

White as Snow

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IT was common talk in the underworld of the great metropolis that Slim Hanley had a long-standing grudge against a dip familiarly known as Mike the Mouse. Just how it had come about or why Hanley hated the Mouse, no one seemed able to understand thoroughly, but it was gossip in the cafes, gambling dens and dives, Slim intended to get the Mouse and get him good.

Had the facts of the feud been known, the angels of crime who fluttered through the red lights of the joints would have understood that Slim Hanley had reason for the grudge he cherished. Several years before, incredible as it seemed, both men had been partners, traveling the farmer circuit and burglarizing small-town post offices and banks with a fair degree of success. There had been the little episode of the railroad station in the town of Millsburg. Here, Slim Hanley had fallen victim to the wiles of one Sada Kern, daughter of an old-time counterfeiter who had reformed and was cultivating a small farm. Sada, born of criminal parents, yearned for the city and Slim promised that her yearnings should not be in vain; he proposed to marry her and make her both wife and partner; but first there was the matter of the safe in the depot of Millburg.

On the night the robbery was scheduled to take place, the slim yegg, hurrying to the rendezvous, found that some one had visited the spot before his arrival. From a distance, Hanley observed the bobbing of lanterns and saw the place swarming with minions of the law. As he had committed no crime in that particular town, he drew near and made inquiries. Some one, full of information, told him that the station safe had been blown by "a robber who had run off with old man Kern's daughter." When Slim, seething with varied emotions, hurried to the farm of the ex-counterfeiter, he found that what he suspected was true. It was Mike the Mouse who had both blown the safe and eloped with the Millburg maiden.

All this had happened two years ago, but Slim Hanley had not forgotten.

Mike the Mouse, after his marriage with Sada Kern, had abandoned safe-blowing for the easier and safer profession of picking pockets. Sada, welcoming a life of crime, turned shoplifter and, as a sideline, enjoyed a lucrative income from the peddling of small quantities of "snow." Both had kept an eye on Hanley when he returned to the city to turn capper for a gambling-house in the upper Forties; but the tall, well-groomed young man had done nothing beyond mentioning, in the presence of the Mouse, the fact that he intended to get him at some future date. When the Mouse, slightly perturbed, hurried to his Sada and informed her of what he had learned, his better half soothed him and routed his fears by waxing sarcastic.

"So you fell for that stuff, Mike?" she sneered. "Don't you know he was throwing a scare into you? Why, that cheap flash couldn't get even with a wop peanut seller! Pull yourself together, Mike. If he tries to start anything, for two bits, I'll get Larry the Barber to stick a knife in him."

Despite himself, her husband shuddered. He knew that Sada wouldn't hesitate to do what she said and it alarmed him. His sobriquet well befitted him. He had the heart of a mouse. Secretly he feared his former partner, but took pains that Sada should not know of it.

"He's a bad guy," the Mouse muttered, "but he can't bull me. I remember the time he shot one of the constables at Hillmount——"

His wife made a weary gesture. "Country stuff," she said disparagingly. "Small-town bunk! Slim may be a boob in most things, but when it comes to looking out for himself, he's there with the brains. He knows he'll take a nice little ride up the river for a stretch at making shoes if he starts anything like that here. Nix on the gun play for Hanley. The worst he could do would be to try and frame you, and he can't get away with that while

I'm on the job!"

Slightly mollified and reassured, the Mouse threw out his narrow chest, and, when interviewed on the subject of the grudge of Hanley, he would laugh contemptuously and sneer an answer:

"I don't know what that guy's got against me, but let him start something. I guess he'll get more in return than he imagines."

When Slim, hearing of the Mouse's sangfroid and his invariable answer, realized that his one-time partner was returning his threat with interest, he laughed long and loud.

"Will you get wise to Mike," he told Red Saunders, a friend and confidant, "trying to make believe he's there with the nerve! The sawed-off dip! I'll bet he's shivering all the way down to his shoes!"

Red Saunders laughed. "What did he do to you, Slim, and when are you going to throw the hooks into him?"

The lids came down over the crook's shifty eyes and his mouth tightened to a thin, red streak.

"What he did to me," he answered slowly, "is a personal matter, and when I get busy with him it will, be nobody's business but my own—and yours. You're going to play a star part, kid."

Time passed, and as Mike the Mouse went about his affairs unmolested, he breathed more easily again. What Sada had told him about Slim's words being a scare, he believed; and after a few months, he forgot entirely the threat of the other.

Meanwhile prosperity came to him and his wife. Sada had given up the shoplifting game to devote her energies entirely to the selling of narcotics. At this she did a flourishing business, drawing down profits that amazed her until she became used to them; and the Mouse, leaving leathers alone, and refraining from allowing his fingers to stray into strange pockets, became her agent, transferring the snow from Sada to the purchaser.

It was almost six months after the Slim Hanley scare that Mike the Mouse met Austin Bender. Bender, it seemed, was a Philadelphia lush who had lately taken to dope, and who had come to the city where the supply was more plentiful and easier to procure than in the sleepy town of his birth. Mike the Mouse picked up his acquaintance in a Rialto cafe and promptly learned, through discreet questioning, that the man was a "sleigh rider." Upon hearing this he sold him all the snow

he had about him at a prohibitive price, and carried home the news to Sada, who listened suspiciously.

"H'm," was her comment when the Mouse finished his narrative. "How do you know he isn't a pigeon? You're too friendly altogether with people you pick up."

At this the Mouse looked grieved and hastened to assure her that his find was a booze-soaked spendthrift from whom they could raise unlimited money from the sale of the restricted article they handled. As a few weeks passed, and Bender kept both of them busy filling his orders with no untoward happening, Sada dropped her guard and confided to the Mouse that she was entirely wrong in her former opinions.

"Look here, friend," Austin Bender said to the Mouse, late one afternoon, a month or two after they had become acquainted. "I'm leaving for Phillie to-night, and I've got a couple of friends in town who want to load up on the stuff before catching the rattler. You know there's nothing doing in that line in the Quaker City and we want to be stocked up with it before leaving. How much have you on hand and where can we get it?"

The Mouse pleaded ignorance until he could see Sada, and after promising Bender to telephone him at his apartment, hurried away. When the former daughter of Millsburg heard the news of a heavy purchase, she listened in silence and then nodded.

"Sure, give him a ring and tell him to come down here with his friends," she said. "I guess we can fix them up."

The Mouse licked his lips. "You—you don't think this bird's a dope-squad bull, do you?" he asked anxiously. "How do we know who his friends are? I *think* he's on the level but—but you can never tell."

Sada was amused, for when she had been skeptical, her husband had valiantly stood up in defense of the Philadelphian. Now, when she was undisturbed, it was his turn to doubt.

"Tell them to come down," she said, "and leave the rest to me."

When the Mouse, still somewhat uncertain, went out to use the telephone, Sada became very busy about the small parlor.

It was almost ten o'clock that night when the front doorbell of the apartment rang three times and the Mouse, drawing a deep breath, admitted Bender and two well-dressed men, who came in

quietly and sat down in the parlor while the ex-dip called his wife.

She appeared presently, was introduced to the trio, and bade her husband bring a bottle of wine.

"We're in a little hurry," Bender said. "Our train leaves in an hour and we don't want to miss it. Can you let us have the stuff now?"

Sada looked at him coolly. "Yes. How much worth do you want?"

"For myself," murmured one of Bender's friends, a short stout man with keen eyes, "I'd like to take a couple of hundred dollars' worth." He winked at his companion. "Enough, to last until we blow in again, eh Joey?"

The other inclined his head. "Right! And the same for me."

Bender glanced at his watch. "And my usual quantity tripled."

The wife of Mike the Mouse allowed her cool, impersonal gaze to linger upon them. "I'll get it," she said quietly.

As she left the room, the man who had been addressed as Joey encountered the gaze of Bender and nodded slightly. The third member of the trio arose from his chair to examine a framed photograph near the door.

A minute or two passed and then Sada returned carrying three small packages which she placed on the table in the center of the room.

"Here's the stuff," she said. "Cross my palm, if you please."

The man across the table from her picked up one of the packages, opened it and brought to light a small box filled to overflowing with a white powder. As he raised his eyes from the package, he threw back the lapel of his coat with one hand, disclosing a shield, at the same time producing a shiny revolver, seemingly from nowhere.

"All right, boys!" he cried. "Caught 'em both with the goods!"

Mike the Mouse, frozen with terror, made a rush for the door but stopped abruptly as he looked into the barrel of a gun held by the man who had lately been scrutinizing the picture on the wall.

"Great Scott!" the Mouse screamed. "It's a pinch!"

His captor laughed. "Looks like it, don't it," he said easily. "We've been on your trail for a long, long while, but we wanted the woman higher up and I guess we've got her!"

In the center of the room Sada rested dimpled

elbows on the table top and stared thoughtfully across at the trio and at her quivering husband.

"What's all the excitement about?" she drawled languidly.

The man called Joey looked at her with a glance of admiration.

"Pretty cool, girlie, but we've nailed you with the goods."

Instead of replying she looked into the face of the man who called himself Austin Bender.

"So I was right from the first," she said slowly! "you *are* a pigeon!"

He nodded, a sneer on his lips. "Yep —out to get you both and I guess you're got."

There was the jingle of handcuffs and the Mouse gave a squeal as they passed over his wrists. At the sound of her husband's voice, Sada straightened up.

"Don't be in so much of a hurry," she said pleasantly, "there isn't any train to catch now, you know. Don't try to rush the game by slipping the bracelets on before you're wise to the layout!"

The man called Joey took a step forward. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded harshly.

She laughed and in her laughter was soft triumph. "Listen, and you'll find out. In the first place I knew Mr. Bender here, alias Mr. Red Saunders, was doing this little job to oblige his pal, a once-was friend of mine and Mike's, known as Slim Hanley. I recognized him the minute I saw him, and as for you two gentlemen, if you want to learn to act like hopheads, first you must leave off feeling for your guns every two or three minutes."

She stopped to give vent to laughter again as Austin Bender, alias Red Saunders, retreated a step or two.

"Shoot the rest of the piece!" the detective facing her ordered. "How about the stuff, here?"

Sada yawned. "If you had been on the level," she said frankly, "you would have got it. As it's a frame up, it's all off! You can search this place from end to end, and you won't find an ounce of dope—not a grain!"

The detective opposite her snatched up the package on the table, and with professional haste, examined it carefully. Then with, an oath he dropped it.

"*Baking powder!*" he cried.

The woman laughed calmly. "Baking powder it is!"