

Thrilling Adventure in a Gaming House

[From the Boston Traveller]

It was the Spring of 18-- that I found myself gliding upon the waters of the mighty Mississippi, and bound for the Crescent City, New Orleans.

With a single exception I had formed no traveling acquaintance on board the boat, although I had been nearly two days upon my journey, which was becoming somewhat monotonous. The individual with whom I singularly enough fraternized seemed like myself, to have but little inclination to extend his acquaintance among the passengers, though he seemed to be constantly upon the look out for someone, and from the close manner in which he regarded the operations of two or three of those individuals, whose profuse display of vest chains and jewelry and proficiency with cards at the tables in the saloon, betrayed their profession, I more than once set him down as some sort of police detective in disguise.

He called himself George Thorn of Kentucky; so his card read, which he gave me in exchange for mine. In truth he was a noble specimen of the Corn-cracker State. Full six foot in height, a clear, intelligent blue eye, broad forehead, and light curly hair, muscular arms, and the chest of a Hercules, he challenged the admiration of more than one of the passengers, as with his serious and never smiling face he paced the promenade deck or sat apparently buried in thought in the saloon.

“Do you never play at cards?” said I to him, as he left a group that were standing about a table of four players, and noting the progress of the game. I had frequently seen him invited, but he invariably, like myself, refused to participate in the game.

“Oh yes,” said he, “but where is the use of playing here; those fellows (nodding toward the players) can tell every card in the pack by their backs, and they are trying hard to pluck poor some poor pigeon from among these passengers, but as yet with indifferent success; beware of them, sir.”

I thanked him for his friendly warning, and at the same time expressed my astonishment at his affirmation. To convince me of the truth of it, he called the steward of the boat and ordered him to bring him a fresh pack of cards, which were brought, and he handed the pack to me, bidding me to shuffle them. I did so, when he immediately selected nearly every ace and king from the pack, without looking at the face of them. Next, he dealt them in two parcels, one to me and one to himself, when, upon examination, I found that all the cards of real value in the game were in his hand, although I could not detect the least unfairness as he dealt them.

“You see,” said he, smilingly, at my look of astonishment, “the advantage an expert in these matters has over even a skillful player.”

“I do, indeed,” replied I, astonished at my fellow-traveler’s dexterity, and beginning to think he might be a reformed gambler, or one “playing possum” for some purpose or other; but as he did

not urge or even invite me to play, nor had played with anyone else, and threw the cards aside with an expression of disgust too natural to be assumed, I came to the conclusion that my suspicions were unjust, and my traveling acquaintance was a riddle yet to be solved.

Early the next morning the boat arrived at New Orleans, and amid the hurry and bustle of debarkation I lost my friend, the Kentuckian, not even seeing him to bid adieu. The same evening, however, after visiting the theatre, I was enjoying the cool air and a fragrant Havana in the rotunda of the St. Charles Hotel, and conversing with a friend from the North whom I had formerly met, when who should I encounter but my steamboat acquaintance.

After the usual greeting our conversation turned upon our trip down the river, our fellow passengers, &c., when my fellow traveler remarked that if I should like to visit the interior of a gambling house, or “hell,” as it is more appropriately called, he would be pleased to show it to me as one of the sights or “lions” of the city.— Never having witnessed anything of the kind, both I and my friend assented, and after a short walk, found ourselves within the precincts of one of those glittering and gorgeously furnished establishments—vestibules to the infernal regions—where men were engaged in the various games of hazard.

The interior of a gaming house has been too frequently described to need repetition. The Faro Bank, with its crowd of visitors; the Rouge et Noir, with its anxious circle, and groups of players at other games, of which I was ignorant of the name, were all busily engaged as we entered. We had passed through two apartments and reached a third, in which were but four players, playing in pairs at different tables. As we entered we sat down at an unoccupied table for a moment, when, as we did so, we heard one of the two men nearest us say to his opponent—

“That’s my last dollar; luck is yours, and I’m cleaned out.”

“But you wear a good ring,” said his opponent. “See! I will give you a chance for revenge. I’ll back my ring against yours on the next game. It’s a ring I won from a Kentucky boy that came to New Orleans to see the sights,” said he, carelessly.

How little did he know those words, so lightly spoken, would seal his doom.

“No!” said his opponent, rising; “I’ll meet you tomorrow night. I won’t pledge my jewelry yet.”

As the player, who was sitting with his back partially towards us, mentioned Kentucky in his conversation, I saw Thorn listen with eagerness, and as he twisted the ring he offered to bet, upon his finger, I saw the Kentuckian turn deadly pale. His eyes glowed like fire for an instant, then his countenance again assumed its calm and placid look—and, to our amazement, he rose, and walking across the apartment to the player, who had just been left by his companion, courteously proposed to try a hand or two with him if agreeable, and if we, his friends, would excuse him for a short time. Of course we assented—so did the gambler, who appeared at first somewhat surprised at the proposition, but probably resolved to try his skill upon the new comer.

The cards were dealt and the game proceeded. We were sufficiently near to see that the piece of gold which constituted the first stake was won by our friend’s opponent; so also, was the second.

The third stake Thorn gained. And thus they went on alternately winning and losing, till at last Thorn carelessly observed:

“That is a pretty ring you offered to bet a while ago, stranger. Will you sell it?”

“Well, as to that,” said the other, “it’s pretty enough, and cost me enough,—for a young fellow pledged it to me some three years ago as a sort of note of hand, which he promised to redeem with five hundred dollars that he owned me—a debt of honor, sir, but he never paid it; so I retain the ring. No, stranger, I guess I won’t sell it.”

“But the owner? You should have made him pay; five hundred dollars is a dear price for such a bauble.”

“Why, as to that,” said the player, as he gathered up the cards for the next hand, “he couldn’t come to time very well, for he ‘paid the debt of nature,’ as they say, the same night, and that cancelled my obligation. Ah, the stake’s mine, there’s always luck in this ring, sir, I believe,” said he, as he drew the money toward him, “suppose we try a larger stake,” and he prepared to shuffle the cards again.

“As you like,” said Thorn.

“Well, what shall it be?” said his opponent, “anything from one to five hundred!” and he threw a banknote of that denomination carelessly, as if in bravado, upon the table.

To our surprise, Thorn drew a wallet from his pocket, and produced an equal amount of money, then sweeping the cards they had been using from the table to the floor, he called for a fresh pack, and passing them, as the attendant brought them to him, rapidly through his hand, he gave them to his adversary, remarking to him, as he did so, to “mind his deal this time,” fixing upon him a searching glance as he went through that operation. The game was that known as “bluff,” or “poker,” I know not which, but at any rate one on which the players bet upon the cards they hold. Thorn and his opponent having each glanced at their cards, commenced the game.

“I’ll go you one hundred,” said Thorn, commencing.

“Two hundred better than that,” said his opponent.

“Another hundred,” continued Thorn.

“‘Hm’m three hundred better!” said the gambler producing the notes from his pocketbook.

“Three hundred more,” said Thorn, quietly.

The game was getting exciting to us as spectators; three thousand dollars lay upon the table to be decided by the cards held by the players, each of whom seemed from his bets to be confident of success, though their countenances betrayed not the least emotion.

“One hundred more,” said the gambler again.

“I call you,” said Torn.

“*Ah! three kings and an ace!*” said the sharper, triumphantly.

“THREE ACES AND A KING!” said Thorn quietly, as he displayed his own cards, and with his eyes fixed steadily upon his opponent, folded up the money and crammed it into his pocket.

“I must confess,” said Thorn, “that I am not of a convivial or musical turn, although I can occasionally tell a good story. I have a little history now, sir, upon my tongue’s end, that will be of uncommon interest to you.”

“To me! Pray tell it, sir,” said the gambler, with a laugh. “It will be a wind up for the evening’s entertainment.”

It was now long past midnight; absorbed in the excitement of the game, we had scarcely noticed the flight of time or that the adjoining rooms were now nearly deserted by their occupants, and that the other two players, at the other end of the apartment in which we were, had finished their own game long since, and been spectators of that between Thorn and his opponent, and were now apparently interested listeners.

“About three years since,” began Thorn, “a young man in Kentucky, the confidential agent of a large business firm, was intrusted with a large sum of money and commissioned to transact some business in New Orleans; it was his first visit to the city; he started happily, leaving behind him a young wife and lovely infant. Unfortunately, upon one of the Mississippi boats, or immediately upon his arrival in New Orleans, he fell in with a *professional* man—a man of play I mean, you understand—

The gambler nodded, and Thorn continued:

“By the management of this ‘professional,’ the young man was enticed to a ‘hell,’ introduced to play, plied with wine, stripped of his money—in short, to use a ‘professional’ word, ‘plucked.’”

“Ha! ha! the old story,” said the gambler; “the fate of pigeons.”

“Fortune favors you,” said the gambler, stoically, too well schooled to betray any emotion or chagrin at the result.

“So it seems,” said the other.

“But I hope to meet you again, sir; for I must have my revenge after so heavy a run of luck as this,” said Thorn’s opponent; “and I have no doubt your friends will join us in a social sit down; for if you are as good at cracking a bottle, singing a song, or telling a story, as holding a hand at cards, those who are your friends are fortunate.”

“You are very complimentary, but that which interests you is yet to come.”

“Indeed! Go on!”

Thorn continued:

“The young man was perfectly sobered by his loss; he returned to his hotel; stung with remorse and half crazy with excitement, he placed a pistol to his head and blew his brains out leaving a tarnished name as an inheritance for his wife and innocent child.”

“But what’s all this to me?” said the gambler, now pale as ashes beneath the flashing eye of the speaker, “is it a moral lesson you’re about to read here, or a sermon you have to preach?”

“What is it to you?” continued Thorn, his voice quivering with excitement. “Ah! I’ll tell you what it is to you. This meeting of you and I tonight, which for three long years I have sought, is not mere chance. The hand of Heaven is in it.— ’Twas three years ago this very night,—aye, this very hour,” said he, glancing at his watch, “that the young man I spoke of rushed madly into eternity—not by his own hand, but his opponent at the card table is he that should be accountable for that deed of blood—the amount of money he lost was just the amount I have this night won from you; *that very ring upon your finger is his!* I AM HIS BROTHER, AND YOU ARE HIS ASSASSIN!”

Thorn pronounced these words in a firm, clear, ringing voice, and as he concluded brought his hand down with a blow upon the table at which they were sitting, which was instantly overturned, as he and his opponent started simultaneously to their feet. They were scarcely six paces apart after springing from their chairs, and both drew their weapons as they rose.

“Die, liar!” shouted the gambler, discharging his weapon the moment he gained his feet. The bullet ripped open Thorn’s waistcoat, and his watch flew in fragments from the pocket, dangling by its chain, at the same moment his arm, which was slowly rising, became rigid as that of a statue—the pistol he held exploded, and the gambler fell back a corpse upon the carpet. —This all passed so suddenly, ere we could interfere, that we stood as if paralyzed for an instant—the servants alarmed by the noise, and the police came rushing into the apartment.

Thorn quietly surrendered himself, merely turning to us and the other two who were in the room, saying as he did so, “Gentlemen, bear witness, I fired in self-defense, and that I received that villain’s first fire here,” and he pointed to his shattered watch with a smile, and turning, left the room with the officers.

He was tried and acquitted, as it was clearly proven that his adversary fired upon him first. The fact of the gambler being a notorious rascal, whom the community could well afford to spare, might have had some influence with the jury.

I have never met Thorn since, but the recollection of that fearful scene is yet fresh and vivid in my mind, though many years have passed since it was enacted.

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