

The Fatal Safe

by James Dabney

Some years ago I chanced to be in England. I was travelling for my health, and, as I was very anxious to see the “Mother Country” from every point of view, I passed a year going through it, and, in that time, mingled with all classes, and went to all places to which I could gain access. I was the guest of the Duke of —, at his beautiful country-seat in D—, and in the disguise of a vagabond, I penetrated the lowest haunts of vice and crime in the great city of London, and came out from them safely. My friends used to laugh at me for what they called my “oddities,” but I took their teasing good-naturedly, and told them that, as I had come to England to see, I was determined to gratify my curiosity to the utmost. As may be supposed, I gained much strange and interesting experience. Indeed, I learned from my own observation that the most exciting incidents of romance are not half so wonderful as those which one may see around him every day, if he will only take the trouble to look for them.

One morning I was walking along the river side in London, gazing at the long rows of masts, and the black chimneys of the steamers, when my attention was attracted by something on one of the piers, and I went over to look at it. When my curiosity was satisfied, I stood for some time looking at the foul current of the Thames, as it flowed beneath me. I never saw water so full of filth. It seemed as if it might be the great sewer of the universe, through which all the refuse matter of creation was flowing. It was almost sickening to look at it.

Turning to a policeman who was standing by me, I said:

“It would be a wretched death to drown here, in such foul water.”

“You may say that, sir,” he replied, politely. “A man as falls down there, ‘ll never get up again. But a plenty of ‘em are drowned there every day, poor devils. Only a week ago I saw a man drowned right under us.”

“Indeed,” said I, “how was that?”

“Well, you see, sir,” he replied, “it’s rather a long story; but, as I take you for an American, by your speech, and as you might like to hear something of the ways of this city, I don’t mind telling you, if you have the time to listen.”

I assured him I would be only too willing to listen to him, and would be very much obliged to him for the story.

“London, sir,” he began, seating himself on a bale of goods, “is as full of thieves as heaven is of angels. They are a reckless and dangerous class, too, sir, and give us officers of the law a sight of trouble in trying to keep them down. Sometimes you find them the most innocent and respectable-looking people you ever saw; others are regular swells, who can be told by their flashy dress and genteel appearance; while others still are such as you’d better not approach, without a good weapon of some kind. We officers of the law, sir, learn to know all these

characters pretty well after a little experience, and we have a different way of dealing with each class. Some of these people are stupid enough, some are too sharp for even the most expert detective, and some succeed by their genuine impudence.

“About a mile above here, on this street, is the office of a wealthy firm of ship-merchants. They are very close and stingy men, sir, and, instead of taking a building suitable to their wealth and trade, they hire a small, mean office, opening right on the street, and which is hardly secure from the most blundering burglar. I am on the night-police, sir, and my beat carries me just in front of their office. They have spoken to me about keeping a good watch on their premises, but I have told them I cannot see my whole beat at once, and that I was confident some bold thief would break in some night, and rob them. Sure enough, sir, my prediction was realized about a week ago.

“It seems that Messrs. Cuttwothy & Co., the merchants I speak of, never keep as much as a hundred pounds in their office after bank hours. They have only one small safe, in which their books are deposited, and, as they always make it known that they keep no money in this safe, they have felt confident that no one would care to attempt a robbery for the sake of a few account-books, which could be of value to no one but the firm.

“It happened, however, about a week ago, that Messrs. Cuttwell & Co. received a remittance of ten thousand pounds, after the banks closed. It was an unusual occurrence, and it was too late to deposit the sum in bank; so, after consulting about the matter, the firm concluded to place the money quietly in the safe until the next morning and say nothing about it.

“That night, about twelve o’clock, I was coming up my beat, when I saw four men pushing a small safe along the streets. It was an extraordinary sight, and I suppose they expected that the very boldness of the act would be their greatest protection. It was a clear, starlight night, and every one of their movements was perfectly plain to me, I recognized the safe, at a glance, as the property of Messrs. Cuttworth & Co., and I was confident that these men were engaged in a daring robbery. My first thought was to spring my rattle for assistance and to frighten them off; but, on reflection, I decided not to do so. I wanted to see what the thieves would do with the safe, as it was likely that I might, in this way, learn something of value to the law. Besides this, it’s a habit of mine to let a man think he’s perfectly secure and unsuspected, before I pounce upon him.

“From the ease with which the men moved the safe, I could see that they were powerful fellows, and that, if they chose to offer any resistance, I would have my hands full. I loosened my revolver and examined it, and keeping in my hand, crept along cautiously in the shadow of the buildings, until the thieves stopped on this pier. Then I crossed the street a little below them, and crept up on them. One of them descended into a large four-oared wherry, and the others fastened a rope of the safe, and prepared to lower it into the boat.

“Now was my time, and springing forward, I shouted:

‘I have you now, you villains.’

“The men were frightened, and let go the rope. The safe had been balanced on the edge of the pier, just ready for lowering, and the men had gotten further in their work than I suspected. At the sound of my voice they let go the rope, and the safe fell over the pier into the boat with a

loud crash. It struck the man who was in the wherry, ready to receive it, and fairly drove him through the bottom of the boat, which at once filled and sank. The three men on the pier escaped, but the man in the boat was either killed by the fall, or drowned. The next day I went to the office of Messrs. Cuttworth & Co., and found them in great excitement over what had happened. I told them what had become of the safe, and during the day it was fished up, and its contents found uninjured. It is not very well known how the thieves knew there was money in the safe, or whether they knew it at all, but, as the porter of the firm has not been heard from since, it is believed that he was concerned in the robbery, and that he was the man that was killed in the boat.”

“I suppose Messrs. Cuttworth & Co. rewarded you handsomely for your services,” I said, as the policeman concluded.

“They gave me a guinea, sir, and told me I was an efficient man,” he answered with a dry laugh.

I dropped a shilling into his hand, and, thanking him for his story, went on my way.

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