

Retribution
---Or---
Rodden The Gambler

by Mary Orme

“I know you are wondering what ails my hand,” said the captain of our steamboat, who had appeared with his arm in a sling since we went onboard, several days previous. We had made his acquaintance, and liked him, and had wondered about his hand, as he said, but not enough to ask the chambermaid, or the men.

“I am sick of running a steamboat,” said he. “I want a plantation, tho’ maybe some hand would ‘cut up,’ and give me as bad a hurt as this. It is no use telling everything to everybody, but I don’t mind telling you.”

“Seeing it’s you,” said my wife, smiling.

“Yes, ‘seeing it’s you,’ as the peddlers say, I will tell you. I hope, Madam, you will not see any rough work on the river. My word for it, it would use you up mighty quick.”

My wife was an invalid, and we were escaping from the cold and coal-smoke of Cincinnati, to spend the winter in New Orleans.

“On our last trip down,” said the captain, “I observed a party on board that I did not feel very happy to see. I don’t like snags on two legs. The party consisted of a young man, about thirty or thirty five years old, with his wife and a young babe, and his other. The young man was *hard*, decidedly. He had on a gray coat and pants, and purple velvet vest, with a massive gold chain strung across his breast. He had abundant black hair, which curled, and was redolent of macassar. His face was red and fluffy, and his eyes were black and wicked. He had been good looking, or might have been, if his mother had not brought him up. She was a tall, stately woman, quite as tall as her son, about fifty years, or perhaps older. She wore a false front, and her forehead was shaved, so as to look larger than it was naturally. She was made up in the most careful way, so I can’t answer for her age, and was dressed in the richest moiré antique and the costliest lace. There was not a sin of the civilized world that was not written on that woman’s face. I have seen a great many women in whom but little of womanly virtue and sweetness was left, but never one who struck me as being so bad as this gambler’s mother, Yes, Madam, this was a nest of gamblers. The poor little wife was a trained stool-pigeon; even the baby was dressed to attract and win, if possible, the unwary. The wife was very pretty, but she seemed to my practiced eyes a strange compound. She was dressed very elegantly, and had on a great deal too much jewelry for a steamboat. I might have thought her a real lady but for these ornaments, and I afterward discovered that her husband made her wear these trappings to render her more attractive to his destined victims. I saw, after a day or two, that she was dressed daily for display. They had come from Canada, so they stated, and were going to New Orleans. I kept my eyes open, and so did the chambermaid, who has been with me nine years. There was a gentleman on board who had pleased me very much, and with whom I formed an intimate acquaintance soon after we left Cincinnati, who interested himself in watching these people also. We had a young

man on board, who was going to Memphis as a master-carpenter. He was simple and honest, what we call green, and told of his intentions, and talked of his means and his prospects much too freely. His name was John Greene. The gambler gave his name as Rodden, and the gentleman to whom I was partial called himself Browne. I did not think that was his name; he seemed to me to be an actor, or a private gentleman who was about to become one. When we were alone, he sometimes amused me by personating persons on board, or others whom I knew, in a very remarkable way.

“Rodden made a set at young Greene as soon as he learned that he had money, but not by noticing him at all himself at first. But he moved the wires, and the elder Rodden talked with the young man about his home, and his mother, and hinted at a sweetheart; and the young wife, who seemed to scorn everybody and everything but herself, spoke very sweetly to him, and gave him her babe to hold sometimes. I pitied that young wife and mother. She evidently loved her baby more than all things else, and feared her husband and his mother most terribly. Toward them her pride was broken, and she crouched and did their bidding. There seemed a constant struggle going on within her. Without her babe, I could conceive of her jumping into the river at any hour. But with it, and for it she would do anything to live.

“Rodden made up his mind to rob the young carpenter, and it had to be done before we reached Memphis; and it was done, sir. He won three thousand dollars from him six hours before we reached Memphis. They had played for small sums at first, and Greene had won about two-thirds of the time. At first he had played with the female Roddens for candy and sherry-cobblers. After a time he played with Rodden himself, but he won most of the time, and became proud of his skill. He boasted to Browne that he had won thirty dollars at half a dollar a game. He had lost but five games in doing this. Browne tried to convince him that Rodden was getting ready to pluck, but Greene could not be persuaded, the stakes were so trifling. He, however, promised Mr. Browne on no account to play higher.

“The night before we reached Memphis, Rodden and Greene played late, and Browne watched them till he tired. They did not raise their stakes, and won almost equally, and he left them at eleven o’clock, and went to bed. Rodden then called for wine, and Greene drank, and rushed madly on his own ruin, doubling, tripling, and quadrupling his stakes, until he had lost his all. He drank himself to sleep, but they woke him rather early, as we were nearing Memphis. Instead of getting ready, he went up to the hurricane deck, and took off his coat, vest, and neck-cloth. He wrote with a pencil on a scrap of paper these words:

“‘TO THE CAPTAIN OF THIS BOAT: Rodden robbed me last night, when I was drunk, of three thousand dollars—all I have in the world. I am going to drown myself. Please thank Mr. Browne for me, and tell him I am sorry I did not hear to him.’

“This paper he pinned to his vest, and then jumped into the river. The alarm was given, and the men tried to save him, but he sunk before they could reach him. The paper was brought to me, and I spoke to Rodden about it. He became violent and insulting at once, and finally drew a bowie knife upon me; I attempted to take the knife from him; he drew it through my closed hand, and wounded me most severely.

“The waiters pinioned him from behind, and Browne took the knife from him. We were by this time stopping at Memphis. He broke from all who attempted to obstruct him, and rushed ashore. His mother had their baggage taken ashore at once, and she and the wife left the boat in a very short time after Rodden had escaped. I could not be detained o serve the ends of justice. I got my hand dressed, and was glad to be rod of such dangerous people.

“And I have heard nothing about them since, but I shall remember the fellow a good while, I am afraid.”

“And what became of Mr. Browne?”

“We left him in New Orleans, and he has promised to dine with me while I am there this time, and I have promised to dine with him. Who he is or what he is I don’t know, but I shall always remember his kindness when I was hurt, and the tender sorrow he felt for the loss of that young man.’

“I will pay that Rodden yet,’ said he, ‘if I go over the world to do it. The avenger of blood ought to be on that fellow’s track, and to shoot him down like a mad dog would be a kindness to society.

* * * * *

The 5th of May I left New Orleans to return north, my wife’s health being much improved. We went on board that palace of a boat, the —. Almost the first person I saw was a woman, who exactly answered the description given by the captain of the mother of Rodden. There was the same stately presence, the same shaven forehead and false front, the same rich lace and moiré antique, to which were added flashing jewels. Then there was a pretty, petite woman, with a babe about a year old, clothed in the same showy manner, and presently I saw the hard gambler, Rodden. There was no mistaking the party. The young mother and her babe looked ill; the old mother and her son looked flushed, and eager for prey. I noticed these people so much, that I hardly looked at anybody else, but the day after I started, I observed a particularly green looking individual, with light flaxen hair, an awkward slouched hat, blue pantaloons, that had a queer, home-spun look, and a gray coat. He had old yarn gloves on, which he never removed, that I could see, though they were sometimes varied by the substitution of awkward old leather or kid ones.

I watched the gambler, for it had somehow transpired that the awkward looking customer with the gloves had been to the New Orleans market, with a large amount of bacon and cheese. I saw the same game played that Captain — had described in the case of the carpenter. One day I observed Rodden and “Ike,”—so he called himself—together.

“No matter about my name, Mr. call me Ike. I’ll answer to that till the cows come home. You can’t come it over me callin’ me Mr. How do I know but you’re one of them fellows that plays poker and all us wins?”

“I never played but three games of poker in my life,” said Rodden, “but I’ll play whist with you for the drinks.”

“No you *don’t*. Look o’ here, Mr.” said he, pulling down the lower eyelash, “do you see anything green *there?*”

“I know you,” said Rodden, insinuatingly. “I would not undertake to cheat you, if cheating were my trade, as I am happy to say it is not. You have evidently cut your eye teeth.”

“You don’t say. Good-lookin’, but ye can’t come in. I shan’t play for drinks, nor for nothin’ else. I promised Susy, when I come away, that I would not touch a kaird while I was off. You see five thousand dollars’ wuth o’ hams and cheese would would not be no shakes at all with one of them fellers that plays poker.”

“That’s so,” said Rodden. “You are wise.”

“Yes, my money is in the captain’s safe, and that’s wiser, and there ‘twill stay, till a half an hour before I land.”

“At —“ said Rodden, suggestively.

“At—yes, *at*, but where *at* is you’ll have to find out, for I told Susy I’d keep dark, and would not talk any more than was really necessary. As to you, I would not mind tellin’ you, for I took to you at once. You are smart, but you can’t keep a hotel, or you would not come at me about kairds. You might a known by the looks of me that I would not play.”

Rodden was persevering; the ‘verdant man’ was firm, and there seemed little probability of a pigeon in this case. Meanwhile, the young wife seemed more ill, more miserable, and more terrified every hour, and the old mother seemed more hard, proud, and imperious. She would take the babe away from the mother, and keep it, and I believe pinch it, and otherwise maltreat it, simply to torture the mother. And Rodden never interfered with anything his other close to do. What a life that young soul was leading! What fate was reserved for her child, and she seemed to me to have intelligence enough to “look before, and after.” My wife was perfectly miserable at what she observed of the suffering of that poor little mother and her babe. One evening I heard Rodden talking to the gawky man about play.

“Look o’ here now,” said he, “ef you ever say *kairds* to me agin, I’ll pitch into ye. I am a man o’ my word, ‘specially when my word’s pledged to Susy. But I have got my pocket full o’ dice, and they ain’t loaded, nuther. If you want to play enough to bet suthin handsome agin my tobacker box, I’ll play with you.” He drew out a very ancient silver tobacco box, about five dollars’ weight, and laid it on the table. Rodden sat down to business, and won the box—played again, and lost. Their first night was occupied with this box, which was lost and won many times, and ended by returning to the countryman’s pocket.

“Smart fellow, but you can’t keep a hotel, nor win my tobacco box,” said he.

The next day they played again, and greeny lost his box, his watch, and thirty dollars. But on the third day he won, till I believe the gambler had lost nearly all he had to lose, and the countryman suddenly refused to play any more.

“Not tonight, any way,” said he. “I might be willing to play tomorrow, but I want to sleep with my pockets full one night,” said he. “I allus put my own money in the cap’n’s safe but I’ll keep this ere that was yourn in my birth tonight. ‘Twill do me good.”

“That man will be robbed tonight, and maybe murdered,” said I to my wife.

I had such a presentiment of mischief to the countryman, that I could not go to sleep, and at midnight, when I heard the man go to his state room, I knocked at his door, and said, “Will you allow me to speak to you?”

“I know what you’r gonner say,” said he. “But never you lay awake on my account. I an’t a baby, and I know that that Rodden is gonter du, as well as you du. But he’s barkin’ up the wrong tree. Look o’ here, Mr.” said he, and he drew a tremendous bowis knife out from the back of his neck, and turning his pillow, I saw a six-xhooter. “I reckon there ‘ere will do his business, if he comes arter me, and my winnin’s.”

I left the man reassured, and returned to my bed, but not to sleep. The boat went on her way with great rapidity; breathing her deep and terrible breaths, and seeming like some awful living thing. The Mississippi is always dreadful to me, but there was something unusually terrible now. It was swollen by the floods, and seemed like a vast sea, and if any serious accident happened to our boat, there seemed no chance for life to be saved. As I lay thinking of all this, I heard a step without. I knew that the countryman slept with his door open.

“I should choke to death at once,” said he, “If I could not get the air.” I rose and lighted a lamp that I always had by my bed. I took the lamp, and went to the door of the countryman’s room, which was closed. I was startled by the report of a pistol, and a suppressed cry. I opened the door. Rodden was lying on the floor, but he rose instantly. One of his ears was shot off, and his hand was cut across. He ran out at the door, and I had only time to hear the countryman say—

“That varmint!”

“Are you hurt?”

“Not a bit of it,” said he; but he had a cut on the hand, which proved to be a slight one.

The gambler turned to find himself grasped by the porter, who had entertained the same opinion of his intentions that I had. He had seen him leave his room with his knife, and had followed him, thinking that he would find the door closed. The open door and the watchful countryman had made quick work, and before the porter could interfere he had seen Rodden strike, and then a pistol had been fired, and a blow given by the countryman. The wretch, Rodden, struggled hard, but we drew him into the state room, locked the doors and bound him at our leisure. Loss of blood conquered him a great deal, tough we stanchd it as soon as possible. The porter went for

the captain, and we consulted as to the best means of disposing of our prisoner. His wife was, doubtless, in a terrible state of anxiety, because he did not return to his state room, as she must have heard the pistol. I asked my wife to go to her and tell her the sad truth, that her husband was wounded, and a felon, she wept bitterly and said:

“Oh, what I have not suffered with him and her?” and then she said: “O, that I could return to my once happy home.”

“And why can you not?” said my wife.

Then she revealed the fact that she had married without the consent of her parents—that she had eloped with Rodden.

“You must return, and they will receive you gladly,” said my wife.

“I must think, I must think,” said she. “I dread most of all to see my mother.”

“You need not fear her.”

“She will take my babe from me.” “She cannot do that, neither will she wish to.”

The poor wife wrung her hands and said: “O, I must think!”

The porter watched by the wounded and pinioned Rodden, while the captain and I, and the countryman consulted. And now I discovered that the man who called himself Ike, had, from first to last, been acting a part. He had removed his flaxen hair, and his old gloves, and he had on now, a handsome dressing gown. I saw how his delicately beautiful hands must have betrayed him, if it had not been for their ugly coverings. He told the captain and myself that his name was Browne, though he was known in the dramatic world by another name. Then he told us the facts that I had learned on my downward voyage.

“I swore to avenge that poor boy, and I have kept my word,” said he. “The law shall finish what I have begun, and if his poor little wife wishes to escape, she shall have the opportunity.”

The poor little wife decided, under my wife’s influence, to return home. The mother, when informed of the facts, did not seek to burden with her, probably because she did not wish to expend money for any one but herself.

The husband asked to see his wife when he learned that he would be lodged in jail at Maysville.

“It is all up with me, for the present,” said he. “You had better go home, Lib., and stay with the old folks, and behave yourself. My mother is no fit company for you, unless I am about.”

The little wife answered only with her sobs. She held the baby for his father to kiss him, but she did not offer him her own lips or cheek. He was not her tyrant now. She had found friends. She would escape. We took her to her parental home, and saw her kindly received by a worthy father,

and a most loving mother. Mr. Browne went with us, and left one thousand dollars in her father's hands, that being the sum he had won from Rodden.

Rodden was tried for a murderous assault with intent to rob, and was sent to the penitentiary for twenty-five years. He will be sixty years of age, when he has served out his time. His mother used her best endeavors to get him acquitted, without success. What became of her, after her son's incarceration, I never heard, but the little wife has become an exemplary woman, and a faithful mother, and regards her escape as little short of a miracle.

We have kept up the most friendly relations with Mr. Browne, and when he goes to Great Britain, in exercise of his profession, we always feel as if our whole country were lonely without him, and we rejoice at his return, as if one of our own family had come home.

The New York Ledger, April 6, 1861