

THE SLEUTH

"You are Neil Ottaway, aren't you?" asked the boy with a touch of awe.

"You get me wrong, son," said Neil, good-naturedly. "My name is Paddy Leary from a spot called Tipperary."

"Oh, you can't fool me!" said the boy, confidently. "With your long hair and all, and hiding away like this. As soon as that came out in the paper about you changing with a stoker I began to look for you on West street. I tracked you here from the store where you wrote that letter."

"What were you going to do with me when you got me?" asked Neil curiously.

"Turn you over to the police. Then my old man would have to let me be a detective," said Neil.

"Oh, I see!" said Neil.

"What are you going to do to me?" the boy asked with a shade of apprehension.

"Not a thing—if you keep away from the windows," said Neil. "Glad to have somebody to talk to. What's your name?"

"Kid Doty," the boy said with a swagger. "Doty means brave, see? I'm not afraid of anything that walks."

"That so?" said Neil.

Kid Doty suspected irony. "Well, I followed you right into your lair, didn't I?" he said aggressively. "That's something."

"Sure, that's something," said Neil, grinning. He liked this boy.

The Kid looked around him with bright eyes. His fears at rest, he chattered like a child to his mother.

"Say this is a note! Us two being locked up together. I never read anything like it, did you? Or saw it in the movies. These rooms would make a great scene in the movies, wouldn't they? This is the real thing! Say, you'll have to keep me with you now wherever you go, to prevent me from telling the police."

"I suppose so," said Neil ruefully.

"Oh! Will you? Will you? Will you?" the boy eagerly. "Oh, say, I'd give anything to go with you! I'll be your man. I'll help you fight!"

"But I thought you were going to be a detective," said Neil.

"I don't care how. There's nothing in it. New York for a fellow like me. I'd have gone west long ago, but I don't know how to ride the bumpers. I don't know where the bumpers are on a car. You can show me."

"Well, we'll see," said Neil guardedly.

"How do you feel?" asked the Kid, with respect.

"I feel all right thank you," said Neil.

"After croaking a guy, I mean."

Neil hated to disappoint his ingenious admirer. He made an effort to pile up to the part ascribed to him.

"Don't want to talk about it," he growled, as if in unhappy retrospect.

The Kid went a long breath of excitement. "He haunts you!" he cried.

Neil looked around him apprehensively. "Ah, cut it out!" he muttered.

"I've done lots of bad things myself," said the boy, eagerly. "though I haven't killed my man yet. I suppose you're a dope fiend. I smoked a pill once. I wasn't very sick, neither. Have a cigarette?"

Neil wondered if it required a criminal to win a boy's confidence completely. He wasn't going to spoil it by a moral homily. "Cigarettes!" he said, affecting scorn. "I smoke a pipe for women and dudes. I smoke a pipe!"

The boy's face changed. Unostentatiously he put away the box. "Sure!" he said. "I smoke nothing but a pipe myself. Or a good, strong cigar. I just carry these to give away."

Neil looked at the boy with a mixture of interest and alarm. "Make a real note," he urged, "so they can't say it's a frame-up."

There was enough of the scarf left over to make a blind for the youngster's eyes. Neil prepared to put it on.

"But what's the use of that?" asked the victim. "I'm coming back in a little while." Neil said, "And you mustn't see what I do."

"I wouldn't tell," Neil said, "but it makes it seem more realistic."

"Oh, all right. Better gag me, too, or they'll want to know why I didn't raise the neighborhood."

"I can see under the bandage. Pull it down a little," said the helpless one consentingly.

Neil smiled as he tied the knot. He gripped the thin shoulder in a friendly hand. "I'm off now. Lie low for awhile. I'll bring you in a bite to eat. So long, old fellow!"

"So long, old fellow," returned the boy in careful imitation.

Neil looked the room door behind him. Feeling his way down stairs, he satisfied himself with a cautious survey that there was no one immediately outside, and issued into the street. He made his way over the uneven flags towards Hudson street.

After dark it was more than ever cold in that neighborhood. Few lights were to be seen in the little tenements sandwiched between yards and stables, yet figures occasionally passed in and out in the dark. At the corner of Washington street under the tin awning of a vacant store a group of youths with snickers fixed in their faces eyed him hard as he passed.

He had little to fear from such as

The afternoon passed very pleasantly on both sides, notwithstanding the absence of lunch. Together they washed Neil's clothes and spread them to dry in the patches of sunlight under the front windows.

Meanwhile the Kid bombarded Neil with hundreds of questions concerning a life of crime. Neil's ingenuity was put to it to find satisfactory answers. Fortunately the boy was uncritical. At the same time Kid Doty continually forgot his assumption of the desperate, and lapsed into the normal adolescent. He entertained Neil with simple domestic details.

"My old man's a lawyer. Good head, too. But of course he doesn't understand me. Fathers always want you to study hard in school and get high marks." Huh! teacher's pet! Not for mine! They didn't do it themselves, no sir! I found an old letter that told how Dad was arrested once for breaking church windows. So he can't blame me.

"Wants me to be a lawyer. Gee! If I had my way, I'd take the whole push of lawyers, barring the old man, and put them on a ship, and torpedo it. I got a young brother. He thinks he's bad, too. He's just imitating me. I won't let him be. No, sir, that kid's got to stick in school and make something of himself!"

When it began to grow dark Neil prepared to go out. Dressed in the renovated clothes, and wearing the blue shirt and red tie, there was little

of his shrunken, creased clothes offered little temptation to footpads, however small their way of business. He walked with a slouch and a wary eye that kept him from being better than his borrowed clothes.

Turning into Hudson street, the scene was instantly metamorphosed. New York is a city of such breathless scene-shifting. A line of brightly-lighted stores stretched up and down on either hand, and the pavement was alive with after-supper shoppers. Neil went into the first baker's to obtain a bite for himself and a bag of cakes such as might appeal to a boy's salivary glands. Then he made his way north according to schedule, searching the faces of the passers-by, while carefully maintaining the vacant look of his own.

Would she come? He realized now that it was herself he longed to see more than anything she might bring for his supper. Why had he not asked her to accompany him? Fearing a sickening disappointment that would twist his heart to hope, he thought of a dozen good reasons to prevent her coming; she might not have got his letter; and even if she had, how could a girl be expected to get a man's outfit together at an hour's notice; and how could a delicately brought-up girl bring in a loose knot, a water repeller, and a hat? He should not have asked it of her—but what else could he have done?

"Of course she will not come!" he told himself a score of times, while his desirous eyes continued to search for her.

Slouching along, head down and hands in pockets, he reached Abingdon Square without seeing her. He erected his steps the whole way, still without reward, and turned north again, considerably saddened in heart. Suddenly one of the poor housewives of the meaner quarters came making their little purchases, brushed against him, and a voice whispered startlingly:

"Don't you know me?"

Neil and his nerves under good control. He walked on with unchanged face. The woman who had spoken was in front of him; he studied her figure sharply. Surely it was not possible! She was wearing a long, ill-fitting rusty coat, much braided, the braids coming off. Below it appeared a faded skirt and deplorable shoes. She was bareheaded. Her brown hair, twisted in a loose knot, was resting untidily in every direction. She carried a covered basket. More convincing than the clothes was the walk, the manner; the whole figure sagged wearily.

It could not be! He stopped under pretense of looking into a shop window, and Neil had a glimpse of her profile. He was amazed. It was she, his charming girl, but terribly changed. Her skin showed the sickly pallor resulting from bad housing and insufficient food. Her nose, once so straight, was now bent and red, and rough, her lips weary and lustreless. Neil was strangely divided in his mind between horror at the outrage to her beauty, and delight in the cleverness that had accomplished it.

His imagination was impressed for

to suggest the coal-passer. Kid Doty pressed his felt hat on his idol. With considerable stretching, it was made to do.

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"You're not going anywhere," said Neil.

His face fell. "Aw, I'm your pal now," he pleaded. "Through thick and thin. I could stall off the cops. Two heads are better than one."

Neil was not a little touched. "I don't doubt you, old man. But I have trouble enough to look after myself, without another. Besides, I'm broke."

"I got a dollar and a half," the boy said eagerly.

Neil shook his head firmly.

"What did you do with the old man's roll?" asked Kid Doty.

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"To tie your wrists and ankles, my son."

"Honest?" Doty's face was a study in delight and alarm. "But—this is a dickens of an out-of-the-way joint," he faltered.

"When I make my getaway I'll tie off the police to come and release you."

"You would be desperado's face glowed. "Oh, say, will you? That'll make some story, eh? That's pretty near as good as bringing you in myself. Gee! when they read the papers in school!"

With alacrity the boy put his hands behind him to be tied. "Make a real note," he urged, "so they can't say it's a frame-up."

There was enough of the scarf left over to make a blind for the youngster's eyes. Neil prepared to put it on.

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Neil smiled as he tied the knot. He gripped the thin shoulder in a friendly hand. "I'm off now. Lie low for awhile. I'll bring you in a bite to eat. So long, old fellow!"

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around her in lovely, smoky coils. "Oh, beautiful!" he cried, softly. "You look like a dried rose."

"I didn't let it down for you to say things like that," she reproved him with her adorable primness. "It has to be fixed before I can go out."

He laughed in his throat. "Oh, wait, let it wait awhile," he murmured, dreamily.

Affronted by his ardent glance she twisted it up again hastily. But Neil snatched up the pins from where she had laid them.

"What's the matter with me?" he demanded. "Can't I even look at your hair? Am I hateful to you?"

"Would I be here if you were?" she whispered, holding her hair up with one hand and extending the other for the pins.

"Doesn't matter," said Neil. "People in such a neighborhood as this mind their own business strictly."

He held her up the rickety stairs. Her hand lay in his as soft and warm as a nestling. In the pitch blackness of the landing above he could not help trying to draw her close to him. Surely after this she must love him!

But she held off determinedly. "Ah, be generous!" she whispered with a catch in her breath. "Don't make me sorry I came!"

He released her with a little groan. He could not resist this kind of an appeal. She was safe because she was so entirely at his mercy. At the same

time he was a man and she was a woman. How was he to know that she did not secretly desire him to overbear her resistance? Boys learn out of the air that maidens must be maidenly.

When he opened the door a cracked voice from within instantly asked in accents of alarm: "Who is it?"

"All right, old man," said Neil.

He had heard the girl give a little gasp. He pressed her hand reassuringly, and touched her lips for silence. Neil carried the bag of cakes into his willing prisoner.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" whispered the young desperado. "The rats made a fierce racket."

Neil squeezed his shoulder, and opening the bag put the refreshments where he could reach them with his mouth. This pleased Kid Doty more than the prosaic method of fingers.

"I'll be in the next room," said Neil. "I'll be in the next room. If the rats come around again, sing out."

CHAPTER VII.

"Did you bring a candle?" Neil asked the girl, in a whisper.

She nodded, and feeling in her basket, presented him with a candle.

Neil led her into the middle room and closed the door. "So the light won't give us away through the front windows," he explained. He lit the candle. "We'll have to sit on the floor," he said. He spread his coat for her.

"But—but what am I staying for?" she faltered. "I've brought you the things. I must go back."

"Ah, not right away!" he said, reaching for her hand. "I need the sight of you more than new clothes. It's lonesomeness undermines a man, not danger. Every minute you stay gives me fresh heart."

She was persuaded to sit down. The candle threw immense, grotesque shadows of them upon the stained walls and broken ceiling. They were so quiet that their pairs of eyes ventured to peer at each other in the corners. Neil shield bits of plaster at them. He gazed at the girl in the light with fresh, delighted interest. The lovely depths of her eyes reassured him of her beauty.

She was only human. "Ah! don't look at me!" she murmured, averting her head. "I'm hideous!"

"You're still yourself," he said, happily, "though changed on the outside."

"It's my hair," she explained. "Untidy hair undoes a woman completely."

"Looks as if it hadn't been brushed for a week," he said, maliciously.

"Oh," she gasped. Her quick fingers searched in the coil for pins. With a shake she tossed it free. It fell all

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