

A Good Night's Work

It is just ten years ago tonight. Perhaps it is that fact which makes it run in my head as it does. I can't get it out. Those were not very pleasant days when I toiled along from eight in the morning till eight at night, and barely succeeded in making enough to keep body and soul together at that; but now that they are far in the dim distance, that I am better off and able to take a breathing spell now and then, I look back with affection to the days when I had a small life-insurance office at No.— Broadway, near Dey street. A few days ago I came upon the identical sign that told strangers that at room No. 6 in the basement of that building, I, Edward W. Morton, did a life-insurance business. The sign has been in the garret for nine years now, and looks old and dirty, but I well remembered the day when it was put up, and how proud and delighted with it.

It was on the 13th of October, 18—, that I made quite a bad day of it, and came back to the office about half-past five very much disgusted with my day's ill-success. It was a very cold day for that time of year, and the wind was anything but mild. As I passed Dey street I looked down towards the East River, and I remember still how black and cold the water looked, and what a wintry look the pink clouds near the horizon had. What a night upon which to commit suicide! It seemed to me I should much prefer drowning myself on a bright, beautiful, warm, sunny morning, than when the water looks so cold and black.

The basement of our building was rented to half a dozen insurance and real estate agents, who each had an office; one long passage gave access to all; at the end of it was an iron stair case, leading up to the first floor, which was taken up by the — Bank, then the richest bank of the day in New York. The luxury of their offices was something unprecedented in those times; their painted ceilings, gorgeous sofas, and rosewood furniture were among the sights of the business part of the city. On the floors above were other offices, and on the top floor of all lived the janitor and his family.

On the day in question, as I reached our building, Mr. Winslow, the president of the bank above my office, got into his carriage and drove off; Edith Winslow was then, as she is now, the guiding star of my life. But in those days I worshiped only at a distance; sometimes I would promenade Fifth Avenue for hours in hope of seeing her go by in her carriage. I had met her but once, and at an evening party; but that was sufficient to make me her devoted slave. I knew none of her friends; she was rich and I was poor; she was the daughter of a bank president, I was a young agent who had a small office under her father's bank. Nevertheless, not a day passed but that my thoughts wandered off to Edith Winslow, and I wondered if I should ever know her better.

It was growing dark when I entered our building; the janitor was sweeping out the halls as I groped for my key-hole and let myself in. The fire, the first of the season, was nearly out, and as I was cold and tired, I put on some more coal, stirred it up, and sat down to think. There I sat for a long time wrapped in thought, and heedless of the growing darkness; it was warm and comfortable, I was tired, and gradually I fell asleep. I must have slept some eight hours; it was about six o'clock, or half-past, when I dozed off—it was nearly two when I awoke. Some of my readers have no doubt heard of the water-torture; water is allowed to drip, drop by drop, upon the prisoner's head, until after a while it is said to produce the greatest agony. Well my dream just

before I awoke was a curious one. I was in a gloomy dungeon and chained to the floor, while water drops fell upon my head; the torture was something awful; I was writhing about, trying to get from under the drops; in my struggles I managed to twist myself off my chair, and I awoke; it was pitch dark; the fire was almost out, and I was shivering with cold; instinctively I put my hand to my head; to my astonishment I was all wet; splash another drop of water right on top of my head; at the same time, the fall of some heavy piece of iron on the floor above made me hold my breath. What could that be? My first thought was that the janitor had left the water turned on in some of the basins up stairs, and it was dripping through the ceiling. The noises I heard were probably made by the janitor closing up the iron shutters; it was probably only seven or eight o'clock; I raked a few coals together, and by their light looked at my watch; it was two A.M.! Evidently this could not be the janitor. Again I heard something heavy fall; something was wrong; possibly burglars were at work at the safes above!

I took off my shoes, and then felt that the whole floor was wet; every now and then I heard a drop fall from the ceiling; I looked around for some weapon; there was nothing better than a pair of dumb-bells; I grabbed one, a big twelve-pounder that I have still, and opened my office door softly. There was just a glimmer of light coming down the iron-staircase. Slowly and cautiously I crept along, dumb-bell in hand, until I got to the foot of the stairs. A blow from my twelve-pounder would kill a man dead as a sardine. After listening a while, I went up until I could command a view of the main hall on the first floor. From the glass doors of the bank streamed a bright light, and I could hear subdued voices. There were undoubtedly burglars in the main office of the bank. It was easy enough to make sure of it. On the first story stairs was a ventilation window, through which I had often looked down in passing on the clerks at work inside. I could get on those stairs without passing before the bank door. I got to them, went up, peeped down, and saw a very curious scene. Tied to a pillar in the center of the room was our unfortunate janitor, gagged, and his eyes protruding from his head. His two children were tied to another column, and his wife to a third. The floor was covered with water coming from the lining of the safe, which was filled with water as a protection against fire; this was the condition of affairs when I crept back to my office in the basement. My egress from there to the street was through my window; so I pushed it up, got out on the ledge, jumped down, and landed in the arms of a stalwart policeman, who had been watching my proceedings. He thought *he* had caught a first class burglar. I convinced him of his mistake, and in five minutes we were at the station-house; in five more, a dozen uniformed gentlemen got in at my window and followed me upstairs. We, or rather they, captured them all and liberated the janitor. The next day the bank people sent me a check for a good round sum. The loss would have been immense if the burglars had succeeded as they were in a fit way of doing when I appeared on the scene. If I was writing a love story I could tell how soon after the bank offered me a very good position, and how, in the end, I married Edith Winslow; but I only started out to tell the story of the most profitable piece of night work I ever did.

JULIUS SPEC, JR.

The New York [NY] Ledger, January 27, 1877