

The MAN NOBODY KNEW

by HOLWORTHY HALL

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CHAPTER XI—Continued.

—12—

"I don't deny," said Armstrong slowly, "that at first sight this is a queer thing for me to do—to check up your property, I mean—when you and I have had such an intimate relationship as opponents. And I wouldn't for the world have agreed to it if it could have had the slightest connection with . . . with your own private affairs. It hasn't—it can't have. I give you my word on that; it's been settled without the slightest reference to anything else. But since it hasn't, and since Rufus asked me as a favor—and promised to tell you about it—and it's absolutely commercial—"

"That's enough. I'm glad you're going to do it." Hilliard's voice was gruff; it was tribute to his companion's code of ethics. "Know anything about mining?"

"Not a thing. But I'm to go to a law firm in Butte—and of course it's only a formality, anyway. I'll probably find it's better than you ever claimed. But Rufus asked me."

"I see. Well—now about this other matter . . ."

Armstrong was watching the west-bound express as it felt its cautious way through Railroad avenue to the station.

"Yes?"

Hilliard was suddenly ashamed of himself; he was forced to concede that his rival had the advantage of him in poise and altruism. He shook himself free of the savage resentment which was stealing upon him.

"We're only human—both of us. Perhaps—under the circumstances—the best thing we can say is to say nothing . . . except that I wish you all the luck in the world. I don't pretend it isn't a hard thing to say—but I'm trying to mean it. And you certainly deserve it."

"And to you," said Armstrong cheerfully. "And no bad feelings on either side. And I hope your mine makes a million dollars for you."

"Thanks," said Hilliard, grimly. "I'll need it. But don't be afraid to send Rufus your honest opinion—will you?"

"No—and I'll send it to you, too. That's only fair. . . . I'd better be starting."

They shook hands again across the wheel.

"You're a good sport, Armstrong . . . don't think I've got any resentment left . . . except a bit that I can't quite swallow on short notice . . ."

"I know. But you don't need to worry, old man. Your future's bright enough—as I hope to wire Rufus about Saturday."

Too late, Hilliard perceived that they were talking at cross-purposes—Armstrong was evidently thinking about the mine. But there was time only for a last gesture of farewell; and Armstrong had disappeared in the depths of the trainshed. Armstrong . . . the victor, and the inquisitor . . . was on the road to Butte!

Work, hard work, the panacea and the salvation of those who are sorely distressed, even this cheapest relief was denied Hilliard. He was left alone with his problem, wrestling with it once more in the black darkness of dependency, and knowing neither a means of simplifying it, nor a counselor to whom he could turn for aid.

He conceded that there was only one thing for him to do, and he intended to do it, but he was harassed because he had so much time to think about it. Not since the first sickening shock of Harmon's revelation had he doubted his own purpose; it was merely the machinery of it which perplexed him. His confidence in himself gradually returned; he was abnormally calm and determined; he had no more idea of resisting his impulses than he would have had, in Flanders, of disobeying his orders. The thing was there to be done, and he, regardless of his own future, was there to do it.

Overnight, he had occupied himself with some elementary accounting.

With Harmon's check, his outstanding balance for expenses, and what money he could raise by selling his runabout and a few personal possessions, he had on hand a matter of ninety-six hundred dollars; Syracuse had entrusted him with sixty-two thousand. To compromise pro rata with his creditors—this was apparently his only resource, and yet how insufficient a reparation it was! He knew that it had been his duty to investigate the Montana property before he began to exploit it; he knew that his self-induction to Syracuse had been blatantly inexcusable, and that not even the fact that he had been carried away by the drama of it could ever be excused. His intricate fabric of deception, now that he inspected it from this different viewpoint, was flimsy—shoddy. He could be traced—if anyone cared to spend the time, and the energy, if Armstrong—or Rufus Waring—cared to spend it, for example. Of course,

bottom of this sooner or later—and the sooner the better. I'm waiting for you to repeat what you just told us, Rufus."

There were tears of anger in the law student's eyes—of anger and of impotence. He gave Angela a look of supercilious disdain, shrugged his shoulders. "Well, that settles that!" he said, and as Angela gave a gasp of understanding, and turned angrily white, he laughed metallically.

Cullen moved nearer to him.

"Are you going to speak up or not? Because if you aren't . . ."

Waring folded his arms; but he still failed of the pose he planned, because his eyes and his muscles were traitor to him.

"No, I'm not! Not until I'm ready to! I'm not afraid of the whole crowd of you! I'm not going to be bullied and bulldozed into—" He attempted to brush past Cullen, the older man caught him by the arm. "Take your hands off me!"

"You stay where you are!" stormed Cullen. "Until you can—"

"If you lay your hands on me once more, Mr. Cullen, I'll . . . don't you know I know what this means! I'll have you—"

"Oh, your law!" Cullen snorted it contemptuously. "For God's sake, don't snivel about it . . . stand up and take it like a man, if you've got any manhood in you! For a law student you're . . . well, don't try to run away from it, then. . . . Are you going to tell him, or am I?"

The answer was delayed; Cullen swung around to Hilliard. "Then I'll tell you myself. Know what this boy's been saying about you? Coming up to us when you're not here, and trying to knife you when you're not looking?"

Hilliard, who had been standing paralysed, found voice.

"Why, I can guess," he said, curiously calm. "And don't be harsh with him, Mr. Cullen. As a matter of fact—"

Angela had sprung between them; Hilliard saw that her cheeks were tear-stained.

"It's nothing but jealousy!" she cried vehemently. "He's said horrible things about you! He's always saying things about you! He said—"

"Angela!" Cullen almost fairly shouted it. "I tell you, this is my house, and I won't have any more of this infernal nonsense in it! Hear me? I've had all the nonsense I'm going to stand from anybody! Rufus, you stay right there! Angela, you keep quiet!" He turned to Hilliard. "If you'd come in a half minute sooner, you'd have heard this young whipper-snapper trying to make you out a swindler! Trying to class you with fake promoters and mining sharks! Look at him! Look at him! I want to—Yes—that's what he did! You! And tell you, Hilliard, it'll take more than his say-so to start anything around here! Don't you open your mouth, Rufus . . . you had your chance and you wouldn't take it! And I want to tell you right here and right now—"

"Wait a minute!" Hilliard was deadly quiet; the only quiet member of the quartette. "There's no use in telling all the neighbors just yet." He regarded Waring kindly. "Do you mind repeating precisely what you did say, Rufus? Don't you think I'm entitled to that much?"

The boy flushed agonizedly; he was the accuser, and yet he couldn't meet Hilliard's eyes. It wasn't guilt; it was mere intellectual inferiority; and yet it gave exactly the opposite impression.

"Well," he said desperately, "I know hearsay evidence is no good, so I got it first hand—in your own room in the Onondaga, didn't I? You won't deny that, will you? I didn't just pick up rumors—I got it from you. Didn't I?"

Cullen's hands were closing and unclosing apologetically.

"For Heaven's sake, who ever said it wasn't two years ago! We all know that! Give us some news young man, give us some news!"

Waring was breathing hard, and his interest had switched to Angela, who stood adamant. Indeed, he was suddenly transformed to the status of a supplicant rather than that of a proselytizing witness.

"Well . . . they said it was offered . . . two years ago . . . to anybody who'd take it . . . for ten thousand dollars . . . and nobody'd take it as a gift . . ."

"Oh, good Lord!" Cullen was near to bursting. "Doesn't the fool know what a prospect is? Hasn't he seen the reports? And still he—"

"And . . . and the land next to it was . . . had a mine on it, the XLNC mine, that's in pretty fair shape, but that didn't signify anything . . ."

He paused for a moment. "And there hasn't been any work done on it, to speak of, for two years . . . And the corporation report I got shows that a fellow named Martin Harmon's—the president of it, and Harmon's a cheap Wall street man in New York. The Butte people don't consider him reliable. And I've written to him four times—and he won't answer."

"Ah!" said Hilliard, startled.

"Well?" Cullen repeated his challenge.

"That's all." He gazed beseechingly at Angela, who sniffed and turned her head away.

"All!" Cullen breathed stertorously. "And with a flimsy lot of rot-like that you've got the unmitigated gall to start a slanderous story like this about Henry Hilliard! You've got the nerve to!"

The astonishing part of it, interposed Hilliard, with coolness which astonished even himself, "is that every single item of it is true! Don't blame him, Mr. Cullen. It's true—every word."

Cullen shook himself.

"Of course it's true! Isn't it what you've told us yourself, in a different way? It's the telling of it that counts!"

"Now listen to me a moment!" Hilliard was impassively serious; the way to the denouement was opening clear before him. He need only offer himself for judgment, and the future would take care of itself. "My purpose

in coming up here this afternoon was to talk to you about this same property, Mr. Cullen. I . . . I had some rather important things to tell you about it. But in view of this new attitude of Waring's, I'm going to act differently. This won't stop here, and I prefer to have somebody look into it before it's any worse. I'm going to put myself in your hands. Rufus and Angela, I want you both to witness this."

"What this is all about is beyond me! Only, if this law minnow has gone as far as this . . . We've got to get at the bottom of it . . . You know that as well as I do, Hilliard, naturally. The boy's as wild as a hawk. Heaven knows how far he'd go outside. This has got to be cleared up! We've got to pound some sense into him. We—"

Hilliard was smiling vacuously; now that the blow had actually fallen, and the complaint officially lodged, he felt deliciously relaxed, content. Before he could contrive a reply Waring was strident again.

"Yes." The student's voice was thin with acerbity. "Yes, you think you're pretty smart—all of you. Don't you? I come in here to do you a kindness that anybody else, it seems to me, would take as a favor, and you and Angela jump all over me—why doesn't he deny it? That's what I want to know! Why doesn't he say something?"

Cullen looked at Hilliard and made a swift deduction, and spoke it.

"He's waiting for the rest of it. Go on—you're only half through the yarn told us."

"Oh, very well." Waring gathered courage. "You can have all you want—maybe more than you want. You'd have had it sooner if you hadn't started yelling at me. I know what I'm talking about; you people don't seem to realize I'm in the law! I don't go off half-cocked. I wrote to a law firm in Butte, Montana; that's what I did. I found out what was the biggest firm there, and I wrote them a letter. They answered it, too. I got my information right from the ground. I've got a letter that says—"

Cullen swayed forward, his hand outstretched, palm-upward, in a direct challenge of Waring's truthfulness.

"Where is it?"

The boy withdrew a step and stammered: "I left it home."

"Oh, you did!" Cullen's laugh was stinging. "That's likely!"

"Yes, that's exactly what I did! Think I'd bring an original letter out of my office—let it out of my hands until it's time to make it of record? Not on your life! I've got it all right. It says the Silverbow Mining corporation owns some acreage, fast enough, but there isn't a mine on it."

Cullen vented his abandon of rage on the empty air.

"Well, who in the devil ever said there was?"

"Why . . . didn't you?" The appeal was to Hilliard; and it was made in a tone of astonishment which would have been ludicrous if there hadn't been tragedy behind it.

"No." Hilliard shook his head.

"You can't accuse me of that, at least . . . The only mine we ever mentioned was one in prospect. I always said it was a prospect, with an old shaft on it, didn't I? And so it is! But an old shaft isn't a producing mine, necessarily. And—please let him finish. Mr. Cullen!"

"Well . . ." The boy had twin disks of hectic flame in his cheeks. "That's only a detail, anyway . . . they said it was . . . undeveloped . . . they said the shaft had been abandoned more than two years ago, because it wasn't worth much of anything."

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"Hush! Angela!" Her father's admonition was peremptory enough to quell her instantly. He wheeled back to Waring. "We're going to get at the

bottom of this sooner or later—and the sooner the better. I'm waiting for you to repeat what you just told us, Rufus."

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