THE BLACK BOX OF SILENCE

By Francis Lynde

Illustrations By Olwin Sugero

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CHAPTER X

The Louisville Three

In the evening Lando briefly announced his intention of going to call upon Betty.

"The Stillings live away over in the western suburb," said Markham. "You'd better take a taxi, or the rundown."

"For safety's sake, you mean? Not so you could notice it. I'm not dodging anybody or anything tonight."

"Use your own point on, have you? Don't want me along?"

"No thanks. I'll go alone."

Left to himself, Markham lighted a cigar and picked a quiet corner of the lobby in which to read. Soon Lando returned, the frown of his departure deepened to an unwonted scowl.

"No luck?" said Waiff, noting the scowl.

"No. She'd gone out somewhere with Cushy."

"You didn't see the professor?"

"No; he had gone to the field, wherever they are. I visited with the Stillings—mostly Mr. Stillings, in his den."

"Just friendly gossip?"

"Not altogether. Betty's been talking about us and that broke the ice. The Stillings didn't quite like the way she's letting Cushy cut in."

"That's the aftermath of his scamphakeus out here last summer, I suppose?"

"Not so much that as other things. Stillings thinks Cushy is fixing to pull off something else; and that he is using Betty in some way."

"But how could Betty figure in any of his schemes?"

"God knows. But it's plain Stillings believes she does—innocently, of course. He was cautious until he found out where we stand; then he intimated that it was up to us to put a spoke in Cushy's wheel."

"Good. I'm'll do it!"

"We'll both do it. As you remarked, I have my warpoint on, now."

"Anything happened to stir you up afresh?"

"Yes. That shooting this afternoon was a planned attempt to kill us. As I was coming back across town just now I saw a car with running board of camp dunnage going through by the back street. There were two men in it, and I saw them as the car came under the crossing electric. They were the men who were shooting at us. They were so tin can tourists; they were gunnos, hired to follow us. They'd make a foolishness drive some way, and have just got back to town."

"All right; dope the rest of it out if you can."

"It's clear enough. My black box is locked in the room who knew I knew we have followed them, and that they won't be safe until they get rid of us."

"You can't carry it to stop further?"

"I think not. Not so long as they do not know I've spotted them. If they are what they have appeared to be, a slung-shotter with known business men of Louisville?"

"I see. But how did you find that. What we have to do first is to cut Betty out of it. Let's go back?"

In accordance with the program which Lando—with his warpoint on—called mapped out, the two of them promptly made a call on Miss Betty Lawson. In a week-long contest thus initiated by Cushy Waiff stubbornly for place, and there were numerous setbacks—which seemed to afford Miss Betty no little quiet amusement.

On the seventh day, when Markham, having his turn, had her out in the blue roadster, she said, "Mad at me, Markham, and Owen freeze up and refuse to talk when I say anything about Fort, Waiff? What has he done to make you have him?"

"We have never had much to do with him, either of us," Markham replied. Then, bluntly, "Are you going to marry him, Betty?"

She laughed. "Do you know of any reason why I absolutely?"

"Perhaps not any reason that would appeal to you."

"That is dodging," she retorted brightly. "As a friend don't you think you ought to tell me if there is a reason?"

"Yes; and get myself written down in your black book." No, though, you my dear."

"All right; don't then. I'll ask Owen. I often wonder if boys, who home boys like you and Owen, ever know beautifully transparent you are."

"Thanks; glad you find us so. I'm all right to wear a glass front when one has a clear conscience, you know."

"But your conscience is not clear."

"What makes you think so?"

"Perhaps it is the transparency we were speaking of." Then, "Why wouldn't you tell me why you and Owen are out here, Wally?"

"I have told you. Can't we have a vacation as well as other folks?"

"That is exactly what Owen said yesterday; and it means just as much—or as little. Let me tell you something, Wally, dear; in this little round world we live in, you get just as much as you are willing to give—and no more."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that if you and Owen don't tried me, I can be crusher, too!"

"Now you have got me dodging a bit myself. Meaning what? Who shouldn't we both tried you?"

"Why, himself! He hasn't good know. Where are you taking me to-day?"

"Out to meet some friends Markham has met for me; Mr. Stark and Mr. Distinguished-Dinner" she giggled. "That I know who they are, Markham, is the daughter of old Doctor Field who, the Tinsmiths where I live, and the school's home and the Smith's—Hillcrest—is above Tolice."

"But I understand they are not so far above."

"They are only they're touring the Hillcrest and the Smiths are staying home. They are running the big ranch in the colonel's absence."

In due course the blue roadster was parked in the Hillcrest garage, and in Corona Smith Miss Betty speedily found a kindred spirit. And when Smith came home and added his insistence to Corona's urgings that the others stay to dinner, Waiff relented afresh. For Betty accepted the invitation, telling the Lando house over the phone to let her city hostess know where she was.

After she was through telephoning, Markham called up Lando.

"Any developments?" he asked.

"No," came the answer.

"Any news?"

"Out at Hillcrest, and we are staying for dinner. You've not forgotten that this is the showdown day—the twenty-eighth?"

"No; but nobody has turned up yet. Has anybody the register?"

"Right again. I'll be with you presently. Call me if anything turns loose."

After Smith had smoked an after-dinner cigar with his man grown in the colonel's den, he said regretfully that he had to excuse himself; that he was due to meet the westbound Flyer which was bringing some of his business associates from the East.

"It's perfectly all right," Markham assured him. "We'll have to be going too. I promised Mr. Stillings I wouldn't keep Betty out late."

When the gloaming were said, Smith went with Markham to the garage. "You'll beat me to town," he said; "I'm have to stop and fill up. And stop, kids mine; there's been a good bit of whisky running down this little notch of late; and today the sheriff gave us a hint. And I saw them as the car came under the crossing electric. They were the men who were about town last night. They were no tin can tourists; they were gunnos, hired to follow us. They make a foolishness drive some way, and have just got back to town."

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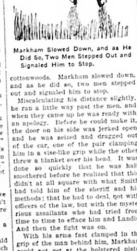

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Cottonwoods. Markham slowed down, and as he did so, two men stepped out and signaled him to stop.

Miscalculating his distance slightly, he had to back a little to reach them, when they came up he was ready with an apology. Before he could make it, the door on his side was jerked open and he was seized and dragged out of the car, one of the pair clamping him in a vise-like grip while the other threw a blanket over his head. It was done so quickly that he was half smothered before he realized that he didn't at all square with what Smith had told him of the sheriff and his methods; that he had to deal, not with officers of the law, but with the desperate assailants who had tried from time to time to efface him and Lando. And then the fight was on.

With his arms fast clamped in the grip of the man behind him, Markham could not get at the holstered pistol under his coat. But his legs were free, and a swift kick doubled the blanketholder up and made him lose his hold long enough to enable Markham to shake his head free of the stifling folds. Instantly he backed the clamper violently against the standing car, sending him over the fender until he was forced to let go to save himself from having his back broken.

At that, Markham got his weapon out, but now the two were between him and the car and he couldn't fire without taking a chance of hitting Betty. The things was their advantage and doing the-before upon them, the shorter of the two crouching low to grab at his legs while the other dived into a clench and tried to twist the automobile out of the hands of the man who had been wrestling with, and in the midst of this there came a gleam of light and the roaring of a motor behind. Markham saw the headlights of an approaching car and Betty running to meet it, frantically waving her arms to stop it.

That ended it. As the encumbered car came to a halt, Markham and Smith sprang out of it, the two ran for their cut, joined the fray themselves in and were gone.

When Smith and Betty came into view, Markham was hunting the door out of his clothes. For Betty's sake he had kept the incident out—"Thought you said the sheriff's men were straightforward," she said, as he checked—

"Good! Let those fellows were his friends's men; they were just plain gunnos, hired to follow us."

"No, just warned up a bit, that's more like it. Who were the men?"

"Not quite that bad. But it was pretty disturbing."

"Good! Let those fellows were his friends's men; they were just plain gunnos, hired to follow us." Then, "