoy telegram to the Union Club, and lured him to the empty house in Thirty-sixth street. We believe he and Sim Johnson arranged to attack and drug him there. We think, when they either killed or drugged him, they packed him in the box and shipped it by rail to Georgia. The fact that some unknown party on the cars chloroformed us leads us to suppose it was Mason, who may have been on the cars disguised. We also think they had accomplices at Swamp Angel to stop the train so they could steal the box and hide the body of the man it contained in the swamp. The fact of Mason and the negro being there at the time, confirms this suspicion of them being at the bottom of the job."

"Your suspicions seem to be well founded, sir, but it may be only a theory on your part, after all," said the girl.

"Miss Dalton, you can weaken or strengthen our suspicions."

"In what way, Mr. Brady?"

"By showing us a motive for such crooked work."

"How can I?"

"Simply by answering my questions."

"Nothing would give me more pleasure."

"First, then, were your father and Mason on friendly terms?"

"Very."

"Didn't they ever quarrel?"

"Never, to my knowledge."

"Then revenge is out of the question. Now for love."

"I don't quite understand you, sir."

"Wasn't Mason in love with you?"

The girl's cheeks flushed and she averted her glance.

Both detectives noticed the tell-tale glow and smiled at each other.

Finally, after some consideration, Lizzie said, with an effort:

"Mr. Mason did profess to be in love with me."

"Wanted you to marry him, didn't he?"

"Yes. But I didn't return his affection."

"Did you tell him so?"

"Several times. I told my father about it, too."

"How did he seem to take it?"

"Well, he forbade me marrying Mr. Mason and told him the same thing."

"Then with your father out of the way, so he could no longer object, Mason might have figured that he would have better success winning you."

"No matter what he thought, it wouldn't do him any good, sir."

"So I presume. However, it shows an incentive to get rid of your father. Now, there's another consideration. I refer to money."

"How could he gain money by killing my father?"

"Well, he told us your father's fortune was to go to both of you."

"Then he did not tell the truth," said the girl, contemptuously. "My father often told me that every cent he had was willed to me exclusively."

"Have you seen his will?"

"Yes. He once showed it to me."

"Then you know what you said to be true?"

"Of course I do. Mr. Mason had no claim on my father's generosity."

"What lawyer drew up the will?"

"Oh, he's been dead several years. His name was Evan D. Russell."

"Where was the will kept?"

"Hidden. No one but papa knows where."

The Bradys questioned her closely for a while longer.

While this was going on, Young King Brady had been holding the negro by the arm. But they became so interested in what Lizzie was saying that neither one paid much attention to him.

Sim soon observed this.

Filled with a desire to escape, he suddenly wrenched his arm free.

Quick as a flash he seized a chair, swung it around and knocked Harry down.

Old King Brady heard his partner's warning cry and turned around, but ere he could do anything the chair crushed down upon his head and he fell upon his back in the middle of the floor.

The delighted negro rushed to the open window and leaped out.

Up scrambled the chagrined detectives.

Both smarted from the blows, but were otherwise uninjured and they rushed to the window and jumped out into the front yard.

Rushing out to the street they gazed around, but failed to see anything of the fugitive valet.

He had hidden himself so completely that they could find no trace of him, although they scoured the neighborhood for an hour.

When they met again, both looked very much disgusted and Harry said:

"He has eluded us, it seems."

"Completely," Old King Brady answered, angrily.

"We may as well give up hunting for him."

"Yes. It's a waste of time at present."

They returned to the house and told Lizzie the bad news, and the old detective said:

"I expected to pump some valuable information from him about Ronald Mason. But that hope is gone. We shall have to watch out for that pair. In the meantime, if you wish us to recover your father's body, dead or alive, you must maintain the utmost secrecy of what we said, Miss Dalton."

"You can depend upon my discretion," replied the girl, quietly.

The detectives promised to exert every effort to find her father, and finally took their leave of her.

On the following day the Bradys went to the office of Solomon Gloom, the undertaker, on Seventh avenue, and met him in his office.

He looked nothing like the man who personated him.

It was just as the Bradys suspected.

Having described the man who had the wagon and carried off the body, Old King Brady asked the undertaker:

"Did you give that man one of your business cards?"

"I certainly did," replied Mr. Gloom.

"And rented out your wagon to him?"

"Yes, sir. I also got them a Health Board permit for small-pox, so they could

remove their relative's body. The party died of small-pox."

That satisfied the Bradys to the means the abductors employed to personate the undertaker and carry out their plot.

The officers next went to the Union Club and made an effort to secure the telegram which brought Mr. Dalton from the clubhouse the night he was summoned away and vanished from view.

The steward found it in the rubbish-basket and gave it to them.

The message was worded as follows:

"Oliver Dalton: Meet me secretly, nine to-night, in house No. —
West Thirty-sixth street, about mail robberies.

Old King Brady."

Here was a startling surprise for the detectives.

"Did you send that message?" asked Harry, of his partner.

"No. It's a forgery!" declared the old detective.

"I thought so."

"Whoever sent it knew the broker was going to have us run down the thieves who were robbing him."

"As Ronald Mason admitted to us that he practically ran the business, he must have known that we were going to work up the case. Our chief told Mr. Dalton we would. Therefore it must be another example of Mason's perfidy."

"Come to the telegraph office. We'll see if we can trace the party who sent this despatch."

They hastened from the Union Club.

By dint of diligent inquiry the Bradys learned which office the forged despatch

had been sent from, and went there.

Showing the message to the girl operator, Old King Brady asked:

"Do you remember sending this message?"

"Distinctly," she replied, "on account of the odd signature."

"Can you describe the party who sent it?"

"Oh, yes. I'm acquainted with the gentleman."

"Indeed! What was his name?"

"Mr. Ronald Mason."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, indeed."

The Bradys thanked the girl and departed.

"Gradually we are getting at the bottom of this affair," said Old King Brady.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MISSING MAN FOUND.

The Bradys kept Ronald Mason closely shadowed for several days. They saw that he was living the mechanical life of a sober business man.

He was at his desk every morning at nine o'clock, and departed at five in the evening for home, in a cab. He did not depart from the house during the night, and received no callers there.

But the detectives did not relax their vigilance.

They had a deep-rooted suspicion that Mason had been working a plot to get rid of his uncle so he could inherit part of Mr. Dalton's money, and win the broker's daughter for his bride without any opposition.

Old King Brady figured that he was bound to show his hand sooner or later.

Nor did his judgment err.

At the end of the week a telegraph boy delivered a message at the broker's residence, about nine o'clock at night.

Within a few minutes after the lad departed the front door opened and a man in shabby clothes, with a beard on his face, cautiously emerged.

He carried a big bundle under his arm.

He glanced up and down the deserted street and seeing nobody, he hastily ran down the steps and stole rapidly away.

Safely hidden in the area of an empty house opposite, the Bradys observed him, and a smile crossed Harry's face as he nudged his partner and whispered:

"There's Mason, now!"

"Very clumsily disguised!" Old King Brady commented.

"If he were not up to some mischief, he would not be so careful to conceal his identity," Harry remarked, drily.

They let the young man get some distance ahead before they ventured out in the street. Then they separated, to avoid attracting special attention.

Mason walked down Eighth avenue to Thirty-fourth street and boarded a horse-car going east. The detectives followed it afoot until they reached Broadway, and at Herald Square they secured a cab.

The chase then became comparatively easy.

Mason rode to the East river before he alighted and finally made his way afoot along the river front until he reached a pier.

The detectives were close behind him, as yet unseen.

Going out on the pier, Mason paused and whistled.

Instantly a man climbed up over the string piece from a rowboat in which sat a solitary individual, close to the piles.

As it was a clear night, the detectives had no trouble to see that the man who joined Mason was a negro.

And then they recognized him as Sim Johnson, the valet.

For a few moments the pair held a whispered conversation, and then climbed down the piles and got into the rowboat.

Creeping nearer, the Bradys now caught a good view of the boatman.

He was a little old man, in a blue blouse and felt hat, and his face was covered

by a gray beard.

When Mason and the negro were aboard, the boatman rowed out on the river, shipped his oars and let the skiff drift with the tide.

The Bradys reached the end of the pier and watched them keenly.

There was something towing behind the skiff by a rope.

As the skiff paused, the three men pulled it into the boat.

It was a large object, but the detectives could not make out at that distance what it really was.

They saw the three men working over it for a while, and finally push it overboard again so the boat could tow it.

When this was done the light craft was rowed down the river and the detectives lost track of it altogether.

They felt rather disappointed.

"What the deuce were they doing?" Harry asked.

"Blessed if I could tell," replied Old King Brady, in perplexity.

"Let's go back to Mason's house and wait for him to come back."

Old King Brady assented.

They returned to the West Thirty-sixth street residence.

An hour later, as they stood on the corner, the man they suspected as Mason came along, and Old King Brady stepped in front of him.

"Hold on there, my friend!" he remarked.

"Let me pass!" growled the other in low, ugly tones, as he shot a savage glance at the old detective, and made an effort to go by.

"Wait a moment!" persisted the officer.

"I ain't got any time."

"Tut-tut!"

"Well, what do you want?"

"I've taken a violent interest in your whiskers, sir."

"Come, now, none of your guying——"

"Oh, I ain't fooling. I've taken such a huge interest in your whiskers that I'd like to have a handful as a keepsake."

And so saying the detective grabbed them.

A slight pull dislodged them from the man's face, causing him to recoil, giving utterance to a smothered cry of alarm.

Old King Brady chuckled.

Holding up a false beard, he glanced at the man.

"Why," exclaimed Harry, "it's Mr. Mason!"

"Bless my heart, so it is," added the old detective, feigning to be very much astonished at the discovery. "How strange! Why, Mr. Mason, what in the world are you going around masquerading this way for, at such a late hour of the night?"

The broker's nephew was furious over his exposure.

He knew it was useless to pretend he was not the man they mentioned and he swore at them, and cried, fiercely:

"That's none of your infernal business."

"How angry you are. My! My! Keep cool, Mr. Mason. Wrath isn't going to mend matters for you in any way."

"Get out of my path, you old meddlesome fool!"

"Now, don't get excited," laughed Old King Brady. "You must know, sir, that we are engaged upon very important business. Some time ago we saw you come out of that house, and thinking you were a burglar we followed you down to the East river."

"You followed me?" gasped Mason, with a guilty start.

"Oh, dear, yes. And we saw you meet Sim Johnson on the pier, and we saw you get into the rowboat with your bundle, and we saw the little old man with the gray beard row you out on the stream, and then we saw you all pull up the object you had towing astern, take it into the boat, work over it a while, toss it back, and row away."

Mason's face had grown deathly pale.

He eyed the detectives with such a vindictive look that they could see he would have knocked their heads off if he dared.

Finally, though, he regained his composure a little and asked:

"What object did you see us pull out of the water?"

"Really, I can't say. You were too far from the dock for us to distinguish exactly what it was. But it looked something like the corpse of a man."

"You must be crazy, Brady!"

"Do you think so? We don't. But you've aroused our curiosity about that mysterious trip on the river and we'd like to know what it all meant."

"You'll never learn from me."

"Oh, I suppose not—voluntarily. Anyway, you ought to tell us why you are so intimate with your uncle's negro valet——"

"You make me sick!" exclaimed Mason, wearily. "Sim told me all about your looney suspicions about he and I making away with my uncle. But I defy you to prove any of your crack-brained theories. You are on the wrong trail, Brady. And I advise you to leave me alone, or by jingo, I'll defend myself and make it very

warm for you."

"Got a big political pull?" laughed the old detective.

"No, but I carry a gun in my pocket!" hissed Mason, furiously.

"Oh, pshaw! That don't scare me a bit, my boy. Then you won't confess——"

"I'll tell you nothing of my personal affairs!" roared Mason. "Clear out! Mind your own business. Leave me alone! I don't want to have anything to do with you fellows! Do you understand?"

And he scowled and stamped his foot on the pavement and rushed past them and hastily entered his house.

The Bradys laughed and walked away.

"He's getting afraid of us," said Harry.

"Yes. We are wearing on his nerves. He knows we are watching him, and it makes him very uneasy. However, when we get good proof of his guilt, we'll nail him, and that will end his rascality."

They felt confident that Mason would not come out again that night and therefore went home.

On the following morning a great surprise awaited them.

Harry was reading the daily paper and caught view of this item:

"The missing man found. Oliver Dalton, the well-known Broad street broker, found drowned in the East river. At ten o'clock last night Martin Kelly, an old junk dealer, picked up the mutilated corpse of a well-dressed man in the East river off the foot of East Forty-second street. He towed it behind his skiff to the morgue, and turned the corpse over to the authorities, with an account of his ghastly find. The body had been in the water so long it would have been unrecognizable if it were not for some private papers found in the pockets, by means of which the man's identity was established. A

reporter was the first one to bring the news to the dead man's daughter, etc."

When Harry read the item aloud, Old King Brady cried:

"Harry, had Mason's trip on the river anything to do with finding that corpse?"

"Let us go down to the morgue and get the facts."

Old King Brady nodded and they hastened across town.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT THE BROKER'S WILL SAID.

When the Bradys entered the morgue they found Lizzie Dalton there, bitterly weeping, and the keeper showing her the body said to be her father's.

The man's head was gone, as if it had been severed by the wheels of a passing boat. The hands were nearly destroyed and the clothing was in a good state. The keeper was asking the girl:

"An' yer recognize him as yer father?"

"It must be," replied Lizzie, with a sob. "On the finger is a ring which I know belonged to him, the clothing certainly is his and the keys, papers and penknife found in the pockets belonged to him. As you can see, the envelopes have his name and address on them."

Just then the girl saw the Bradys.

They bowed to her and Old King Brady said, in kindly tones:

"We hope you will make no error, Miss Dalton. Let the identification be complete. Everything depends upon your verdict."

"Oh, I am positive it is poor papa," said the weeping girl, "for no one but he could have had the things found on this corpse."

The detectives examined the body and the effects.

They then left the Morgue with the girl.

She was deeply affected and they brought her home in a carriage.

When they left her at her door and departed, the Bradys were in a bewildered state of mind and the old detective said:

"Harry, I'm completely puzzled again."

"On account of the girl's positive identification of that body?"

"Yes. If it wasn't Dalton's corpse she would not declare it was."

"But how about the body we traced to the swamp in Georgia? Could it have been brought North again and thrown in the river here?"

"Such a thing might have occurred."

"It seems improbable, though."

"Very true. But there's no way to account for the finding of this body here unless that's what happened."

"Then we are beyond our depth again."

"So it appears. We may be deep enough to solve an ordinary mystery, but the depth of this one seems to be too much for us. At first we imagined we had the whole thing thoroughly sifted out. Now we've received a severe setback. It brings us to where we started, practically. All our theories may have been wrong. Sim Johnson and Ronald Mason may be innocent men. Perhaps we wronged them by unjust suspicions based upon circumstantial evidence."

"Then you think we had better drop the case?"

Old King Brady nodded, and replied:

"I don't see what else we can do now. If the man found in the river is Dalton, the body is in such a state that it will be utterly impossible to tell whether he was a victim of foul play, suicide, or accident. There is absolutely nothing about the body to indicate what the cause of his death was."

"I don't fancy giving up the case."

"Well, we never before found a job we couldn't finish successfully," said the old detective. "But how we are to unravel the mystery of this man's death is beyond my power of thinking."

Harry pondered a few moments in silence.

Several ideas passed through his mind and he finally said:

"Will you stick to the case a while longer if I do?"

"Certainly. Why did you ask that question?"

"Because we haven't satisfied ourselves about what Mason and the black valet were doing on the river with that boatman. If we find that the old gray-bearded fellow was the one who brought the body to the morgue, it would seem to indicate that Mason and the coon know something about how Mr. Dalton may have met his doom. Remember the object they had towing behind the boat may have been the old broker's corpse. We can find out by attending the coroner's inquest and gaining a glimpse of the man who picked up the body."

"Then we shall do so."

On the following day they went to the morgue again and there found the coroner and his jury.

The inquest was in progress.

As the boatman who found the body was the only witness present the Bradys saw him the moment they entered the building.

It proved that their suspicion was correct.

He was the same little old man whom they had seen rowing Mason and Johnson out on the river.

Satisfied of this and having learned his address, the detectives left the building with renewed hope in their hearts.

Outside, Harry said to his partner:

"It's the same fellow, sure enough."

"No doubt about it, Harry. But then, he may have found the body long before he met the negro and Mason. He may have learned whose corpse it was and telegraphed to Mason to come down to the river and identify it."

Harry shook his head.

"I don't agree with your view," said he.

"Why not? It's plausible."

"No, it ain't. It don't account for Johnson being there ahead of Mason."

"By Jove, I didn't think of that."

"I tell you, Old King Brady, the whole circumstance is so suspicious that I'm yet of the opinion that the whole thing is a deep-laid plot, and I'm convinced that we will get at the bottom of the mystery if we keep a watch on the foxy Mr. Mason."

"It won't do any harm to try a while longer."

Harry looked pleased to hear this, and they went downtown and put their plan in operation at once.

Within the next few days several important events occurred.

The body was taken from the morgue and was buried from Mr. Dalton's house, Lizzie and Mason being the chief mourners.

The Bradys had found out who Mr. Dalton's lawyer was.

Having called on him and explained their suspicions of Mason, they asked him if he had seen Mr. Dalton's will.

He told them that Mason had given it to him that morning, with a request that it be read at the house that afternoon.

It was then sealed up and according to Mason's story, had been in Mr. Dalton's safe a long time, in the Broad street office.

"We must hear the contents of that will," said Old King Brady. "As Mason is an unscrupulous man, we fear he may have tampered with it."

"You might disguise yourselves and go with me," suggested the lawyer. "I could tell Mason you were called on as witnesses."

"Very well. What time are you going there?"

"I'll leave here at four o'clock."

"We shall be on hand to go with you."

With this understanding they separated.

The Bradys went home and disguised themselves.

Both were expert at such work, and quickly made such a wonderful change in their outward appearance that they could safely defy recognition.

Harry was made up as a stylish young woman, and Old King Brady, in a black wig and beard, looked like a minister.

The lawyer did not know them when they returned to his office, and laughed heartily when he found out who they were.

"I never saw such skillful disguising done before," he exclaimed, admiringly, "and I can assure you that Mason will not know who you are."

They proceeded to Mr. Dalton's house and were introduced to Lizzie and the broker's nephew as two witnesses to the reading of the will.

Neither Mason nor the girl knew the detectives.

When all were seated and the lawyer had made a few remarks about his business, he opened the seals on the will and read it aloud.

By this paper the old broker left a fortune amounting to half a million, most of which was invested in stocks, bonds and mortgages.

But it was a peculiar will.

After speaking of the high regard in which he held Ronald Mason, the broker went on to say that he earnestly desired his daughter to marry the young man. If she did so she was to receive half the fortune. If she failed to do so, every cent was to go to Mason.

The brokerage business was left to him to do with it as he pleased.

When the lawyer ceased reading, Lizzie Dalton was as pale as death.

Rising to her feet she bitterly denounced the terms of the will, and said:

"I don't believe my father ever wrote such a will. He always was opposed to Mason marrying me. So was I. And what is more, if I forfeit every dollar coming to me, I'll never marry that man!"

She pointed at Mason.

His clean-shaven face was convulsed with anger.

"So!" he sneered. "That's your answer, is it?"

"Yes!" she cried, hotly. "I hate you, Ronald Mason, and you know it."

"Oh, you'll regret your hasty decision."

"Never! Never!"

"Then if you reject the terms of that will you are entitled to nothing, and therefore you can clear out of here. This house and everything is mine. I am the master here now. You get out!"

"Hold on, there! I've got something to say about this," said Old King Brady, as he flung off his disguise and seized the disputed will.

CHAPTER IX.

FLIGHT OF THE GUILTY MAN.

When Ronald Mason saw that the supposed minister was his enemy, Old King Brady, a tigerish expression leaped to his eyes.

He recoiled a few steps and gasped, hoarsely:

"What! You here?"

"You can see for yourself!" replied the detective.

"What is the meaning of this trickery?"

"I denounce this will as a forgery!" thundered Old King Brady.

For an instant there was a deep, oppressive silence in the room.

The detective's words startled every one and the lawyer finally asked:

"Upon what ground do you make that remarkable statement, Mr. Brady?"

The old detective held up the will.

"In the first place," said he, forcibly, "the provisions of this instrument are entirely unnatural. Who ever heard of a kind, indulgent father disinheriting his only child for not marrying a man whom we all know he formerly refused to accept as a son-in-law? Who would believe Oliver Dalton criminal enough to leave his tenderly-nurtured daughter an absolute beggar, dependent upon the cold charity of the world? What has this girl done to forfeit her birthright? What

has this man done that Dalton should leave his daughter penniless, for his sake?"

"It does look rather queer," assented the lawyer.

"Queer? Why, it's utterly ridiculous!" cried Old King Brady, in tones of supreme contempt. "It's beyond reason. Only an insane father would be guilty of such a deed. Moreover, I have my doubts about the signature attached to this paper. It looks similar to Mr. Dalton's signature which I have appended to a letter now in my pocket. But there are certain formations in the letters that lead me to suppose this signature on the will is a rank forgery. I'm going to prove that idea by giving the will and some of Mr. Dalton's signatures to a handwriting expert. He will magnify them and throw the image of the enlarged signatures on a screen by means of a magic-lantern. Any one can then tell at a glance if this signature is a forgery or not."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" yelled Mason, furiously.

"Won't I? You'll see, sir. I shall."

"That will shall be filed for probate with the surrogate."

"So it shall," grimly answered Old King Brady. "So it shall. And this lawyer will contest it on behalf of Miss Dalton, and baffle your design to rob her. And if it is proven that the will is a forgery, you can rest assured that I'll arrest you for the crooked work the moment I get my hands on you!"

Mason gave a hollow, mocking laugh.

"Fool!" he hissed. "I don't fear you."

"But you shall——"

"Bah! Shut up! You make me sick!"

And snapping his fingers at the old detective, Mason rushed from the room, put on his hat and left the house.

When he was gone, Harry hastened after him.

Left alone with the girl and the lawyer, Old King Brady held a conference with

them and settled upon a plan of legal action.

In the meantime Mason had gone downtown, with Young King Brady carefully shadowing him at a safe distance.

He entered Mr. Dalton's office and remained there until long after all the clerks had gone home.

Harry remained outside the building on the watch for him, and at about seven o'clock saw him emerge.

He dropped a letter in a lamp-post letter-box and rapidly strode across town and entered a liquor saloon.

Young King Brady divested himself of his disguise in a hallway.

While waiting for his man to emerge from the saloon, the boy made a bundle of the disguise and wrapped it in a newspaper.

Half an hour passed by.

Getting uneasy over the prolonged absence of the man, Harry strode into the saloon, glanced around and failed to see Mason.

"He must have given me the slip!" thought the boy, ruefully.

"Looking for any one, sir?" queried a bartender who was watching him.

"Yes. What became of a fellow of this description who came in here half an hour ago?" said Harry, and he minutely described Mason.

"Why, he went out the side door after getting a drink of whisky," said the bartender. "He seemed to be in a hurry to catch a train."

"How do you know?"

"Well, he asked me what time the train for Savannah left, and as I told him he only had a few moments to catch it, he hurried out."

Harry thanked the man and left.

"The villain is heading for the South again!" flashed across the boy's mind. "I'll see if I can verify this idea."

He went over to the railroad ticket office and closely questioned the agent, who admitted that a man such as the detective described had bought a ticket for Swamp Angel and gone.

Young King Brady was puzzled over Mason's actions.

He could not understand why the man was running away from New York so soon after the incident at Dalton's house.

"It looks as if he had a guilty conscience and feared exposure," muttered the boy, as he made his way home.

Old King Brady was there ahead of him and Harry told him about Mason's flight to the South.

It made the old detective laugh.

"Guess we've frightened him," he remarked.

The Bradys remained up late that night discussing their plans.

On the following morning a letter reached them from Mason, worded in the following manner:

"Messrs. Brady: By the time this reaches you I shall be so far from New York that you'll never catch me. I know very well that you are going to find out that Dalton's will is a forgery. If I remain you'll put the screws on me. So I'll baffle you by going in good season. Moreover, you will find out later in the day that all the funds in Dalton's business are missing. I've got the stuff, as I need it to get away. If the time ever comes for me to get even with you for all the trouble you've caused me, I'll make you pay dearly for your accursed interference.

"Ronald Mason."

"So he's gone," said Harry.

"In good season."

"And he left a black record behind him."

"We probably haven't heard the worst yet, Harry."

"Let's go to the office and see how much he stole."

Old King Brady was eager for the facts, and they passed out together.

In half an hour they reached Dalton's office and found a policeman in charge, all the clerks frantic with alarm, and the safe open.

"There's been a robbery here," said the policeman to the detectives.

"How much was taken?" asked Harry.

"Thirty thousand dollars in cash and bonds."

"Well, we know who did the job. The clerks must go, and we must close and lock the doors after I secure a few papers."

They had a talk with the chief clerk, got all the details, and the place was then vacated and locked up.

Returning to the street the detectives strode down Broad street toward the Battery, and the old sleuth remarked:

"He made quite a rich haul."

"As we know about where to find him," answered Harry, "we may be able to recover the booty when we go after him."

Just then a little old man with a gray beard came waddling out of Bridge street, clad in a blue jumper and an old felt hat.

The moment Harry saw him he sprang forward, clutched him by the arm, swung him around, and said:

"Martin Kelly, the junk man!"

"Gosh!" exclaimed the old fellow. "Ther detectives."

"Yes, and we are going to arrest you, Martin, for your connection with the case of the drowned man you brought to the morgue."

"What fer?" tremulously asked the old man, beginning to get frightened.

"Oh, we saw you, Ronald Mason and the coon fooling with that corpse in your boat on the river before you brought it to the morgue, and we want to know what you were up to."

"I'll tell, if yer don't jail me, Mr. Brady."

"That's a bargain. Out with it, then."

"Well, that there nigger was aboardin' with me. The other night him an' me was on ther river carryin' some scrap iron from a boat where I bought it an' we found that dead body. As soon as ther coon saw it, he tied it to ther boat an' said he an' his boss would palm it off for somebody else. So he went ashore an' telegraphed to Mason to fetch down a suit of Dalton's clothes an' things to make it look as if the body was Dalton's. When Mason come, we rowed out on the river, stripped the corpse, put on him the things Mason brought, chucked him overboard and I set them ashore down the river an' towed the body to the morgue where I left it. They paid me ten dollars to keep my mouth shut about what they done."

The Bradys were amazed.

His story cleared up a great deal of mystery and left the real fate of Oliver Dalton a matter of doubt again.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT THE HANDWRITING EXPERT SHOWED.

Realizing the importance of Martin Kelly's confession, Harry now turned to his partner and said, significantly:

"We'd better get what he says in the form of an affidavit."

"By all means," assented the old detective, eagerly.

"Say, yer ain't a-goin' ter do nuthin' to me, are yer?" demanded Kelly.

"Oh, no; merely going to make you swear to the facts you gave us."

"I'll do that willin' enough, sir."

They brought him before a notary public, and having written out his statement and secured his signature and oath, they let him go, after learning that Johnson did not return to his house since the body was found.

The Bradys were delighted.

When they reached the street, Harry cried:

"That Mason was a clever schemer. But we've foiled his plan to palm off a stranger's body for that of the missing broker. We must let Lizzie Dalton know how she was duped. There's every possibility yet that her father is still alive. With this doubt pending, the will need not be probated yet."

"Steps have already been begun to test the signature," said Old King Brady. "By

this afternoon we shall know positively whether that signature to the will is a forgery or not."

"And if it is?"

"We'll have to run down Mason and make him pay the penalty of his crime," replied the veteran detective, decisively.

They then went up to the Dalton house.

Lizzie was at home and heard what Kelly confessed.

Her joy and astonishment knew no bounds, and she cried:

"Then there is some probability that my poor father yet lives!"

"Yes, indeed," replied Harry, "and it is our belief that he is still concealed down South in the big swamp on his estate. We are going back there to investigate the matter."

"And I sincerely hope you will be successful in finding him," fervently replied the girl. "In fact, I am so anxious about the matter that I shall go down to Swamp Angel myself as soon as I can get my affairs so regulated here that I can go away."

"Then we shall meet there."

"I hope so. And if your work is going to keep you in the vicinity of our place, I want you to make your headquarters there."

They thanked her for the invitation and after some further talk they left the house and headed for the writing-expert's office.

The professor was located on Broadway near Chambers street.

He was in when they called.

They had furnished him with several check-vouchers, and other specimens of Mr. Dalton's handwriting procured at his office.

He greeted them warmly and asked, with a smile:

"I suppose you are curious to learn the result of my labors?"

"We are," assented Old King Brady, taking a chew of tobacco.

"I've finished my investigations."

"And what is the result?"

"That signature is a rank forgery."

"A poor one?"

"Very."

"Let us see."

"I'll magnify the writing."

He had a projecting machine, and, lighting it, he placed the signature on the will and several more signatures of Mr. Dalton in the machine.

The names were reflected on a sheet, in enormous proportions.

Three were exactly alike, but the fourth was entirely unlike them.

Magnified, the finest lines of the writing were now as coarse as a broom handle, so that every little mark was plainly visible.

"Explanations are useless here," said the expert, smilingly. "You can easily see for yourself all I could tell you. The three signatures which are alike are taken from a check, a letter and a bill. You will notice there isn't the slightest deviation in any of the lines from the fixed method Mr. Dalton had of signing his name. The odd-looking signature is the one affixed to the will. Here you will see that the loops, straight lines, curves and angles are all entirely unlike the original; the width of the lines and shading are different, and the angle at which the letters are set is not the same as that in the others."

The Bradys saw all this and more, too.

In fact, they had every evidence before them that the will was a base forgery and they were well satisfied.

With this fact established, they went to the Central office.

Here they encountered their chief.

Old King Brady detailed to him all that transpired, and he listened very attentively until the detective finished.

Then he pondered a moment, and said:

"The whole thing is a big plot on Mason's part to get his uncle's money and daughter at one swoop."

"We've clearly established Mason's guilt, sir."

"Very true. He's a bad egg. Capture him and you may find out what he has done with Oliver Dalton."

"I've become convinced of another fact since finding out what a villain that fellow is," said Old King Brady.

"To what do you allude?"

"Well, you recollect that when we began this case it was for the purpose of finding out who was stealing money from the broker's mail," said the detective.

"I'm aware of that."

"In view of all that happened, it begins to look as if Mason was the guilty party the Federal Government is after."

"It wouldn't surprise me a bit if you brought home that crime to his door," said the chief. "If, as you say, he had such extensive control of the business, he must have handled all the mail. It would then have been an easy matter for him to purloin the contents of many of the envelopes without being detected."

"The misfortune now is that he's gone so we cannot set a trap to catch him in the act," said Old King Brady. "If anything now is found out about the matter, it will

only be learned from Mason himself making a clean breast of the crooked work."

"Convict him of his other misdeeds," said the chief, lighting a cigar, "and you'll have evidence enough to send the villain to jail for a long time. If Mr. Dalton is dead, you can lay the crime at his door, for he was the only person in the world who hoped to be benefited by the demise of his benefactor."

It was late when the Bradys took leave of the chief.

On the following afternoon they were ready to depart from New York, and they each wore a clever disguise.

While Old King Brady in boots and whiskers might have passed for a respectable old farmer, Harry had every appearance of being a typical Texan cowboy.

They proceeded downtown by separate routes.

Harry crossed over to the west side of the city and boarding a Belt Line horse-car, he paid his fare and glanced around.

The boy's picturesque costume and fierce big mustache attracted the attention of all the passengers.

He returned their curious stares with interest, and looking from one to the other, his gaze finally rested upon a negro sitting in a corner of the car with a big black-enamel valise on his lap.

Young King Brady could hardly repress a start.

The negro was Sim Johnson!

"Great Scott!" he muttered. "It's Mason's friend, the valet. Where is the black rascal going with that big valise? Shall I put the nippers on him? What is he doing over here on West street?"

He thought it over.

Harry's first impulse was to arrest the man.

Cool second-thought restrained him, however, and he muttered softly:

"No. I'll shadow him and find out where he is going. It will be time enough to arrest him when I find he's trying to get away."

He kept a wary eye on the coon after that.

Johnson rode down to the foot of Liberty street and alighted.

To Harry's astonishment he saw the darky buy a ticket for Swamp Angel, and then the truth flashed across the boy's mind.

"He's going to the very place I'm heading for," thought the boy, "and he must be doing that at the request of Ronald Mason. In that case he's sure to meet the man. What a good decoy duck he will make! By Jove, I've only got to shadow him and he will lead me right to the very place where his employer is concealed. Then we'll be enabled to arrest Mason right away."

The coon crossed the river, with Harry on the same boat.

Old King Brady met Harry on the Jersey side and Young King Brady told his partner about Sim.

A smile of intense satisfaction crossed the old detective's bewhiskered face, and he strode along behind the valet and saw him board the train.

The Bradys followed.

Shortly afterward the cars started.

On the following night they all alighted at Swamp Angel and the negro took to the railroad track and started to tramp in the direction of the swamp where Mr. Dalton's body had disappeared.

There was plenty shelter from the negro's gaze for the detectives, and they silently and stealthily sped along in pursuit of their decoy.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE QUICKSAND.

"Halt, or you're a dead man!"

It was a stern command, in a rough voice.

The Bradys paused near some rocks and saw two rifle barrels aimed over the top of them, in the hands of two masked men.

Hearing the voice, Johnson had come to a sudden stop and glanced around.

Just as the detectives were about to reach for the revolvers they carried, the same rough voice sang out, quickly:

"Hands up!"

The sharp click of the rifle hammers followed.

It would have been sheer folly to disobey that command, for the masked men had a bead drawn on the officers.

In that lonely place no one would know they got killed.

They felt chagrined over the careless way in which they walked right into the ambushade, and raised their hands.

"Goldurn yer!" cried Old King Brady. "What on airth dew yer mean by holdin' up a feller citizen this way?"

One of the masked men emerged from behind the rocks.

He was nicely clad, wore a big felt hat, had long hair hanging down on his shoulders and a brown mustache on his upper lip.

This man looked like a southern planter.

A hideous half mask of black hid the upper half of his face and the Winchester he carried was aimed at the officers.

He intently studied Old King Brady's face a few moments, then asked:

"What were you skulking along after that negro for?"

The moment the officers heard his voice they recognized him, despite his disguise, as Ronald Mason.

Affecting an indignant air, Old King Brady growled:

"Goldurn it, who wuz afollerin' that nigger?"

"You were."

"No, we wuzn't!"

"I'll find out about that! Hey, Sim!"

"Am dat yo', Massa Ronald?" cried the coon, running back.

"Yes, and here are two fellows sneaking along on your trail."

"Wha' fo'?" demanded the darky.

"Hanged if I know. Look at them."

"Fo' de Lawd sakes, dey was on de train wif me, sah."

"They were, hey? That's suspicious."

"Oh, go 'long!" said Old King Brady. "Can't a man walk along here without bein' held up like a burglar by you chaps? Gosh durn it, if it's robbery yer up ter, it's mighty little money you'll find on me."

"We ain't thieves."

"Wall, I'm blamed if yer don't look like it."

"Sim, take a good look at those gents and if you happen to find any guns about their clothes just relieve them of them."

"Yassah," said the coon.

He got so close to Old King Brady that he suddenly detected the fact that the detective was wearing a wig and false beard.

The cunning negro did not let on what he had seen.

But he suddenly grabbed them and pulled them off the old detective.

It effected a startling change in Old King Brady's appearance, and Mason recognized him at once, and roared furiously:

"I'll be blest if it ain't those cussed detectives again!"

"Lawd amassy!" groaned Sim, all his courage departing, and he made a sudden dash for the swamp and rushed away, spattering up showers of mud and water.

The Bradys swiftly drew their pistols.

It was clear that a fight was imminent.

The man with the rifle pulled the trigger, intending to shoot the old detective, but his weapon missed fire.

"Run!" yelled his companion behind the rocks, and he shot at Harry just as Mason made a dash for shelter.

A bullet whistled by dangerously close to Young King Brady's cheek, and he discharged a shot at the running man.

It carried off his hat.

The next moment the three rascals vanished.

Harry and his partner made an effort to find them, but failed.

All hands had gone plunging among the weeds and shrubbery, and in an instant were swallowed up by the verdure.

"A warm welcome, Harry," said Old King Brady, when they met on the railroad track five minutes later.

"I'm sorry Mason caught us shadowing the valet."

"It gave our presence here away, and will put them on their guard."

"Can't be helped. We know Mason is really here, however. He's desperate now, and won't hesitate to murder us if he can, to avoid arrest."

"Who was the other masked man, I wonder?"

"Must be the party who helped him to get the box off the train, and carry the body of Mr. Dalton to the house in the swamp."

"Oh, Mason hadn't a hand in stealing the box from the baggage car. He got off before the cars reached this point of the swamp, I'm sure."

"Then that fellow must have had other helpers, as he could not very well have done the job unaided," said Harry.

"Let us get around to the board walk, and try to reach the hut. If they are heading for that building, we can meet them there."

"Here's a quicker way," said the boy, pointing at a boat.

It was a crude affair, half hidden in the reeds.

They embarked, and rowed out through the lagoons.

The water was mostly quite shallow, but there were places where the detectives could not see bottom.

In a short time they reached the island in the swamp, and, leaping ashore, they ran over to the hut.

One glance inside was enough for them.

"The place is deserted," was Harry's comment.

"Wait for them. We may have headed off the rascals."

"If they saw us coming here, they will shun the place."

"There was no way to conceal our movements."

An hour went by quietly enough.

Not a soul ventured near the place, and Harry grew restless.

He made a circuit of the island, scanning every section of the swamp, and finally returned to his partner, and said:

"We've had our labor for our pains."

"No sign of them, eh?"

"No. Could they have gone to the Dalton residence?"

"More than likely. As Mason is skulking about this neighborhood, he, of course, must be living in the big house."

"Come on over there then."

"Get in the boat. It will save us making a detour of the swamp."

They saw numerous channels by following which they could reach the mainland quite close to the big house.

Gliding slowly over the water, the boat finally touched the shore, and the two detectives debarked and pulled the punt up on the bank.

There were rocks, trees and bushes all around.

As they stood looking for a path, a voice reached their ears, saying:

"Sim, where are you?"

Then the negro answered:

"Near de sho', Massa Ronald."

Old King Brady held up his finger warningly.

"There they are!" he whispered.

Just then Mason's voice was heard again:

"Keep on shouting, Sim, so I can locate you."

"Dis way! Dis way!" cried the darky.

The detectives glided in the direction of the voice, and, passing through the shrubbery, they parted the bushes, and entered a clearing.

A little brook was gushing from the midst of the verdure, and emptied its waters into a shallow pool, the bottom of which was composed of pure white sand.

Pausing on the brink of this pool, the detectives glanced searchingly around, and heard the negro laughing amid the shrubbery.

"He's over there!" said Harry, pointing across the pool.

"Watch a moment, and we may locate him," Old King Brady whispered.

Standing stock still, they listened intently.

In fact, they were so absorbed in looking for the negro that they did not see two men crouching in the bushes close behind them.

They were the two masked fellows who first assailed them.

As stealthily as tigers, they crept from their covert.

When but a few feet separated them from the Bradys, they made a combined rush, with their hands outstretched.

The alert detectives heard them coming, and glanced around.

Before they could defend themselves, however, the on-comers struck them heavily, and knocked the detectives into the pool.

Too late the Bradys realized that the negro had been decoying them purposely to that dangerous place.

For, the moment they fell into the pool, they sank in the sand.

Trying to scramble to their feet, the Bradys found their legs going down in the treacherous sand rapidly.

Then the truth flashed across their minds, and Harry cried:

"By Heavens, they've thrown us into a bed of quick-sand!"

"Try to reach the shore—quick!" panted Old King Brady.

They made the most desperate efforts, but only floundered around helplessly, and each moment got caught more firmly in the deadly sand.

CHAPTER XII.

AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND.

The moment Ronald Mason and his companion hurled Old and Young King Brady in the bed of quick-sand, they ran away.

Dodging behind the rocks, they hid themselves.

By this time the sun was rising.

Finding it impossible to extricate themselves from the deadly grip of the treacherous sand, the detectives ceased their struggles.

"It's useless, Harry," said the old sleuth, despairingly.

"If we remain passive, we'll soon sink beyond our depth, and perish."

"Yell at the top of your voice. Some one may hear us."

"Help! Help! Help!" shouted Harry.

They were shouting this way when Mason came from behind the rocks, pulled off his mask, and grinned sardonically at them.

Finally he said in sarcastic tones:

"Well, how do you like dying by inches?"

"This was cowardly of you, Mason," said Old King Brady, bitterly.

"It's my way of gaining revenge."

"Why don't you give us a fair show to fight for our lives?"

"Because you are so dangerous you might beat me."

"Help us out of here, and act like a man."

"I won't. See all the harm you've done me. In the first place, you've cheated me out of a fortune. In the second place, you prevented me from getting the girl I loved. In short, you've baffled me at every turn, after I made the most elaborate preparations to succeed."

"We did our duty."

"Oh, that be hanged! You'd kill me to do your duty, and I'm justified in ridding myself of such enemies as you two are."

"If you hadn't done wrong you would not have had us after you."

"Well, I know that very well. It's stale news. But I had an object in what I did, and you interfered and foiled me. I didn't do any one much harm, and——"

"You robbed Oliver Dalton and put him out of the way."

"Robbed him?"

"Yes. You pilfered money from the mail."

"How do you know I did?" asked Mason, with a startled look.

"Dalton employed us to expose you, and we'd been at his house on the night you and Johnson were posing in Thirty-sixth street as undertakers."

"The deuce! I didn't know Dalton knew."

"You admit, then, that you did rob his mail?"

"No use denying it now," laughed Mason. "I freely admit that I did get away with thousands of his dollars in that way. No use trying to conceal it. You'll never get out of there alive to prosecute me. And even if you do, you've got enough other evidence against me to send me up as high as a kite."

Despite his peril Old King Brady felt triumphant.

They now knew who the mail thief was.

By this time the Bradys were sunk in the quick-sand to their hips, and were unable to move in any direction.

They kept sinking every moment with horrible rapidity.

"Well, we can't arrest you now for that crime," said Old King Brady, "but I've got a feeling that we shall do so yet."

"Humbug! You are getting dopy. You can't escape from there."

"Are you going to abandon us to our fate?"

"Yes; I wish you a merry voyage over the River Styx!"

And with a mocking bow and a jeering laugh, he strode away.

The Bradys began to shout for help again, and Mason paused, and, darting an angry look at them, he shouted threateningly:

"If you don't shut up we'll shoot you!"

"So much the better," replied Old King Brady. "It will end our misery."

"Oh, we won't shoot to kill," growled the scowling rascal, "but we will riddle your carcasses with painful wounds."

"Mason, you're a fiend."

"Am I? That's a compliment."

And with a short laugh he disappeared in the bushes.

Once more the detectives began to call for assistance, for they now were sunk to their armpits in the sand.

Their voices sounded hoarse and smothered, and a despairing feeling was creeping into their hearts, but they kept on shouting.

Presently Mason shouted at them from the bushes in angry tones:

"Are you going to shut up?"

"No!" roared Old King Brady.

"Then I'll pepper you!"

And bang! went his rifle, and a bullet whistled by their heads.

"Keep on yelling, Harry!" gasped the old detective.

"Help! Help!" shouted the boy, obediently.

Bang! went Mason's rifle again.

The ball grazed Harry's cheek, and stung like a bee.

Just then the shots and yells were heard by an old track-walker of the railroad, and he rushed around the swamp shouting:

"All right! I'm coming!"

This unwelcome voice to Mason caused a look of alarm to flit over his pale features, and, fearing arrest, he sped away.

The villain calculated that the detectives would be buried out of sight long before assistance could reach them.

But the Bradys were cheered up wonderfully.

They kept on shouting, and the track-walker finally found them by being guided by the tones of their voices.

Only their heads stuck above the water.

He stared at the pair in astonishment a moment, and cried:

"What in thunder are you doing in there?"

"Buried in quick-sand!" gasped Harry. "Help us—quick!"

The old fellow was startled and rushed in among the trees.

For a minute the detectives thought he deserted them. But he soon reappeared with a sapling he had cut with his pocket-knife.

Standing on the embankment, he reached out the end to Old King Brady, who lifted his hands above the water and grasped it.

"Pull!" gasped the detective.

The track-walker used all his strength, for the sand clung to the old detective tenaciously, and dragged him up.

Around him the sand stirred up and the water bubbled and eddied as it rushed into the opening left by his body.

After a fearful struggle Old King Brady was dragged free of the sand, and drawn to the shore, panting and drenched.

Harry had sunk to his chin.

It was only by keeping his head thrown back that he kept his mouth above water, and his two hands were raised.

Quick to act, and paying no heed to his own exhaustion, Old King Brady grasped the pole and thrust it out to the boy.

Half gone, Harry took hold.

Between the old detective and the track-walker he was hauled up and pulled ashore in a half-fainting condition. It was some time ere he revived.

But when his faculties returned, and the old track-walker had been thanked, the boy told their benefactor all that had happened.

He was surprised and indignant.

"That man Mason is a devil!" he exclaimed.

"We'll make short work of him for this terrible deed," said Harry.

"And I wish I could help you."

Shortly afterward the track-walker departed to resume his lonely tramp along the road-bed with a sledge over his shoulder to replace any spike or frogs dislodged by the passing cars.

Left alone, the Bradys glanced at each other, and Harry remarked softly:

"Our time hasn't come to perish yet, partner."

"I felt sure of that, even before that man came to our rescue."

"We've found out now what a desperate man Mason is."

"And we'll have to resort to drastic measures to get the best of him."

"How do you feel?"

"In a good humor to fight."

"Then let's go up to the house and tackle him."

"He will be surprised to see us alive."

They were thoroughly rested now, and, having examined their pistols and found them in working order, they proceeded up the hill.

Within a short time they reached the house, and rang the front door bell for admittance.

George Scott, the big negro whom they had met at the gate when they were there before, opened the door and grinned at them.

"Hello, George!" said Harry. "How are you?"

"Right smart, sah, thank you," chuckled the darky.

"Is Mr. Mason in?"

"Good Lawdy, no," replied the colored man. "An' de blame rascal better not come in dis yere house, or I'll blow de roof ob his head off, sho's yo's bo'n. I

done know all he's been a-doin', I does."

"Why, who gave you the news?" asked Harry, in surprise.

"Missy Lizzie, sah. She arrive heah ter-day, bress her heart, an' she seen yo' a-comin', an' done tell me fo' ter ask yo' right inter de parlor. She be downstairs in a moment, Massa Brady. Come right in, gemmen, come right in."

And he led the detectives into the parlor, flung open the blinds, and left the room.

In a few moments the door opened and Lizzie Dalton stepped into the room and approached them, with a smile and extended hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

NICK WIFFLES EXPLAINS A MYSTERY.

"So you found Ronald Mason prowling around the swamp, after you traced Sim Johnson down here from New York?" asked the broker's daughter, after the first salutations were over, and all were seated.

"We were under the impression that he had been making this house his abode," replied Old King Brady, in some surprise.

"No, indeed. George, the caretaker, declares that nobody but he and his wife have been in this house since you two gentlemen were here last."

"That is very strange," said the old detective.

"Why do you think so?" asked the girl, curiously.

"It puzzles me to account for Mason haunting the swamp and never coming near this house. Why is he hanging around that dismal swamp? What is the attraction that keeps him there with no friends or companions but those two negroes?"

"Was the other masked man a negro?"

"Yes. I saw the rascal's black skin plainly."

"Perhaps he is in the swamp to avoid arrest."

"No, no. He would not select such a malarious hole when there are so many pleasanter places for him to abide in. There is a deeper reason behind it. We must find out what it is."

"When he learns I am here, Mr. Brady, he may take it into his head to continue his persecutions."

"Not while we are here to protect you."

"Then you will be my guests?" eagerly asked the girl.

"Nothing would afford us greater pleasure."

"That makes my mind feel much easier."

"If your father should yet be alive and they should have him concealed somewhere around this swamp, it might account for their presence here."

"Yes, yes," she assented, eagerly. "You've proven conclusively that my poor father was not the man found in the river."

"In view of the fact that the game is up, so far as Mason is concerned, I can't fathom any object he may have in keeping your father a prisoner any longer. That is, of course, presuming he really has your father alive and imprisoned anywhere."

"Well," said the girl, reflectively, "I cannot give an opinion on that point at all. I can only keep on hoping that you may soon find my father, dead or alive. It would end this dreadful suspense and uncertainty about his fate."

At this juncture George's wife stuck her kinky head in at the door and announced that dinner was awaiting them.

The Bradys were shown to their rooms.

Having washed and made their toilets as best they could, they went down and joined Lizzie in the dining-room.

After that, several days and nights of hard work ensued.

The Bradys abandoned their disguises, merely wearing their top boots, and thoroughly scoured the swamp.

Not a trace of Mason or his two negroes was found.

It nettled the detectives, and finally drove them to the conclusion that the rascally trio had gone away.

Assured of this, the Bradys searched Swamp Angel.

No one there had seen anything of the men in question.

It therefore seemed quite evident that they cleared out of that neighborhood entirely, and assured of this, the Bradys started for home afoot that night.

"We shall have to leave here to-morrow," said the old sleuth, "and get upon their track elsewhere, Harry."

"It's a question how to find their trail," the boy answered, dubiously.

"As they more than likely went by rail, we could easily make inquiries of the passing train crews for some tidings of them."

Just then the pounding of horses' hoofs upon the road reached their ears, and they rushed behind a heap of rocks.

Parting some bushes growing there, they peered out.

The moon was rising in the cloudy sky, lighting up the dusty road, and the detectives caught view of two men on horseback.

They were coming from the direction of Pine Creek, the next railroad station beyond Swamp Angel, and carried bundles of provisions.

As Harry's glance fell upon the pair, he grasped Old King Brady's arm, and muttered in low, excited tones:

"It's Mason and Johnson, or some other negro."

"Hush! Keep quiet!" muttered Old King Brady.

Up came the horsemen, blissfully ignorant of the fact that the detectives were watching them, and Mason was laughing and saying:

"The fools were searching the swamp for us during the past three days, Nick, and they couldn't find a sign of us."

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed the negro. "'Specs dey am not so smart as dey fink dey am. An' what's mo', dey nebber find us."

Just then the detectives sprang from their covert.

Landing in the road in front of the two startled men, they grasped the horses' bridles at the bits, and the frightened beasts paused and reared up.

"Whoa!" yelled Mason. "What's that? Whoa!"

Old King Brady aimed a pistol up in his face.

"It's me!" he cried.

"Thunder!" roared the man.

"You throw your hands up."

"What for?"

"Because we want you!"

A sneering laugh pealed from Mason's lips.

He dug spurs into his horse's flanks, and the brute sprang forward, maddened with pain, and knocked the old detective down.

Over him bounded the horse, and the next moment it went galloping away into the woods a few yards ahead, and vanished.

Harry had been more fortunate.

As soon as he stopped the negro's horse, the black man raised a stick he carried and aimed a blow at the boy's head.

"G'way f'om dar!" he yelled.

Harry bounded out of reach of the blow.

The descending stick hit the horse and it gave a sudden leap that dismounted the man, and went plunging away at a furious rate.

The negro landed on his back on the ground.

In a moment Harry pounced upon him.

Pushing his pistol in the man's face, he cried:

"Surrender, you black fiend, or I'll bore you!"

"Don't shoot, boss!" roared the coon, frantically.

"Are you going to submit?"

"Yassah, yassah!"

"Without a fight?"

"Fo' sho' I is."

"Roll over on your face."

"Ober I go! Don't fire!" said the coon, turning over.

"Now, put your hands on your back."

"Heah dey am, boss!"

And the negro did as he was told.

Out came Harry's handcuffs, "click!" they snapped on his wrists, and in another instant the man was a prisoner.

When Old King Brady reached the boy he was pulling a big navy revolver out of the man's hip pocket.

"Got him, Harry?"

"Safe, Old King Brady."

"Get him upon his feet."

They raised the man, and now got a good square look at him.

He was a short, heavily-built fellow, clad in rags, and had as villainous a face as any they had ever seen.

The man was trembling with fear.

It was plain he was an arrant coward.

When the detectives looked him over, Old King Brady asked him:

"Say, what's your name?"

"Nick Wiffles."

"Where do you live?"

"In de swamp."

"Ain't you the man who built a bonfire on the railroad track some time ago, to stop a train from running into an obstruction?"

"I is."

"And you did it to stop the train?"

"He done telled me ter do it, boss."

"So you could steal a box containing Mr. Dalton's body from the baggage car during the confusion?"

"Dat's about de size ob it."

"And you got Dalton's body out of the box and carried it into the swamp?"

"I did."

"Into the hut?"

"Yassah."

"Were you alone?"

"All alone."

"When you got the body in the hut, what did you do with it?"

"I ain't a-gwine ter tell yer."

"All this was prearranged between you and Mason, wasn't it?"

"Yassah."

Old King Brady smiled. He had cleared up another mystery.

CHAPTER XIV.

EXPOSING THE SWAMP MYSTERY.

The Bradys were surprised at the prompt manner in which the negro answered the questions put to him. But they presently observed that he was keeping a wary eye upon their revolvers, and evidently feared to get shot if they caught him lying to them.

Moreover, Old King Brady showed plainly by the questions he asked that he was familiar with the true inwardness of the things he accused Nick of. It made the darky think the old detective knew more about the case than he actually did know.

Seeing his advantage, Old King Brady said:

"Now, see here, Mr. Wiffles, you know we are detectives, don't you?"

"Ob c'ose," admitted the coon, in gloomy tones.

"You tried to shoot us, and you tried to kill us in the quick-sand. That gives us the right to put you on trial for your life, charged with attempted murder. You are in a pretty bad fix, old man. I wouldn't give two cents for your life. You know what little evidence is required here to hang a Georgia nigger. Therefore you can realize what your fate will be."

Nick began to cry.

Big tears rolled down his cheeks.

Falling on his knees, he cried in despairing tones:

"Oh, massa officer, hab mercy on me!"

"We are inclined to pity you, as you were merely an ignorant tool in the hands of a very wicked man. But of course you can't expect us to be lenient unless you aid us to capture Ronald Mason, and recover Mr. Dalton, either dead or alive."

"What yo' want me ter do, boss?" eagerly asked the miserable coon.

"Tell us where to find Mason."

"He lib in dat hut in de swamp."

"Why does he live there?"

"So's he kin watch his prisoner."

"Who is that—Mr. Dalton?"

"Yassah."

"Oh! Then he's got Dalton in the swamp, eh?"

"Fo' suah, boss."

"In the hut?"

"Dat's whar he was."

"Why is Mason holding him a prisoner?"

"Dunno. But I 'spects it's kaze he am a-tryin' fo' ter git de ole man ter sign a paper, an' de broker won't do it."

"What sort of a paper?"

"A bank check."

"I see. He wants to get a genuine signature to it."

"Wants all ob Massa Dalton's balance what am left in de bank."

"How much does it amount to?"

"Ober \$75,000."

"Dalton refuses?"

"Obstinate as a mule."

"I don't blame him. Now, where is Dalton kept hidden?"

"Dat I can't say, boss. Somewheres in de swamp."

"Is Mason forcing Dalton?"

"Torturing de ole gemman."

"What a shame! Now, tell me: On the night you got Dalton from the box, was the old gentleman drugged?"

"Only tied hand and foot an' gagged."

"Then he was uninjured?"

"Only half starbed."

"When you carried him into the hut, he fought with you?"

"Fearful! Yo' see, he had worked his hands free from de bonds. Done gib me a strong tussle when I was a-gwine ter take him into—into——"

"What?"

"His prison, sah."

"If you don't tell where it is, we shall shoot you, sir!"

As Old King Brady made this threat he pushed his revolver against Nick's forehead, and the coon gave a wild yell of terror.

"Fo' hebbin's sake," he groaned, "doan fire!"

"I'll solve the mystery of this swamp, or I'll murder you!" fiercely cried the old detective. "Do you hear me, sir?"

A cold sweat burst out all over the darky.

He gazed around in alarm, and gasped hoarsely:

"If I tell, will yo' gib me away?"

"To whom?"

"Massa Mason."

"Of course not."

"Den listen. Dar's a tunnel under de flo' ob dat hut."

"Where does it lead to?"

"A big cave under de island in de swamp."

"How do you reach it?"

"Froo a trap-doo' in one corner, covered wid earf."

"And that's where Mason is keeping his prisoner, eh?"

"Yassah. We free lib dar."

"Is that where you carried Dalton on the night you took him from the cars?" demanded Old King Brady.

"Ob co'se," replied the coon. "An' if Mason find out dat I done tell yo' about it, 'spect he'd kill me like a dog."

"No doubt he would," said the old detective. "He is capable of doing almost any kind of villainy. Where were you to-night?"

"Bringin' food fo' de cave, as our supply ran out."

"I thought as much."

Just then Harry muttered:

"Well, the great swamp mystery turns out to be a very simple matter, now that we fully understand it, Old King Brady."

"This man may be lying, Harry."

"We can easily prove what he has told us."

"Yes, indeed. And if we find Mr. Dalton kept a prisoner it will go mighty hard with Mason when we capture him. I'm glad to hear that the old broker had the nerve to resist his demands, for it looks to me as if his nephew were trying to amass all the money he can get his hands on in order to escape from here as soon as possible."

They questioned Nick for a while longer.

Then they brought him to the town, and had him locked up.

Returning to the Dalton mansion, and meeting Lizzie, they told her what they discovered by pumping the negro.

She was, of course, delighted to learn that her father was alive, and was eager for the detectives to go to his rescue.

"We'll make the attempt to-morrow morning," said Harry.

"I don't see why you are putting it off so long," exclaimed the girl, petulantly. "I can get you all the help you may need."

"Let us work our own way," quietly answered the boy. "Knowing that we've captured Nick, and may have pumped him, Mason will very likely be on the lookout for us, and meet us with a hot reception. By waiting, it will lead him to think we don't know anything about his subterranean abode. Then, when we attack, we will have a better chance of taking him by surprise."

The girl pondered a moment.

Cool reflection showed her the wisdom of Harry's plan.

"You are right," she admitted, reluctantly. "I'm so anxious to have something done for my poor father's instant relief that I can hardly suppress my impatience, though."

"We understand your feelings in the matter," replied Old King Brady, quietly. "But we know best how to handle your cousin. If you will leave the matter to our judgment, we will stand a better chance of making a success of our plans."

It required no argument to convince the girl, and she sighed, and said:

"Very well, Mr. Brady. Do as you think best. All I ask is that you will not lose any time about going to my father's rescue."

They discussed the matter fully that night.

In the morning the detectives returned to the swamp.

A careful examination was made of the dreary waste of mud and water, but they failed to see any signs of their men.

It was a bright, sunny day, but a dense vapor hung over the marshy land, and the officers went through it to the island.

They expected by coming so early in the morning to catch their enemies sleeping. But a discovery Harry made dispelled this idea.

He caught view of a tiny stream of smoke rising from some rocks.

Upon examining the spot, he found a natural chimney coming up through the ground, out of which the smoke was pouring.

When he returned to his partner and told him about it, he said:

"That's evidence enough that there's a cave under the island, and the column of smoke shows that Mason and the valet have started a fire to cook their breakfast. When we get in, we are likely to find them at that occupation. Are you ready for the attempt?"

"Certainly," assented Young King Brady.

They walked over to the hut, and entered.

Nick had explained where the trap was located, and they soon found a cunningly hidden ring, and pulled it upward.

A door, covered with earth, was raised.

It revealed a flight of damp stone stairs.

The Bradys drew their pistols, got their dark lanterns ready for use, and descended the stairs for a distance of fifteen feet.

They found themselves in a big natural cavern, and as they flashed their lantern lights around in the gloom, a cry of the most intense astonishment burst from their lips.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PRISONER IN THE CAVE.

"Harry, this is the most astonishing place I ever was in in all my life."

"It certainly is wonderful, Old King Brady."

The detectives were gazing in amazement where the lights of their lanterns rested, and beheld a wonder of nature very seldom seen.

In the first place, they were in a huge cavern of circular shape.

The flight of stairs wound around one of the walls, and beside the bottom step there was a yawning hole in the ground fifty feet in diameter.

It seemed to go straight down into the earth.

Harry picked up a big stone and dropped it into the opening.

They listened intently, but failed to hear it strike bottom in the pit.

"This hole must be of enormous depth!" the boy exclaimed, "else we would have heard that stone hit the bottom."

"Look at the church organ rising up from the depths against that side of the abyss," said Old King Brady, pointing across the chasm.

His light rested upon a number of stalactites forming what looked exactly like the pipes of an enormous organ.

Beneath them was a bank of keys.

The silence of death prevailed.

Nature had wrought a wonderful formation there.

The entire interior of the cave was pure white, looking like camphor.

Huge pendants like great icicles hung from the ceiling, and similar formations rose from the floor.

In some cases the ends of the pendants nearly touched the points of the stalagmites rising from the bottom, and not a few were dropping pure, clear water, which formed little pools that ran in rivulets to the great well, and there vanished in the bowels of the earth.

It was quite cold there, yet there was a strong, fresh, invigorating taste to the air, which was agreeable to the lungs.

At various parts of the walls were other natural formations, and among them, in a niche, the figure of a woman holding a child.

"For beauty, the Mammoth Caves of Kentucky cannot compare with this place," said Young King Brady, in tones of delight.

"We are forgetting our object," said the old officer.

"True. But no one is in this place."

"Let us see if there are not adjoining caverns."

"Explore those openings in the wall."

He pointed at an arched aperture, and they crept into it on their hands and knees, and went ahead a dozen yards, then paused.

They were on the brink of another chasm.

A rift split the passage in two crosswise.

It looked as if some convulsion of nature had ripped the earth apart, and they crept back to the main cavern and tried another opening.

It was possible to stand upright in this place.

The passage wound and zigzagged.

Following it for some distance, they suddenly caught view of a lurid glare ahead as they turned an abrupt bend, and halted.

"Put out your light," whispered Old King Brady, in warning tones.

"See them?" asked the boy, complying.

"No, but they must have kindled that fire."

"Advance carefully now."

They got down on their hands and knees again, and went on to the spot where the passage opened into a smaller cave.

Here the sight was prettier.

The floor, walls and ceiling were a delicate shade of pink, and the icicles formed many fantastic shapes that sparkled in the firelight.

Pausing, the detectives now saw that the place was about fifty feet in diameter, with a vaulted roof, through a hole in which the smoke from a big log fire was pouring upward.

Upon the floor there were some skins of animals, benches, boxes, dishes and other articles used for cooking and comfort.

Two men were lying upon the ground smoking pipes before the big fire, and as the lights glowed upon their faces, the detectives observed that they were Roland Mason and Sim Johnson.

Both were conversing.

"Sim," the white man was saying, "are you quite sure the detectives have got Nick locked up in jail?"

"Dat's whut I heered dis mornin' in de town, Massa Ronald," replied the negro,

in serious tones.

"He may give us away, Sim."

"If he do, Ise gwine ter gib it to him."

"You won't have the chance if he's locked up."

They both laughed heartily at this grim remark.

When Sim's mirth abated, he said thoughtfully:

"Peahs ter me, if dem yere 'tectives wuz a-gwine ter pump any news outen dat coon, dey would hab done it las' night, an' come right heah aftah us, sah."

"Their absence is all that relieves my mind, Sim. I quite agree with your idea. Still, Nick may weaken later on, and make a clean breast of it."

"Hab we got ter stay heah much longer?"

"No. Old Dalton is losing his nerve."

"Gwine ter sign dat check?"

"Yes. He hasn't had anything to eat for three days, and his spirit is broken entirely. He's begging me for food."

"What yo' tell de ole fool?"

"I told him I'd feed him the moment he signs that check."

"An' he gwine ter do it, hey?"

"I'm going to tackle him once more. I'm sure he will obey now. You see, there's a balance of \$75,000 in Dalton's bank, in ready cash. It can't be drawn without a check, and I'm bound to get such a check. Once I have the money I'll let him go."

"Whar yo' go den?"

"England."

"An' take me?"

"So I promised you."

"De quicker yo' settle dat business, de better."

"Yes. It's too dangerous to remain around here much longer."

"Let's go and hab a look at de ole fellow now?"

"Very well. Light your lantern, and I'll get a fountain pen and a blank check."

They got upon their feet.

While the negro was procuring the light, Mason got his check, and they crossed the cavern, entered a narrow fissure in the wall, and vanished.

The detectives glided from their place of concealment.

Every word uttered had been heard by them.

They entered the fissure.

Some distance ahead was the light.

It suddenly disappeared around a bend, and the officers observed, its dim rays illuminating a small chamber, as black as midnight.

Reaching the end of the passage, the Bradys glanced through the big opening and saw a small cavern of the same crystal formation as the two other caves, excepting that everything here was black and dark brown from some chemical discoloration.

It was a gloomy place.

In the middle of the room was a huge rock.

An iron ring was mortised in the side of it, to which a short, rusty chain was fastened. This chain held a human being a prisoner by being padlocked around his ankle.

The man was Oliver Dalton.

But the detectives scarcely recognized him.

His face was pale and haggard, his eyes deeply sunken in their sockets, his hair dishevelled, and his face covered with a short beard.

From privations his figure was so shrunken that his clothing hardly fit him, and the garments were so dirty and torn that he looked like a tramp.

Mason and the negro had paused near him.

The villain stood looking at the pitiful object he had so basely wronged with a cold, calculating glance, and finally said to him:

"How are you feeling, Dalton?"

"Oh, you miserable cur——" began the old broker, bitterly.

"Shut up!" roared Mason, roughly interrupting him. "No raving!"

"You'll kill me yet."

"That makes little difference to me."

"For mercy's sake give me some food; I'm starving."

"Not till you obey me."

"Have you no pity left in you?"

"I'm simply determined to carry my point."

"This is horrible—inhuman!"

"Oh, I know very well it's unpleasant," testily answered Mason, "but you might have spared yourself all the suffering you have been undergoing for the past three days had you done as I asked. You know me, Dalton. I've started a desperate game to get your money, and I've been baffled at every turn by those accursed Bradys. This is my last resource to raise money enough to get out of the country, and, by Heavens, I'll win, or you'll die!"

The broker gazed steadily at him a moment.

In the hard, cruel expression of Mason's eyes he read his doom, and he was so overcome with absolute misery of mind and body that he leaned against the rock and cried like a child. All hope had left him.

He was broken down in body and spirit.

A cold, cynical smile hovered over Mason's face.

He was not moved by the signs of weakness his prisoner showed. On the contrary, he gloated over it.

This was the surest indication to him that Dalton was upon the verge of collapse, and intended to give in.

He waited for his victim to get over the first paroxysm of grief, and watched him as closely as a cat watches a mouse.

Finally he asked in sharp, metallic tones:

"Well, which shall it be—obey me, and sign a check, or remain chained here like a wild beast, and perish of starvation?"

For a moment there was a deep silence.

Slowly the prisoner removed his trembling hands from his wan, pinched face, and said in reproachful tones:

"I can't stand this any longer."

"Then you will sign the check?" eagerly asked Mason.

"Yes. And you will then give me my liberty?"

"The moment you affix your signature to this check, we will give you food. And the moment I get the money, you will get your liberty."

"Give me the check."

Mason drew the pen and paper from his pocket, eagerly strode over to the poor

wretch, and held them out to him.

But instead of taking the pen, Dalton gave one mighty leap, clutched the wretch by the throat with both hands, and, choking the villain till he grew black in the face, he yelled frantically:

"I've got you at last, you dog; and by the eternal, I'll kill you, if it's the last thing I do on earth! Die, confound you, die! And this is the vengeance I've been craving all through the moments of torture you've put me to in the past!"

He hurled Mason upon the floor, pinioned him to the ground, with a knee on his chest, and Sim, with an oath, rushed to his master's aid.

CHAPTER XVI.

ESCAPING FROM THE CAVES.

The Bradys were very much astonished by the violent turn affairs had taken. In the prisoner's desperate attack they saw the last expiring act of a wronged man thirsting to avenge his injuries.

It pleased them to see Mason caught in a trap.

But when the negro showed signs of attacking Mr. Dalton, they realized that it was about time for them to act.

Harry had a revolver in his hand.

Aiming at Sim, he fired.

The sudden report startled every one.

A yell of agony escaped the negro, and he paused and staggered back with a wound in his side which filled him with pain.

The shot caused Dalton to relax his awful grip.

Hoarsely gasping for air to breathe, Mason sprang to his feet.

"I'm shot!" groaned the coon.

"It's the detectives!" gasped Mason, seeing the Bradys.

"We'll get hung!" screamed Sim, in tones of horror.

"Run for the swamp passage!"

"Put out de light!"

Mason seized the lantern and hurled it to the ground.

There was a crash, a jingle of broken glass, then dense gloom.

The Bradys paused.

They heard the patter of rushing footsteps crossing the floor, and made violent efforts to get out and unmask their lanterns.

Only a few moments passed before they had a light flashing on the scene, and they swept it around the cavern.

But they saw nothing of the two villains.

They had made good their escape.

Mr. Dalton stood by the rock, trembling and anxious, and after a few moments of silence, he asked, eagerly:

"Who is that?"

"Friends," cheerily replied Harry.

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"Harry, the villains are gone."

"Can you see how they got out?"

"Yes. There's another tunnel."

"Let them be for the present, and help me liberate this man."

"Wait till I get something from the other cave to break that chain."

He hastened back to the living room.

After the lapse of a few minutes he returned with a file.

While he was cutting open the padlock, Mr. Dalton asked:

"May I ask who you are, gentlemen?"

"The Bradys," replied Harry, quietly.

"What!" gasped the prisoner, in astonished tones.

"We've been hunting for you a long time, and found you at last."

"This is wonderful!"

"Perhaps to you, but not to us."

"For mercy's sake explain matters."

Harry complied as concisely as he could.

When he finished the old broker was thoroughly amazed at the great crime Mason committed in order to rob him.

That it was a failure was due to the detectives, he easily foresaw.

He thanked them again and again, and said, sadly:

"Poor Lizzie! She was faithful to me through all."

"No one will be gladder to see you than she," said Harry.

"And she's so near me now?"

"Yes. In a quarter of an hour you can be with her."

"I feel renewed hope now."

"Will you please tell us how your rascally nephew first managed to get you into his power, Mr. Dalton?" asked Harry, in curious tones.

"It was a very simple plan," replied the old broker. "He knew that I was going to get you to run down the thief who was robbing my mail. But he did not know that I suspected him of the crime. At any rate, on the night you mentioned, I had

gone to the Union Club. A telegram reached me, saying you wished to see me at a house in Thirty-sixth street. I went there. Mason and my valet were waiting there for me. They attacked me. I shouted for help. They chloroformed me, bound and gagged me, put me in a box they had prepared for my reception, and—well, all became a blank."

"They had the box and wagon ready ahead, eh?"

"It was a prearranged plot," the broker replied. "That was evident. I came to my senses in the box, and realized that I was being carried off on a railway car. Then you opened the box. The next thing I knew, the box I was in was thrown from the car. The shock stunned me. When I recovered I found myself being carried over a swamp into a hut. The gag was off my mouth, and I shouted for help."

"Yes; we heard you."

"The negro who carried me brought me down here and secured me this way. Then Mason made his appearance. For the first time I then learned that he was the author of all my trouble. He was bound to secure my bank balance, and I refused to sign a check so he could get it. Infuriated over my persistent refusal, he tortured and starved me. The rest you probably know."

"We heard all they said this morning."

Just then Old King Brady finished cutting the lock, and the man was free and able to walk.

He was very weak, though, and the detectives had to support him.

"Do you know anything about the passage by means of which the villains escaped from here?" asked Old King Brady.

"Oh, yes. I've often explored this place," replied Mr. Dalton, readily. "It's a passage leading under the swamp to the mainland."

"Show us the way, and we will follow it."

"Come along, then, and in a few minutes we'll be out of here."

They entered the tunnel, and Old King Brady said to the broker:

"When I entered the Thirty-sixth street house the night you were abducted, I found a curious dagger lying on the floor, and blood-stains on the boards. These clues led me to suppose a murder had been committed there. Do you know anything about those things?"

"Yes," replied the broker. "The dagger was one I had purchased as a curiosity that evening from a shop in Fourth avenue. When those two men attacked me, I drew it, and cut the negro before they got the best of me by knocking it from my hand. Sim bound up his wound, and then they knocked me down and drugged me."

Old King Brady laughed.

"Another mystery solved," he muttered.

"You thought I was the victim, eh?"

"I did. But I see my error now."

"Daylight ahead," interposed Young King Brady just then.

"That's the exit from this tunnel," explained Mr. Dalton.

They left the passage among some rocks in the grounds above the house, and saw Lizzie Dalton near by.

She sat on a log gazing away toward the big swamp with a sad expression upon her pretty face.

Mr. Dalton became excited.

"Lizzie!" he shouted hoarsely.

She sprang to her feet as if electrified, glanced around at him with a joyful look beaming all over her face, and cried emotionally:

"Oh, papa!"

The next moment they rushed into each other's arms, and kissed and wept over each other, their hearts too full for utterance.

The Bradys turned away from the affecting scene.

"Guess everything's all right, Harry," muttered the old detective.

"Looks that way," replied the boy.

"We've got very little more to do now."

"Only to get the nippers on Mason and his black pal."

"Where in thunder could they have gone?"

"Let's notify the authorities along the line of the railroad in both directions to keep a lookout for the pair."

Acting upon this suggestion, they quietly stole away, leaving the reunited and happy father and daughter talking over past events.

Proceeding to Swamp Angel, and learning that neither of the villains had yet put in an appearance there, they got the telegraph instrument operating, and flashed a warning message all along the line.

News reached them that neither Mason nor Johnson had made any attempt to get away on the cars yet.

In discussing this on their way back to Dalton's the old detective came to a wise conclusion, when he said:

"After all, they ain't apt to show themselves for a while yet, Harry. Both know the game is up, and that we'll be on the lookout for them to escape. They'll expect us to make a bee line for the railroad depots the first thing. Therefore, they'll shun the stations."

"You think they'll remain concealed around the swamp a while?"

"It's more than likely. Now that we've got the railroad guarded so they can't escape, it will be best for us to watch the swamp, and I think we'll find them

lurking there until they think the excitement blows over. They won't expect us to look for them there. That will make our task all the easier, Harry."

"Suppose we secrete ourselves there to-night, then?"

"I'm agreeable. If we can pounce upon the pair while they're asleep, we will be spared the difficulty of a fight in taking them."

They finally reached the Dalton house in time for luncheon.

Both the old broker and his daughter greeted them warmly.

The detectives advised him not to go to New York, or to let on to any one that he was alive, until they had captured his enemies.

After supper, the Bradys departed for the swamp.

When they got around on the south side of the swamp, they heard the murmur of voices coming from a dense thicket.

"Hark! What's that?" muttered Harry, holding up his finger.

"Part the bushes and look through."

Harry moved the tangled shrubbery aside.

They had a clear and uninterrupted view of the broad expanse of swamp, and to their delight saw the two men they were hunting for.

The villains were only fifty yards from where the Bradys crouched.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

The waters of a lagoon washed the swampy shore directly in front of the place where the two detectives were crouching.

A flat-bottomed boat was tied to a log, and Sim Johnson was just in the act of casting it loose, when the detectives saw him.

Roland Mason sat in the stern, a big felt hat on his head, the wig and false mustache adjusted, and he was laughing heartily, and saying:

"Sim, we'll fool those detectives yet."

"Ise mighty glad we know wha' dey's gwine ter do," the coon answered.

"We wouldn't have known their plans if I hadn't gone over to the house to-day and listened outside the open window, to all they were saying to Oliver Dalton," replied the rascal.

Harry gave his partner a nudge.

Just then Sim exclaimed:

"De boat am free, sah."

"Jump in, then, and we'll row across the swamp."

"Yo' gwine ter hire dem horses to-night?"

"Of course. We must ride away from here on horseback, and get back into the

interior, as the railroad stations here are being watched for us. Once we are a day's travel from this accursed place, we can board the cars of some other road, and get down to New Orleans, where we'll be safe."

Sim chuckled audibly, for the plan pleased him immensely.

He was just about to jump into the boat, when Harry cried:

"Now!"

The Bradys rushed from their covert.

The two desperadoes were completely surprised by the sudden appearance of the two noted detectives.

"The jig is up, boys," said Old King Brady, as he covered his man.

Sim raised both hands above his head.

"Don't fire! I gibs in!" he roared, in terrified tones.

At the same moment Harry aimed his pistol at Mason and cried:

"You surrender, or I'll kill you, Mason!"

"Drop that gun, Brady!"

"Not till you give in," replied Harry.

"Then——"

Bang! went Mason's pistol.

He did not raise it to aim, but took the young detective unawares, and the ball grazed Harry's skull, and stunned him.

Dropping his pistol, he flung up his hands, reeled back, and fell over the side of the boat upon the mud, unconscious.

At the same moment Sim, electrified, sprang convulsively at Old King Brady and knocked the pistol aside.

It was discharged in the air.

The coon seized the detective's wrists, and in a moment a terrific struggle ensued between the pair.

Old King Brady thought his partner was killed.

It made him frantic with rage.

"You treacherous dogs! We might have expected such crooked work as this!" he cried. "But you won't escape me, I can tell you!"

"Help, Mason, help!" yelled the coon.

But Mason had discreetly seized the oars, and was then rowing away with all his strength, in a violent effort to escape.

The negro fought with the courage of despair.

But he was no match for Old King Brady.

The great detective gave his wrist a sudden twist that tore it out of the darky's grip, and caught hold of Sim by the throat.

His fingers closed like a vise on the darky's windpipe.

"Down on your knees with you!"

"Oh, golly! Yassah—I go down!"

And down he went.

Out came the old detective's handcuffs, and the next instant they were snapped upon Sim's wrists behind his back.

"Now, don't you budge an inch till I tell you to!" panted the old man-hunter threateningly, as he aimed his pistol at Johnson.

"Ise a dead niggah!" groaned the rascal, dismally.

"That's what you'll be if you stir!" grimly said Old King Brady.

He strode over to Harry and picked him up.

First he was overjoyed to find that the boy was alive, then he carefully examined the wound on his scalp and saw it was only skin deep.

He court-plastered it, to stop the bleeding.

With a hatful of water he bathed the young detective's temples, and while so employed gazed around in quest of Mason.

The man was far away in the boat by that time.

Harry rapidly recovered, and finally got upon his feet again.

His head was very sore, but otherwise he suffered no ill effects from the wound he received, and cried eagerly:

"Can't we head off that villain?"

"I'm going to make an effort. Grab the prisoner."

While Harry took possession of the scared darky, Old King Brady ran around the swamp at the top of his speed toward the spot Mason was heading the boat for, and kept out of the rascal's view.

In this manner Old King Brady reached the grounds surrounding Oliver Dalton's house, and suddenly caught view of Mason.

He had landed, and was kneeling down beside a rock, under which was a hollow space from which he was drawing a package.

Hearing the old detective coming, he bounded to his feet, and raised his revolver to fire. But he was not quick enough.

A sharp report came from the detective's pistol.

The bullet lodged in Mason's leg.

With a yell of pain he fell.

In a moment more the officer pounced on him.

"I've got you at last, Mason!"

"Curse you—shoot! Kill me!" yelled the maddened man.

"No. I'll reserve your life for a prison cell, so you may repent of your sins at your leisure, and ultimately become a reformed man!"

He held the rascal down by main force.

The shot brought Mr. Dalton and his daughter from the house, and as they rushed over to the spot, the broker cried joyfully:

"So you've got him, eh?"

"Yes; got both," replied the detective.

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"Mason, what's in that package?"

"Money. About \$30,000," growled the man in surly tones.

"Is that the money you stole from Mr. Dalton's office?"

"Yes. I may as well own up to it now."

"Mr. Dalton, take your property."

"I shall," replied the broker, seizing the parcel.

Just then Harry came along with Johnson in tow, and the two prisoners were handcuffed together, and were taken to Swamp Angel and locked up.

As Mr. Dalton was anxious to get back to New York, the detectives got their three prisoners and accompanied the broker and his daughter north a few days later, and they finally reached the metropolis.

Of course everybody was surprised to see the broker appear alive and well, after believing so long he was dead and buried.

In due time Roland Mason and his two negro pals were put on trial for their

many offenses, and the testimony of the Bradys convicted them.

Their sentences were the extreme limit, and they went to Sing Sing.

Mr. Dalton soon had his business re-established, and found that after all his losses by Mason's speculations were not very heavy since the time he was supposed to have been found dead.

It is safe to say the forged will was destroyed.

From that time onward the Bradys had the warmest friends in Lizzie Dalton and her father. But they certainly earned their esteem.

They had gone beyond their depth several times while unravelling the great swamp mystery, but success crowned their efforts in the end.

Praised for the good work they did by their chief, and lauded to the skies by the press, they became more celebrated than ever.

But their work for the Secret Service was not ended with the happy finish of the Dalton case. They were soon busy with a new piece of detective work that taxed all their ingenuity.

But we have reserved a history of their exploits while so engaged for another story.

THE END.

Read "THE BRADYS' HOPELESS CASE; OR, AGAINST PLAIN EVIDENCE," which will be the next number (96) of "Secret Service."



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