

My Escape

“Rather a forensic triumph for you, eh, Lytton, my boy!”

“A neat job, I should say, old fellow!”

I smiled, a little complacently, as I took up the newspaper to await the sounding gong which was to proclaim the evening meal at the principal hotel of the little country town. Jones was quite right; and so was Harry Davison. That morning’s work had been a forensic triumph, and the little job, legally speaking, had been most neatly completed. As District Attorney, it had been my duty to prosecute, unsparingly, the bold criminal brought up to the bar, and I had abated no whit of that duty. The sentence—imprisonment for a certain number of years—was owing chiefly to my efforts, and as such I gloried in its clauses.

“The fact is,” said Jones, “these burglaries were getting a little too audaciously frequent. It’s just as well to have the gang broken up.”

“Did you observe those ill-looking fellows by the farther window?” questioned Davison. “By the black looks they cast at you, Lytton, I was rather inclined to think they might be relations or boon companions of Mr. Barry Jumpington, or Jefferson, or whatever his name is—the villain who received a just sentence.”

“I have not the least doubt of it,” I returned, calmly. “I hope it will be a judicious lesson to them, and I only wish I had half a dozen or so of them just exactly where I have their illustrious compatriot.”

“It would do no harm,” remarked Jones, dryly; and here the conversation dropped.

My drive homeward was a long and a late one, and the clock in my little study struck eleven as I checked the horses in front of the small stuccoed portico.

“Sam! Where are you, Sam! Do you mean to keep me here all day, you lazy fellow?”

I spoke rather more sharply than was my wont, for I was tired and impatient, and the crabbed old servant, never very punctilious towards his superiors, retorted as he emerged from the stables:

“Lazy—yes, that’s al’ays the word. I aint no lazier’n other folks, and I’ll thank ye to leave off callin’ ugly names, Mr. Tom.”

“Confound your impudence, Sam!” I exclaimed. “Here—take the reins, and if you give me another word I’ll discharge you on the spot.”

“I’m nothin’ but a servant, I know,” said Sam, “but—”

I sprang from the carriage and threw the reins over the bronzed hand in the angle of the portico.

“You are discharged from my service,” I said, shortly and sternly. “I have put up with too much of your insolence, and I feel that I am rightly punished for it now. No more words—the matter is definitely settled.”

And I went into the house, feeling more annoyed than I was willing to confess, as Sam silently turned and walked away towards the stables.

“I am a fool to give the matter a second thought,” I mused, as I sat toasting my feet before the ruddy gleam of the cheerful Liverpool coal fire. “The old man was a faithful fellow enough, but he had forgotten his place. His domineering, insolent ways would provoke a saint; it is high time I got rid of him.”

Nevertheless, all the next day I missed old Sam more than I was willing to confess, and the smart new servant, with his subservient ways and his soft, insinuating voice proved scarcely a substitute.

The night closed in, dark and tempestuous, over the gold fringed footsteps of a blustering October day, and I had just settled myself comfortably on the crimson moreen lounge, with a book and a cigar, when there came a tumultuous peal at the door-bell, and presently Hartley, the new servant, glided in.

“I am sorry, sir, to disturb you, but there is a person at the door wishes to see you in great haste. He is all dripping with rain, sir, else I should have brought him in here.”

I rose and walked to the door. A short, stout man, who was uneasily wiping the moisture from his hat with his shabby coat sleeve, bowed and stepped forward.

“It’s a messenger from your sister, Mrs. Carlyon, sir,” he said, respectfully. “She aint expected to live the next twenty-four hours, and—”

“Not expected to live!” I gasped, *feeling* myself turn pale, as the blood receded to my heart. “Why, what has happened?”

“Didn’t you get the telegram, sir, at noon?”

“Telegram! I have received no telegram!”

“That is what Dr. Sauger thought probable, sir, and he sent me on in the four-forty train. The horses are at the door, and you’ll only just have time to catch the nine o’clock express.”

Involuntarily I drew on the overcoat which Hartley held ready for me, and donned my hat, while I stammered out one or two incoherent questions.

“What has happened to my sister? When—”

“She was throwd from her horse, sir; it was this mornin’, and the skull is some way hurt.”

“My God!” I gasped; “and why was I not sooner informed?”

“They have telegraphed twice, sir,” said the man; “and Dr. Sauger said—”

“Never mind what Dr. Sauger said; let us lose no time,” I interrupted, springing into the carriage as the clock struck seven; “we have barely time for the train. Drive as if your horses were shod with lightning! Oh! my poor, beautiful Barbara! it seems like a horrid dream!”

Through the tempestuous darkness of the wild autumnal night our horses dashed, and I was all unconscious of the driving rain and howling blast, so deeply was my mind occupied by strange forebodings and melancholy certainties. The glass of one of the windows was broken, and I sat far back in the corner to avoid the mist and wet, but all of a sudden I became conscious of the heavy aromatic breath of pines and hemlocks. I remembered that there were none upon the straight road to the station, and leaned out. The landscape, as far as I could see, was entirely strange to me; we were on a side hill, with a deep ravine below, and an apparently interminable stretch of pine woods above.

I pulled the check string sharply.

“Driver, you have lost your way? this is not the Elmvile Road.”

“No, sir; but it is the shortest cut, across by Miller’s Pond. We shall gain full fifteen minutes by this way.”

“Very well,” I assented, sinking back once more among the damp cushions, and losing myself again in the painful labyrinth of my own thoughts.

Ten minutes could scarcely have elapsed, when the carriage suddenly dashed up in front of a low building—I judged by the roughness of the ground that we had left the road—and stopped. I sprang out, looking round in amazement.

“This is not the depot. This—”

But I was effectually silenced by a gag, suddenly and skillfully brought over my mouth, and a strong rope, at the same moment, being slipped under and around my arms.

“No, it’s *not* the depot, Lawyer Lytton,” said a derisive voice, “but I guess it’ll do just about as well for you. [Anyway], it will for us, and so I wouldn’t advise you to struggle any more, or else—”

As he spoke I was caught up and carried, by main force, into an empty, stone-ceiled room, lighted by the dim gleam of a lantern on the floor.

“Where am I?” I tried to gasp, but the tortuous instrument over my mouth checked the least attempt at speech.

“Easy, now—easy, Squire!” mocked a man, stepping forth from a group of two or three, and in his face, partially revealed by the uncertain gleam of the murky light, I recognized the features of one of the men who had attracted the notice of my companion, in the county court-room, scarcely two days ago.

I saw through the whole mystery now, clearly enough! In an instant it flashed across my brain—I was the victim of a studied conspiracy, the object of which was *revenge!*

My blood ran cold; a chill moisture started from every pore in my body, and the whole terror of my position revealed itself in appalling distinctness to my mind. Had I been enticed here to be foully murdered in this solitary spot, or did some still more dreadful fate await me—some slow torture or diabolical suspense?

I strove to speak again, but in vain; the gag held my mouth with almost intolerable clasp.

“Take it off, George,” interposed one of the men. “Where’s the use of it here? I guess,” he added, as my quondam driver knelt down to unfasten the instrument, (they had laid me at full length on the floor) “he won’t talk quite as pert as he did in the court-room, but we’ll give him a fair chance. Now, then, Squire!”

“Why have you brought me here?” I demanded, looking from one to another of the little group.

“I’ll tell you why,” interposed the last speaker, with brutal ferocity. “Because we mean to give you a chance to try your own medicine, Mr. District Attorney! Because we intend you shall taste the same cup you brewed for Barry Jefferson. He’s a prisoner and so are you; now let’s see how you like it.”

“I suppose you want money,” I said; “how much will satisfy you?”

“Nothing that *you* have to offer,” savagely retorted another, stepping forward. “Revenge is better than money, and we swore we’d have that!”

“Do you mean to murder me?” I gasped.

“No; we mean to lock you up in the old stone barn and leave you.”

“Alone?”

“Alone!” he mocked. “Did the State provide any company for Barry Jefferson? Yes—alone!”

“To die?”

“To die—or live, just as you please. It’s a lonely spot, and you may call a long while before anybody hears you; the walls are strong, and the windows well barred—they used it as a jail in the old times, I’ve heard say—and I don’t think you’ll get out very soon. So good-bye, Squire, and I wish you a pleasant time a-thinkin’ over your prospects.”

“But you will loosen my arms. These ropes are cruelly tight.”

“Well, yes—I don’t care. Take off the ropes, Mike.”

And before I could collect words for the vehement remonstrances that quivered on my lips, I was alone in the chill darkness, surrounded by damp stone walls, and feeling the blood congeal in my veins as I heard the hideous grating of the keys that locked me from all access to the outer world.

I think I must have lost consciousness, for when I again remembered myself, the yellow, beaming light of dawn was pouring down on the floor, broken into jagged streams by the huge, rusty bars of the one unglazed window.

Then it was morning. What an age it seemed since I sat in my library, scarcely twelve hours before. Again I strove to collect my vague, wandering thoughts into some distinct channel, and again I abandoned the effort as in vain.

I got up, leaning my throbbing head and aching shoulders against the damp, dripping walls of this living tomb. What was to be the end of this frightful suspense? A death by the slow tortures of starvation, or, more horrible still, madness. Instinctively I strove to check the fevered current of fancies that careered through my brain, dreading *myself* with an intensity of dread that can scarcely be described.

No, there was no hope. I tried the door, I strove vainly to climb up to the high, stanchioned window and fell back, weak and despairing. I shouted, until the echoes of my own voice came back to me like a jeering cry. There was no hope, no help, in heaven above, or earth beneath. I must die alone in the dreadful solitude of this lovely place; I must die like a prisoned beast, while within how short a space, kindly hearts were beating that would gladly lay down their own existence to spare mine.

The slow sunshine reddened along the floor, creeping higher and higher as the hours crept on. I watched it involuntarily, just as I watched the heavy spiders whose nets draped the window, just as I watched the hideous, slimy things crawling in the dark angles of the stone-work, while all the time I was conscious of the slow ebbing away of my own strength and individuality. And when at length the walls grew dim before my eyes, and I knew that my senses were leaving me, I only felt a vague wonder as to whether the bitterness of death were past.

“Sit up, Mr. Tom! There—don’t you see he’s better already! Just another drop of the brandy, sir. Bless your heart, aint it strange how near a man can come to bein’ dead without going through the actooal thing!”

Was it my faithful Sam's voice that I seemed to hear, indistinctly, as through a dream? Was it the blue arch of heaven that bent over me, like a tender, pitying eye? And where were the hideous walls, and the light streaming faintly through the rusted bars, above?

The brandy from Sam's flask, coursing down my throat like a stream of liquid fire, seemed to infuse new life and strength into me. I sat up and looked around. There were the hemlocks, darkly fringing the hills below; there was the ravine, stretching away like a dark chasm; and there was the square, stone building, mossed over with lichens, and gray with age, with the door yawning wide open.

"How did you get in?" I asked, turning suddenly on Sam, who, with two or three other men, was standing beside me.

"Key was in the inner door, and there wa'n't nothin' but an old rusty bolt and chain on the outside. I guess they didn't expect [anyone] up this way just yet."

"And how—"

"How did I mistrust? Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Tom. Arter you'd give me my walkin' tickets, what should I do but go straight to Mrs. Carlyon. Says I to myself, 'Miss Barbara'll take me in, and give me a home as long as she's got one of her own.' And Miss Barbara she sends me back to you, with a note, and the servants tell me you'd been telegraphed for, and [someone] had come to fetch you in a carriage to Miss Barbara's. Now I knowed that wasn't so; and I says to myself, 'There's something wrong here somewhere,' and I sets myself to thinkin', and—"

"Yes, yes, I know," I interrupted, knowing honest Sam's failing of prolixity; "but how did you come here?"

"I followed the carriage track."

"Followed the carriage track?"

"Every step of the way, like the red Injins in the story books. It was a heavy rain, the night you went away, and the cuts was pretty clear in most places, though I like to lost 'em sometimes, where there was much travellin' since. I knowed clearly by one of the horses not havin' no shoe on the off fore-foot. Down by the cross-roads I got off the scent and went consid'able ways wrong, else I'd ha'been here long ago. I tell ye what," said Sam, rubbing his skinny forehead with a tremendous red silk pocket-handkerchief, and looking beamingly around, "the next time Mr. Tom discharges me, I've a great mind to go in for a place as a Police Detective."

During the long brain fever that succeeded this day and night of terror Sam was never absent from my side, and proved the most faithful of nurses. He is in my service still, and although he grows more domineering as he grows older, I think there is little danger of my discharging him a second time.

Barry Jefferson is still enduring the sentence of the court, but his colleagues have never been apprehended. Most probably they have deemed it advisable to leave the country. But to this day, although years have since elapsed, I cannot recall without a thrill of horror the circumstances of my imprisonment and my escape.

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