

A Night Among Robbers

by Judge Clark

It was the last night of my bachelor life, and as Archy Burton insisted I was bound to “die game,” I had consented to spend it with him, “instead,” to use Archy’s expression, “of moping at home by way of foretaste of my future state.”

I was to meet my friend at half past nine, at his lodgings, whence we were to visit the theatre in time to see the last of “Mary Warner.”

It was already a quarter of nine, and in order to keep my appointment I was hurrying, by way of a “short cut,” along a dimly lighted, unfrequented street, into which a number of dark alleys opened.

Into one of these I felt myself suddenly dragged by a number of violent hands, which had seized me from behind in passing; and before I had time to make any outcry or offer the slightest resistance, I was securely bound, gagged, and blindfolded, and completely at the mercy of my unknown assailants.

“The least noise of disturbance will be at the cost of your life,” was the admonition I received, whispered into one ear and emphasized by the click of a pistol at the other; and then I was hurried swiftly forward, and thrust into a carriage between two of my captors, while others followed.

Immediately we set forward. How far we went, how many turns we took, or where we stopped, of course I could not tell. I was only sensible of time and motion. Whither either tended, I knew not.

At last we ceased to move. I was assisted out and led, guarded as before, several paces over what I judged to be a rough pavement, when a door opened and closed, and then I was made to ascend a narrow stair-way, after which I was forced into a seat and released from the hands of my conductors.

The gag was removed, after a repetition of the previous admonition, but I was still left bound and blindfolded.

“You are doubtless anxious to learn the cause of a proceeding which, it is but natural to suppose, has occasioned you some surprise, continued the same voice in which the admonition had been given.

I felt, if an explanation was forthcoming, it would be made without my asking, and so said nothing.

“You have a fraction over ten thousand dollars to your credit in the —— National Bank,” the voice resumed.

I thought that was none of the voice's business, but didn't say as much.

"If you will fill up a check to bearer," the voice went on, "for ten thousand dollars—we won't stickle for the odd fraction—and the messenger sent to present it returns in safety with the money, you shall, to-morrow night, be conducted in the same manner you were brought here, to the place at which we found you, and there left unmolested."

I still remained silent.

"If you refuse, you die!" the voice added, and the tone, it was evident, was not one of idle menace.

"And you have half an hour to decide," it said; after which there was profound quiet.

I was not prepared to choose immediately. The sum I had in [the] bank composed my all. I had toiled for it with an object in view to which life itself was secondary.

I had long loved Helen Marcey, and though she would willingly have shared my poverty in the days when I had nothing else to offer, I could not but acquiesce in the wisdom of her father's refusal to sanction a union so improvident. But now that I had won a moderate competence, or at least a beginning that insured one, he had given the long-wished-for consent, and the morrow was the day fixed to crown my happiness.

The loss of what I had so hardly earned I could have borne without serious regret, for I was young and sanguine, but the long delay it involved, if not the final postponement of my hopes, fairly made my heart sink. But then came the reflection, "If I die here, my fate will probably never be known. My disappearance, too, will be liable to misconstruction. It may be suspected that I repented my engagement at the last moment, and jilted Helen Marcey on the day appointed for her wedding." That thought determined me.

"I have decided," I said; "I will comply with your demand."

After a brief interval my arms were unbound, and the bandage removed from my eyes. It was some moments before I could distinguish objects. I then found myself in a mean apartment, whose only furniture consisted of a deal table and a few rickety chairs, on one of which I was seated, in the midst of five men closely masked. A dim lamp flickered on the table, on which were also pen, ink, and a blank check properly stamped.

Without waiting to be asked, I drew forward my chair, and took up the pen. A thought flashed upon me. "Suppose I disguise my hand, will not the check be deemed a forgery, and the man who presents it arrested, and thus a clue be afforded which may lead to my release?"

But I found I was reckoning without my host.

“Be sure”—it was always the same voice that spoke, and it had a strange way of impressing one that it meant what it said—“be sure to write in your natural hand; for if aught befalls the messenger, or prevents his safe return within an hour after his departure, your life shall pay for forfeit.

I filled up the check in my usual hand, affixing my ordinary signature, not forgetting to cancel the stamp.

My eyes were again bandaged, and my arms pinioned as before.

At length I heard some one go out. Doubtless it was the messenger.

The echo of the messenger’s departing footsteps seemed hardly to have died away when the stillness was broken by than voice in which it seemed impossible for any good thing to be uttered.

“The time is almost up,” it said, addressing I knew not whom; “get your knife ready, for we dare not risk a pistol shot here.”

A short pause ensued, when some one approached and laid a hand upon my arm. I could not see, but I *felt* that the weapon was raised with which the fatal blow was to be dealt. The very uncertainty as to when and where it was to fall rendered it impossible to nerve myself against it.

But hark! somebody is hurrying up the steps. The door is flung open!

“All right!” a voice exclaims—not the same one this time—“I have the money!”

The hand is withdrawn from my arm. Thank God I am saved! The messenger has returned unharmed!

But hark, again!

There is a rapid shuffling of other footsteps on the stair-way. My heart leaps at the sound. Can it be friends at last?”

“*Fire on the first man that raises a finger!*” shouted a full manly voice, as its owner, in company with I could not tell how many others, rushed into the room.

In a trice my eyes were uncovered and my arms set free. It was Archy Burton that did it, while my foes stood cowering before the levelled revolvers of half a dozen policemen.

“How in the world did you find me, Archy?” I cried, grasping his hand in a transport of joy.

“By the merest of all chances,” he said. “I was so surprised at your failure to meet me last night, that I called at your lodgings this morning to ascertain the reason, when, to my still greater astonishment, I learned you had not been there since yesterday evening. I had no time to look for

you, however, as I had to be at the bank betimes. I am a clerk at the ——National, you know. I happened to be passing behind the paying teller when your check was presented. Its amount—almost your entire balance—the unprepossessing appearance of the man who presented it, and your own mysterious disappearance, all combines to make me suspect something wrong. Without imparting my suspicions to any one, I determined to follow the stranger at a cautious distance, which I did, picking up a few blue-coats by the way, and, as Mr. Merryman says at the circus, ‘Here we are!’”

“God bless you, Archy!” I said; and Helen said so too when he came to the wedding that evening.

Of course I recovered my money; and the five robbers are now in the “Tombs” awaiting trial—at least they *ought* to be.

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