

Saved By a Dream

Permit me to introduce the speaker, Mr. Haskill, Western stage driver – a man muscular, and with an eye as keen and unflinching as an eagle.

I drove the stage from New Sharon to Wexford, a distance of thirty miles. In the spring and fall when the travel was bad, I always tarried [overnight] at Wexford, going down to New Sharon the next day, but during the summer I only tarried for fresh horses there, and returned by night. I liked that plan better, for it gave me more leisure to be with my family.

The night of which I am going to tell you, was late in the autumn. It had been a tough storm all the way up – a north easter, just as full of needle points as they could stuff in. Fine hail, you understand, and rain freezing up and frosting your beard, giving one a remarkable if not a pleasant cast of countenance. I had just two passengers up, an old man with very white hair and beard, and a younger man with a slight stoop, and no other peculiarity, that I noticed. I took the mail bags outside with me under the apron.

I wasn't a particle sorry when the village of Wexford blinked at me with its numerous eyes from crevices in the showers of driving sleet.

Wexford was dignified by the name of village, or South Wexford, more properly, for there was only a meagre collection of five or six houses, and I drove through this place, usually putting up at the half-way house, as it was termed. Beyond this half-way house was Wexford proper, with quite a bustling business air in its one huge smoke-stack, and the row of stores well punctuated with drinking dens. The other stage route ended here, on account of the roughness of the road – the postman jolting the distance between the half-way house and there, to connect the main line. This half-way house had a sorry reputation, on account of the villainous class of roughs that frequented it, to have a game of poker or a bit of a ring fight. I had watched the games scores of times, without allowing myself to be drawn into them or disturbed by them.

As I said, I only tarried at Wexford during the bad weather of early spring and late autumn. But to come back to the night of the storm. It was as much as might be expected. A small number of ruffianly fellows were in the bar-room, but the night was rather threatening for the mass to come out. In fact, I brought in the stage about all the noticeable persons destined to study the cloudy heavens that night, through the bottom of mine host's glasses. There was black Dave – an appendix general to the tavern, as clumsy a piece of clown as one would care to see: and Powder Bill, a second class ruffian who had gained his cognomen by having his face somehow blown full of powder. Beside these, there were several loafers in no wise remarkable.

Of this I was glad, for I was aware that the mail bag was unusually heavy. I knew that there were quite large sums of money expected by different persons about that time, and I should be glad enough when the responsibility was off my shoulders.

We passed a sociable evening. The chatting turned upon practical joking, and the danger often resulting there-from. The person who participated least in the conversation, was my passenger up—the man with stoop shoulders. I had learned that his name was Jenks. While this one and

that one told their tales, his sharp downcast eyes would, in spite of himself, turn continually towards the corner of the room where I had tossed my mail bags. On the other hand, the old fellow with the long, white hair, was the most boisterous talker of the group. His laugh was the loudest, and his puffs of smoke the most frequent, and his voice strengthened with his rising spirits, lost much of the quiver noticeable in oldish persons.

I was both astonished at him and delighted also. To find a man slipping down the shady side of life's hill, gay and disposed to make merry with his friends, is as rare an occurrence as it is exhilarating to witness. He had a peculiarity about his face which you sometimes see, and which gives an effect singular, if not pleasant, to the beholder. He had very bright, rapidly revolving eyes, under bushy, black eyebrows, brows shaggy enough to suggest miniature crows' nests, roughly piled together. He called himself Stowell, and I judged him to be a stranger in those parts. In truth he incautiously made mention of the fact that he was on Government business. At mention of this, I found Jenks furtively and steadily regarding him from the corners of his eyes. My feelings had settled into a fixed distrust of Jenks before the evening was half spent; on the other hand the entire company, if I except Jenks, mentally pronounced the old fellow just the one to while away a dull evening.

After some quite loud boasting of courage and brave deeds, by several of the participants, and this one telling what he could do, and that one affirming what he would not do under such and such circumstances, a motion was made for bed. The old fellow, with a separate good-night to all, was shown to his room first, at his own request, Jenks and myself going last. The glances which this fellow cast at the bags as I took them up to my room, were not particularly reassuring. I thought at first to speak of my suspicions to the landlord, and then I felt ashamed to do so, and went into my room. Turning on the threshold I was unpleasantly surprised to see Jenks standing outside of his room, and regarding me with a fixed gaze.

"Blundering fool!" said I to myself. "If his intentions are to rob me he has taken the mode of proceeding to put me on my guard."

I closed my door and locked it securely, dumped the mail bags in the corner, and being weary, immediately undressed and retired.

I lay for a long time, turning this way and that, made restless, I suspected, by continually thinking of Jenks and his strange conduct. I grew angry at last with myself for allowing him to keep so before my vision, but this state of mind did not tend to sleepiness, I assure you. While I lay tossing about I heard one after another of the family go to bed. Still that infernal Jenks kept before me. I muttered anathemas and turned over again.

Now comes the singular part of the affair. I must have fallen asleep for a moment. I dreamed that I was in that very house, in that very room and bed – that I had fallen asleep and woke up with the impression that there was some one under the bed; that I did not know how to ascertain the truth of it without causing the robber and murderer to spring on me unawares: that having a boyish trick of stuffing my pockets with everything, I felt in there for a marble and found it, and leaning cautiously from the forward edge of the bed, dropped or rolled it towards the back side or wall of the room, thinking as I did so, that if there was no one there it would roll across and

strike the mopboard with a sharp click. I dreamed that the marble rolled but a little way, struck something and stopped – that I looked under the bed and found Stowell instead of Jenks, with murder written upon his face. Then there was a confused plan of what I said and did.

I came to full consciousness from this dream, or incubus state, and a-hemmed and turned over to see if I were really awake now. My whole body was damp, the sweat standing in cold drops upon my face, so great had been my suffering in that few moments' sleep. It was so strange, so frightfully real, that I shifted to the other side, and as silently as possible drew up my pants and felt in the pocket. My fingers touched a bullet that was lying loose among the rubbish. I drew it out, and with such a sensation as I never experienced before and hope never to again, I prepared for the dream test. Reaching my hand well down towards the floor, I gave it a roll towards the back of the bed. It moved a foot or two, and struck something soft and stopped.

My heart stopped beating for a minute, and globules of fire swam before my face, peopling the darkness with horrors. There was no choice but to fill up the programme of the dream. I sprang from the bed before my muscles were paralyzed with terror, and called out:

“Here you, Stowell” – I actually intended to say Jenks but could not – “come out from there, and have done with this sort of practical joking.” No sound about the house. The stormy clouds tearing away overhead, allowed a watery moonlight to flood the room.

“Stowell,” I called again, “I am in no mood for this sort of practical joking. I have not boasted of my courage, but I shall discharge my pistol under the bed, hit or miss, in one moment more.”

There was a thumping and a rustling, the spread was swept aside, and good Heavens! it was Stowell. I could see his white hair and beard. Before he had come to an upright position – for I could dimly discern the outlines of objects—I sprang to the door to shout for help.

I had not turned the key when I heard a leap outside, and the instant that the bolt fell back from the socket, a man sprang into the room. A pistol ball grazed my ear, another shot, and two forms were struggling upon the floor. I was but a moment inactive; the next and I had planted a [blow] with the butt of my pistol somewhere upon the grey head, which stretched the villain senseless, almost the instant receiving the flash of a pistol in the side of [my] head, which had it not providentially refused fire, must have materially interfered with my future powers of narration.

Much confusion followed. The landlord rushed in; the landlady also. Everything was explained directly. Jenks was my rescuer. Jenks, whom I had so doubted, said to me “Look here!” and he removed the white hair of the robber, and exposed to our startled gaze the clean face and closely cropped hair of a “sentenced for life” penitentiary man.

“He escaped two weeks ago from—and eluded pursuit. I got on the track of him at Detroit, and have followed him off and on ever since. He came up from New Sharon purposely to rob, and if need be, to murder you. His joviality, his apparent good humor, allayed all suspicion. I could read his plans when he first went to bed. He stowed himself into some closet or corner of your room to wait for you to fall asleep. I remained close by your door, and should have warned you, but feared to arouse the suspicions of the fellow, lest he should again make off.”

Since I was really saved by a dream, I consider it remarkable.

I distrust remarkably jolly people now, and take into favor sour, silent appearing persons.

Jenks was a detective.

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