

The Golden Hoard

By Edwin Balmer
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SYNOPSIS

When Horace Denslow, New York millionaire, is murdered in his Georgia hunting lodge, where he flew to board a fortune in gold, Linda Teltair discovers his body and also some bits of paper which, when pieced together, become a note incriminating to his son, Gregory Denslow, in whom she is interested. Later, Linda, during a midnight walk on her plantation, discovers the body of Davy Allen, Denslow's pilot who brought the financier and his golden cache down south. When Linda tells Gregg of the note she found and hid, he confides that Davy Allen was his half-brother, and that Davy's mother caused Denslow to be divorced by his wife, Henriette. Gregg admits he sided with his mother in her divorce, but insists Davy loved Denslow and could not have been implicated in the killing of the financier. Just as a woman's voice over the phone warned that Denslow would meet his death when he landed with his hoard of gold, the voice again comes over the phone, this time to tell a newspaper of Davy's relationship to Denslow. Meanwhile wires all over the country buzz with the story of murder and buried gold on the Teltair plantation in Georgia. Prescott, attorney for the Denslow interests, arrives from New York and with Linda examines a "conjure stone" that old Lucius, family retainer, found in the woods where he saw men digging the murder night. Prescott cracks open the "stone." It contains bars of gold.

INSTALLMENT V.

"**W**HERE is the rest of the gold?" Prescott asked Linda. "Where did this come from, did you say?"

"From the woods, Lucius said," she replied.

"Whereabouts?"

"He found it beside the path on the way to the cabin of a friend of his, Ollie."

"Where's that?"

"I don't know on what part of the path, exactly, but he said near where he saw men digging, night before last, in the woods."

"So there may be other 'stones' like this out there now," Prescott considered aloud. "It does not follow that, if the gold was found by others they were the ones that killed Denslow—and Allen. The party that visited the lodge undoubtedly looked for the gold, but I don't believe they found it. I think nobody found it—and was aware of it. Your old Negro didn't have the least glimmering of an idea that there was gold in this stone?"

"Not the least. He just thought it was conjure."

"Then you let him keep on thinking so."

He began to apportion, between various pockets, his seven slabs of gold. The golden bar which Linda had picked up lay near, but not with his little heap.

"You keep that," he said to Linda.

"Why? It's not mine."

"Keep it until we learn exactly whose it may be."

"All right," said Linda. Strangely she wanted to keep the little slab of gold. "I'll keep the pieces of stone, too." And she began to gather them.

He helped her. "How are you going to explain the disappearance of the stone to Lucius?"

Linda intentionally left a few fragments on the hearth. "That's no trouble. When we go out I'll tell Lucius to come in here and get his conjure stone. Don't worry, no one will ever guess from Lucius' story that what was in the rock was—gold."

Clem Clay was having the thrill of his life. Never had he dreamed of elevation to such a pinnacle of personal importance. He eclipsed, temporarily at least, even the governor of the state, or the President, any one. He was in charge of the investigation of the murder of the moment and the search for millions in hoarded gold.

In addition to Dr. Ames and Linda Teltair and the lawyer from New York—Prescott—there were now at work on the case innumerable newspaper people of both sexes, full of ideas and energy. As a matter of mere routine, they had to bring their results to the sheriff. Clem's procedure, plainly, was to keep his own counsel, look completely wise—and pick up as much as he could from those who were uncovering something.

Of course, as sheriff, he had to have a suspect, if not a prisoner; and so, before putting in his public appearance at Albemarle, he had called for Gregg and taken him with him.

"Is he under arrest?" the reporters challenged Clay to define the exact status of Denslow's son. "Have you charged him with the murders?"

"You can ask him if he is," offered Clay, calmly.

SO THE reporters crowded around Gregg, while Clem chewed tobacco and listened carefully. Having their chance, they questioned Gregg about Davy Allen, and about his mother and Allen's mother. They brought in, emphatically and with more excited interest, a new name. Niles Evans.

"You know, of course," a reporter asked Gregg, "Niles Evans?"

"Yes, I know Niles Evans," Clem heard Gregg reply in a quiet, careful—was it too careful?—tone.

"When did you last see him?"

"Why—" Gregg was getting more careful, "—do you want to know?"

"Where is Niles Evans now?" another voice inquired.

"I don't know."

"Where was he when you last saw him?"

"In Palm Beach."

"With your mother?" Say, is it true he's been trying to marry your mother? He's broke now, isn't he? He was cleaned in the market and hasn't a cent? He was the man your father beat out when he married your mother? They say he threatened your father once. Hey, Denslow, you can tell us this, did you leave Palm Beach with him? Did you drive him up part way with you when you were driving about the night your father and Allen were?

Gregg ceased to make answer and the questions cast at him became mere repetitions. Clem could learn no more in that spot so he led Gregg on toward his office in the courthouse.

"Sheriff," the crowd swung back to Clay, "what have you got to say about Niles Evans?"

"I'll say it," replied Clem, "at the inquest."

"How would he do, sheriff, for the man who came downstairs in the lodge and struggled with Linda Teltair?" How

Clem succeeded in getting himself and Gregory up to his office without betraying that, until this moment, he had never heard of Niles Evans.

"Well," observed Clem to Gregg, "I thought we could wait to talk about it when we got here, but the newspaper boys seem to have hold of it somehow. You did right not to say no more on the street, but you might as well come through clean to me about this friend of yours and your mother's, Niles Evans."

Gregg did not reply.

Sheriff Clem Clay turned his back on the boy who would tell him nothing, and he walked to the window and looked down on the crowd in the street, well satisfied with himself.

Searchers for gold roamed the woods, even before Linda led Prescott along the path where Lucius had happened upon his conjure stone. They were natives and strangers white and black, from the hills and from the swamp and from the town. There was no keeping them out, even if Clem's deputies had warned them away more stubbornly. Gold was in the forest, hoarded, hidden gold; and men had been murdered there for it.

Linda passed several of the gold seekers, and she recognized and spoke to a few but she did not remember them. With her eyes she scanned the path and the rank grass beside it for other rocks like Lucius' conjure stone, but she had to remind herself, again and again, what it was she sought, so upset was she by the discovery she had made when she went to her own room to put away her little slab of gold.

She could think, consecutively, of nothing else, for the gold, not even if the stones at her feet were full of those strangely heavy little slabs, was of no account compared to what she had just learned.

And the worst of it was she could do nothing. Not a thing but wait and see what some one else, who now had Gregg in his power, would choose to do, and how he would go about it.

Where was Gregg? What might be happening to him at this moment as a result of what she had neglected to do?

Her eyes continued to examine the ground. No rock at all resembling Lucius' conjure stone was to be found. Repeatedly, Mr. Prescott stooped to pick up or test the weight of stones, but he always put them down again.

A WHISTLING girl overtook them—a small, trim, and competent looking girl who ceased to whistle as she inspected them and inquired:

"Are you Mr. Prescott?" And at his answer she immediately introduced herself. "I'm Kate Kelly; does it mean anything to you?"

"Of course," said Prescott. "You were going to fly the ocean."

"Alone," nodded Kate. "When Earhart made it. Yes, I'm a member of that club."

"Are you Miss Teltair?"

"Yes," said Linda, looking at the girl. She was blue-eyed and brown haired, and with a frankly freckled face and a most cheery smile.

"You live about here?" asked Prescott.

"No; I came down from Newark. I brought Mabel Allen."

"O! When?" Mabel Allen was Davy Allen's widow.

"This morning. I left her at the lodge. She'd like to talk to you."

"Of course," said Prescott, almost absent-minded. "Of course, I'll come right in. How is she?"

"Calm enough now, but damned curious. She's my cousin, by the way."

They turned back and spoke while walking, in single file, mostly.

"Turn up any gold?" Kate asked casually.

"Not yet," said Prescott.

"There is some plenty, in several places. Plenty," Kate repeated. "It's been a hell of a worry to Mabel; she knew Davy was doing it."

"What?" asked Prescott.

"What are we talking about? Hiding gold."

"Did she know how they were doing it?"

"They were hiding it; that's all she knew."

"Did she know," Prescott proceeded, "that her husband was Horace Denslow's son?"

"That's her business," returned Kate. "But if you ask me if I knew, I didn't and if Davy's married off the ground, I guess it might have been me."

"O!" exclaimed Linda.

"Don't bother about that," Kate reassured her.

"Davy never said anything about it. He didn't know it. And I introduced him to Mabel; just the girl for him. They got along."

After that they walked for a while in silence.

"Did you ever know Gregory Denslow?" Linda asked.

"Never saw him," Kate disclaimed. "Nor Niles Evans, either."

"Who's Niles Evans?"

"Are you asking me? I thought he was the one they figured helped Gregory might before last."

"Helped Gregory with what?" Linda pursued.

"My God, now are you asking what happened here? I thought you was the one that found em."

Thus Linda for the first time, heard of Niles Evans.

At the edge of her lawn Kate Kelly and Mr. Prescott left her and drove on to the lodge. Linda went into the house and up to her room where she explored her drawer in desperate hope she had been mistaken before.

Her fingers found her handkerchief and clothing and the little slab of gold, nothing more. She turned out everything in the drawer, then in all the drawers. She was alone upstairs.

Her mother and Andy had gone to the Thompsons'; Daniel had not yet returned from town. It was a great day for Dan, being rephotographed and reinterviewed; and he was to be a witness at the inquest. Linda, of course, would be a witness—indeed, the chief witness; and what, now, would she say?

Newspaper people and radio and film men were downstairs again, halting on the way to the inquest; a sound-film truck blocked the drive to the front door. As she watched them take station to film some important arrival, Linda thought, momentarily, how strange that people whom she never saw before knew more about who was coming to the house than she herself. She stepped out on the balcony and when the cameraman looked up she called:

"Who do you expect?"

"Mrs. Denslow's coming with her son."

Gregg was driving and beside him sat his mother.

FROM the car which crowded in behind Gregg's Clem Clay got out. Some of the cameras swung at him as he strode toward the house after Gregg and his mother.

Linda turned and ran downstairs. Lucius had just opened the door. "Step in, ma'am; step right into de house!" he was bowing to the lady who had been Horace Denslow's wife.

Lucius, who recognized intently that indescribable personal charm called "quality," proudly identified it in her. She had poise and presence which made her seem tall until Linda compared her with herself. She was, in fact, but little taller and she was nearly as slender as Linda. Her eyes were like Gregory's, bold, candid, alert. She studied the dark southern girl before her for a moment and then, in acknowledgment of Linda's, "I'm so glad you came here," she said in a low, liquid voice, "I wanted very much to meet you."



"Are you Mr. Prescott?" And at his answer, she immediately introduced herself. "I'm Kate Kelly; does it mean anything to you?"

"Please come right up stairs!" Linda invited, glancing at Gregg and from him to Clem Clay and the others crowded behind her.

"We've a sitting room up stairs. I'm sorry that my mother is not here. She has taken my brother to a neighbor's house. Upstairs, we can be alone." And she looked again at Clem Clay.

He decided not to follow; he even aligned himself somewhat with Lucius, who admitted to the stairs only Mrs. Denslow and Gregg; and so, in the cool, wide sitting room upstairs, the three of them were alone.

Linda closed the door and, having done so, she led the others away from it. The room was so large that, if they spoke in low voices when at the other end of it, no one listening at the door could hear; and Linda felt sure that Lucius would allow no one in a position to eavesdrop without warning her.

"My son has told me," Mrs. Denslow said in a tone which indicated that she fully realized the situation, "what you did for him yesterday at the lodge."

She means about the letter, Linda thought miserably; and she could only nod.

"That was brave and extremely quick in you. It has proved more important than you could have imagined yesterday—than any of us might have imagined."

"How?" asked Linda, desperately.

"That's what I came to tell you. Of course I wished very much to see you, in any case. I've been deeply impressed by what I have learned about you since I have been here."

She hesitated a moment.

"Won't you sit down?" asked Linda.

"Thank you," said Henriette Taylor Denslow, but remained standing. They all did. "You've heard now about Mr. Niles Evans, I suppose."

"Yes; just an hour ago."

"How was he mentioned to you?"

"As a friend of yours, Mrs. Denslow."

"I mean," the older woman went on calmly, "he was mentioned in connection with the—"

crimes? Definitely, he was described as one who might have killed Mr. Denslow."

"Yes."

"In association with my son, they say," Mrs. Denslow continued. "What they have been unable—or reluctant—to accredit to Gregory alone, they find themselves ready to assign to Mr. Evans and my son together. I will tell you why."

"He undertook, when he was a boy and I a small girl, to become my champion—my defender. My clearest memories of him, when we were children, was of Niles fighting for me; he would fight any boy who, he thought, was rude to me; and he would pick a fight with another boy whom, he thought, I liked. He was always sure that we were to be married."

"How he acted when I married Mr. Denslow is now being recalled, and also what he did when I separated from my husband. Mr. Evans had married but he divorced his wife and made no secret that he wanted me to marry him. Further, he made no secret of his criticisms of Mr. Denslow; he was hotly outspoken against him—particularly recently."

"Unfortunately Mr. Evans was present when Gregory left me, in Florida, to call upon his father. Mr. Evans knew of the difference between my son and myself in regard to his father. He left shortly after my son did."

"Yes," said Linda, when Mrs. Denslow waited.

"Yes," Gregg's mother repeated.

"Where did he go?"

"I don't know."

"Where did he leave for?"

"I don't know that."

"Where is he now?"

"That I don't know."

"Have you heard from him at all since—since Mr. Denslow was killed?"

Mrs. Denslow's face had become very white but she clung to her composure. She was shaking a little but she stood straight as before. "Yes; once," she answered in the same low, guarded tone.

"What makes it worse," Mrs. Denslow added, "is that Niles Evans usually goes about alone. He is a singularly lonely man. It is most unlikely that he could completely account for himself on that night, except by his own unsupported statement. So we have him to think of as well as ourselves."

"Gregory told me this morning, when at last I managed to see him alone, that he had decided to tell at the inquest of his call upon his father and that therefore you must tell about the letter you found on the floor, and produce it. I am not sure, in any case, that would have been best; but now I know it cannot be done."

SHE paled again. "It might hang him and Niles Evans, too. Put that in the law's hands and you can never take it away. It might hang them, I say. . . . Child, I did not mean to startle you so."

"You haven't startled me," Linda said, now paler than she. "It's I—I—what I've got to tell you. I haven't the letter any more!"

"You mean you destroyed it? That's good. That settles it."

"I mean, it's gone! It was taken!"

"Taken? How? By whom?"

"From where I hid it in my room. I don't know by whom or when or anything about it, except that it's gone. You see," she became almost hysterical yet remembered to keep her voice low, "when I went to my room to put away the bar of gold, I thought I'd put it in the same place. I couldn't think of a better place where nobody would look; and the letter was gone! O, I turned out the drawer; I turned out all the drawers; but it wasn't there. Somebody had taken it away!"

Gregg's arms were about her, holding her, pressing her hard as if he understood her feeling that, in her panic, she would fly to pieces. His strength, his pressure reassured her, and now at last, having told him, she could look squarely at him. Strange at such a moment suddenly to love him so—him whom she had sent to death perhaps. What had his mother just said? Put that in the law's hands and you can never take it away. It might hang him! She remembered his mother had said "them."

But Gregg was only pressing her tight; now he was kissing her, careless that his mother was beside them. Linda caught her arms about Gregg and clung to him. They said no words.

His mother said after an interval of length that Linda could not even guess: "Come! We must think! We must, all of us, think. We have to go on to the inquest in a few minutes and say—what we have to say."

"I'll tell of seeing father now, mother."

"No. . . . I can't be sure what to do. . . . If we had any idea who got it. It might be a Negro who had no hint of its importance."

"O, no, Mrs. Denslow," cried Linda. "It couldn't have been one of the servants. I wish I could think it were. . . . You see, I just discovered it when I went to put away the gold—"

"You said that before, Linda; gold; what gold?" Gregg asked her.

"The gold Mr. Prescott and I found in Lucius' conjure stone. Gold; I can get that—unless it's taken, too!"

SHE leaped up, for Gregg, in his bewilderment, had freed her; and to do something—anything—she ran to her own room and felt again at the bottom of the drawer for the scraps of paper which were not there. But she found the gold and hurried back with it.

Lucius, she saw, still held his post at the foot of the stairs.

"Here!" she cried when she shut the door again. "There were eight of these in a stone, Lucius found."

"Then, of course, it wasn't a stone!" Gregg took from her and turned over and over the little bar of gold.

"No; it was a made stone." And she described, none too coherently, how Mr. Prescott and she had broken it; but Gregg seemed to understand.

"Davy Allen probably made it, mother. It fits in."

"With what?" said Linda.

"With what I've heard."

His mother ignored both his remark and the gold. Indeed, she scarcely glanced at it. "The letter has another edge, Gregory."

"Edge, mother?"

"It may be two edged. Think! Whoever stole those scraps from your room," she looked at Linda, "was searching for them, you feel sure?"

"Yes; I do."

"Then he knew of their existence; and he wanted them because he knew they had been scattered—on the floor of that room in the lodge. He searched for them in your room because he suspected that you must have picked them up and carried them away. But, though he has them, how can he use them without pointing at himself? How can he say, 'She took these from the floor beside the body without saying, 'I know they were there because I scattered them there? I am the murderer!'"

"He can't!" Linda cried in her relief, but herself lessened it the next instant. "But he can place them to be found at the lodge somewhere, can't he?"

"Yes. So we have to determine now what we shall do and say. . . ."

Probably it was Linda's run to and from her room which brought the end of their respite; for Clem Clay came upstairs.

Lucius hastened before him and it was Lucius, hand which first struck the door; but it was the sheriff's that opened it.

"Can't give you no more time, ladies," he said. "We've got to move on to the inquest."

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(To be continued)