

A Safe Investment

In the second year of the late civil war, I was married, and went to live with my husband in a small village on the Hudson, some fifty or sixty miles from New York. The house we occupied was a large, rambling mansion, of considerable antiquity for this country, and stood a little apart from the rest of the village, surrounded by broad fields, and commanding a glorious view of the river and hills of the Highlands. It had been built before the Revolution by my husband's great grandfather, and, though destitute of many "Modern improvements," was still a comfortable and pleasant residence.

My husband was a lawyer and a large real-estate owner in the neighborhood, and, at the period of which I write, was greatly perplexed, like many other persons in the North, by the perilous state of the times, and especially about the safe investment of his funds, as the suspension of specie payments, the great rise in gold, and the military disasters in Virginia, made it almost impossible to tell where it would be safe to deposit or to use one's money in any large amount.

In the course of his transactions in real estate, it happened, one day, that he received what was for us a very large sum, about ten thousand dollars, which he brought home and placed in my charge, telling me at the same time that he should have to be absent during the evening attending to some business on the other side of the river, and should not be home till about midnight.

"You can place the money in the safe, dear," he said, as he gave it to me, "and tomorrow I will try and find some way to invest it securely."

So saying, he stepped into the buggy, which was standing at the door, and drove away, taking with him our hired man, Silas, and leaving me with no one in the house but Dinah, an old colored woman, who fulfilled in our modest household the functions of cook and maid-of-all-work, as she had long done in the family of my own parents, who, on my marriage, had yielded her to me as a valuable part of my dower.

Dinah was indeed a character. She was tall and very stout, weighing, she would never tell you, more than two hundred pounds. She was very black, and as lazy as she was black. I do not think any one could move more deliberately than Dinah did, that is, to move at all. And, by a wonderful dispensation, she seemed to feel that whatever her other faults might be, she was strong on the point of locomotion. For when she had been moving with a ponderous slowness, almost maddening to a person of ordinary quickness, one of her favorite expressions was, "Well, Miss Lizzie, what shall I fly onto next?" How she accomplished all she did, the brownies only know. We used sometimes to tremble when there was any special hurry about our domestic arrangements, and yet Dinah always managed to bring affairs to a consummation just when a minute more would have ruined everything; and with undisturbed front, would slowly enunciate, "Well, miss, what shall I fly onto next?"

It was nearly dark when my husband departed, and, after giving my orders to Dinah, or rather my suggestions, I left her and made the tour of the house, to see that all was safe and properly locked up. This duty attended to, I went to my bed room intending to pass the time in reading till my husband should return.

It was a large room on the ground floor, with two French windows opening on a broad veranda. The windows were draped with long yellow silk curtains, between which the moonlight faintly entered, dimmed by the shadow of the piazza, and partly intercepted by the fringe of woodbine which hung from it. My bed stood with its foot toward the windows, and with its head about half a yard from the wall. It was an old-fashioned structure hung with yellow silk like the windows, but I slept with the hangings drawn back and fastened to the head-board. The bed was so large that no one ever thought of moving it, except in those seasons of household panic called house-cleanings, when the combined strength of three or four men was called into requisition to draw it into the middle of the room. So elaborately carved was it that it went by the name of Westminster Abbey in the family. At one end of the room, at no great distance from the bed, was a large safe, built into the huge chimney of the mansion, with a door high enough for a person to enter standing upright. Here I was accustomed to place, every evening, our silver plate on shelves which extended around the sides, on which were also placed boxes containing papers and other valuables. Opposite the foot of the bedstead, between the windows, was a mirror, running from the floor almost to the ceiling. Like all the other furniture in the room, it was old and handsome. How many happy scenes it had reflected in the hundred years it had stood there!

The night was exceedingly hot, and I therefore left the windows open, though I drew the curtains before I seated myself at the table in the center of the room, lighted the candles, and began to read, in order to pass the heavy time before the return of my husband.

After a while, I heard the clock strike nine, at which hour Dinah always went to bed. Her chamber was in the attic, the third story of the house. Remembering some household matter about which I wished to speak to her, I started hurriedly up, and went to the entry to intercept her before she got up-stairs. I had to wait about a minute before she came, and our colloquy continued three or four minutes more.

When I returned to my bedroom, feeling somewhat tired, I resolved to go to bed, as, at that late hour in the country, it was quite certain that no visitors would call, and my husband could let himself in with the latch-key which he always carried. I thought, however, I would try to keep awake by reading, and accordingly placed a light-stand and the candles at the head of my bed. I then closed and fastened the windows, undressed, and got into bed. The key of the safe I placed, as usual, under my pillow.

After reading perhaps half an hour, I grew weary of the book, and, quietly laying it down, remained for some minutes meditating with my eyes fixed on the mirror opposite the foot of the bed, in which I could see myself reflected, together with the yellow silk curtains behind my head. I was thinking, not unnaturally, how pretty I looked, and how happy I was with such a loving husband and such a large sum of money secure in our safe, when suddenly I saw in the mirror a sight that made my heart stand still. A hand appeared between the curtains, drawing them slowly apart, and grasping cautiously the head board. It was a man's hand, large, coarse and dark, as if belonging to a mulatto, or to one greatly tanned by the weather.

My first impulse was to start from the bed, and scream for help. I repressed it with a strong effort of will, and lay perfectly motionless, except that I partially closed my eyes, keeping them only

sufficiently open to watch the mirror. As quick as lightning my mind took in the situation. In the few minutes of my absence from the room, while talking to Dinah in the entry, a thief, a robber, a possible murderer, had stolen in by the piazza-windows, and had hidden himself either under the bed or behind its draped head. He was doubtless armed; and, if I cried out, and attempted to escape from the room, he could easily reach the door before I could, and for his own security would probably put me to death. Dinah was too distant, too feeble and clumsy, to afford me any assistance, and besides, was by this time fast asleep in the third story. The man doubtless knew that my husband had that day received a large sum of money, and had gone off across the river, leaving me alone, or nearly alone, in the house. He had entered caring only for the money, and anxious above all things, to escape undetected and unrecognized. If I let him know that I was aware of his presence, I should expose myself to murder, and perhaps to outrage worse than murder. My obvious policy was, to keep quiet and to feign sleep. I thought also of the money, and was not altogether willing to resign that without an effort to save it, and to have at least some clue to the identity of the thief. I confess, however, that this last consideration was not a very strong one, and am afraid that if I could have seen my way clear to an escape from the room and the house, I should have fled incontinently, without stopping to see more than that terrible hand.

A moment which seemed an hour passed while these thoughts rushed through my mind. I lay perfectly still, with my half-closed eyes watching the mirror. Slowly and noiselessly the frightful hand pulled up its owner, until I could see the head and face reflected in the glass, and glaring at me with fierce yet wary eyes. The man was a mulatto, very dark, with evil passions written in every lineament. I could scarcely refrain from shuddering at the sight of his hateful visage, and speedily closed my eyes to shut it out.

I was not yet quite ready for the ordeal which I knew I must soon pass. I wanted to move my light stand a little out of the way, and to so arrange the bed clothes that I could spring from the bed without impediment. I therefore, gave a little sign, and moved, as if about to awake, slightly opening my eyes at the same time. The head and hand instantly disappeared. I then composedly made the desired changes in the position of the stand and the arrangement of the clothes, put my watch with the key of the safe under my pillow—so near the edge that they could easily be taken out, as I knew they would be—extinguished one of my candles, said my prayers, and, closing my eyes, resigned myself to my fate, with no very sanguine or definite hope of extrication from my perilous position.

I made my breathing regular, and a little louder than when I was awake, and lay with my cheek upon my hand, counterfeiting sleep. At last the stillness became more terrible than even my first agony of fear. Several times I fancied that I heard a soft step approaching from the place of concealment. As often I was deceived. Then again that dreadful stillness, in which I counted the ticking of my watch through the pillow! It was a positive relief when he came out from behind the curtain, stopped at the table, and stood looking at me, as I was well aware, though my eyes were closed. I forced myself to breathe regularly and audibly. He came closer; he bent over me. He passed the lighted candle slowly before my face two or three times. I felt the heat, and saw the light through my closed lids, which must have quivered, though he did not seem to observe their motion. Heaven gave me strength not to move or cry out. Satisfied, apparently, he put back the candle stick on the stand, and his hand crept softly and slowly under the pillow, and one by

one, he removed my watch and the key to the safe. He stood so long looking at me that I felt impelled to open my eyes suddenly upon him.

As he walked softly toward the safe, I did partly open them, and cautiously watched him through my eyelashes. I heard him fumbling with the lock, and once he looked over toward the bed. My eyes were wide open, but I closed them in time not to be detected. Watching him stealthily, I saw him open the door of the safe, go back to the stand for the candle, and return to the safe, which he entered without withdrawing the key from the lock.

Here was the opportunity for which I had waited and watched. I sprang lightly from the bed, with one bound reached the safe, dashed the door to, turned the key, and with one long and loud shriek fell prostrate and senseless on the floor of the dark room.

How long I lay upon the floor, I do not know—probably for a few minutes only—but, as I was unconscious, it seemed when I came to myself, as if the interval had been a long one. I was aroused by his blows upon the iron door, and found myself weak after the long nervous tension, but still calm. I remembered the satisfaction with which I thought, while I lay there before rising, that he could not escape, mingled with a vague and foolish dread that in his rage he might burn the valuable contents of the safe. He pounded desperately on the door, and swore fearfully at finding himself entrapped. But, as I took no notice of his outcries, he soon grew quiet.

Presently I rose, and, lighting a candle, dressed myself with all possible haste and with trembling fingers, turning often to look at the safe, from under the closed door of which I more than half expected to see blood trickling—why, I cannot tell, except that my mind was full of images of horror. I was soon in readiness. I had no means of ascertaining the time, as he had my watch in his pocket, and there was no clock in the room. Taking the candle, I hastened to arouse Dinah, who, as I shook her, slowly opened her eyes, and with scarcely more than her usual slowness pronounced her formula, “Well, Miss Lillie, what shall I fly—Lord a massy! What’s de matter wid do chile? You ain’t seen a ghost—have you honey?”

“No, Dinah; but I’ve seen something worse than a ghost. I’ve caught a robber and he’s in the safe. What time is it?” and, looking at the clock that ticked slowly and deliberately—as how could Dinah’s clock help doing?—I saw to my great relief that it was nearly midnight.

We had scarcely got down-stairs when I heard a sound of wheels. A moment more and my husband was in my arms, listening with amazement to a rapid narrative of my singular adventure. I would not suffer him to open the safe until Silas had summoned assistance from the neighboring houses. I feared that my desperate prisoner might still escape. When the safe was opened, there sat my burglar on the trunk, half stupefied for want of air, a knife in one hand, the package of money in the other, and a burned-out candle at his feet. He was recognized as an old offender, who had not been long out of State Prison, to which in one course of law, he was soon to be sent back for a term of years, which I devoutly hope, may last as long as he lives; for I confess I should not feel easy to hear that he was again at large. The look of rage he gave me on coming out of the safe will not soon be obliterated from my memory.

My husband, I need hardly say, was greatly pleased with my safe investment, and complimented me highly on the courage and coolness with had doubtless saved my life as well as our money. The love and pride with which he always, to this day, rehearses my exploit, were of themselves a sufficient compensation for the horror and the agony of that long summer night.—Appleton's Journal.

St. Joseph [MI] Herald, June 4, 1870