

## *A Narrow Escape*

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CONDEMNED to die! Condemned to perish ignominiously on the scaffold! Condemned to bid adieu to wife, mother, children, and friends!

The poor man wept aloud in the extremity of his anguish. His trembling lips could frame no prayer, and thus the last avenue of escape was closed against him. The most direct and unequivocal evidences surrounded this man—Lloyd Fletcher by name—and the jury, in bringing in their verdict of “guilty in the first degree,” had only acted on their sober conviction of the man’s guilt, drawn from the overwhelming evidence.

Charles Lancaster, an Englishman, and a neighbor of Fletcher’s, had been found brutally murdered, in a lone spot, in the suburbs of London. Fletcher’s pistol was picked up near him, thrown aside as he found himself pursued.

Footprints in the mud corresponded exactly with the boots the prisoner wore, and to crown all they had been bitter and inveterate enemies for months previous.—Fletcher had been heard to say, on several occasions, that nothing but the man’s death could satisfy his implacable vengeance; and then again, he could produce no one to assist him in proving an alibi. Lloyd was a man very domestic in his habits, and very devotedly attached to his family. He was known to be absent from home on that evening, yet, on this particular night, Mrs. Fletcher waited up until daylight for his return, expecting every moment (on account of the circumstances being so unprecedented) to have him brought home a corpse. He seemed to be recovering from the deep stupor of intoxication as he entered his wife’s presence on the morning described, and only knew enough to find the bed and sleep profoundly.

At the time of his arrest, his hands were found lame and bruised; so this, with the rest, made the sum too crushing for the skillful counsel he had employed, and the result was, “Hanged by the neck, Fletcher, till you are dead; and God have mercy on your soul.”

It lacked now only three days to the execution, and here he sat in his lone, comfortless, whitewashed cell, and his head bowed on his hands. “Can nothing be done? Must I die thus, poor, miserable dog that I am? Will Omnipotence allow an innocent man to perish? Out upon such a God as that!” And the poor fellow struck wildly at his prison-house, groaning so deeply that he aroused the attention of the turnkey, who was passing the cell.—The iron door swung back on its creaking hinges and the stalwart form of the keeper appeared before him.

“Come, come, Fletcher, less noise here; be a man! You ain’t the first man that’s had to swing—not by a long shot! You won’t get much sympathy here if you are like a nursing infant, I can tell you. Die game, Fletcher; die game.”

“But I am innocent, I tell you, you old wretch; as innocent of the crime as my little girl baby at home. Oh, my God! my wife—my children—”

“Oh, shut up, here’s your old woman, now.”

The hardened turnkey waited a minute to witness this meeting of the suffering couple, and then with maddened curses withdrew. But the condemned man and his loving, faithful wife took no notice of his departure, but clasped in each other's arms awaited for calmness to speak.

“Oh, Sarah!”

“Oh, Lloyd! God have mercy on us all, my husband! and now listen. Lie down here—place your head on my lap; I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, Sarah, did they search you this time?” he asked, grasping her hands.

“Yes, Lloyd, and they found nothing. I repented my rash promises to you before I reached home. Come what may, suicide must not be your fate. But listen. You see that I am comparatively happy; and let me tell you what has produced this change—a sweet little dream in which I saw you and our darlings all together, comfortable and happy.”

“Oh, Sarah, talk not of dreams to a doomed man like me; perhaps we may be happy in another existence; but no, that cannot be—for surely God will not allow an innocent man to die the death of the guilty. Oh, no, Sarah, oh, no!”

“Keep up your courage, my dear husband, a certain, strange, mysterious something assures me that all will yet be well, how or in what manner heaven only knows.”

“I wish I could see it—I wish I could feel it, Sarah; do not mislead me with false hopes. Oh, my God, if there could only be found a way to escape from this ignominious death!”

“Come, madam, time's up,” and the turnkey made his appearance. “Hate to disturb such a pair of cooing doves, but orders are orders, ma'am, and must be obeyed. Always obey orders if you break crowns. You ought to persuade your husband to stop his sniveling. Mark what I tell you, ma'am, you'll be looking for another husband in three month's time,” continued the wretch, as he walked out by her side.

Sarah hurried through the corridor, endeavoring to hear as little as possible of the brute's conversation, and reached her home and children, there to hope and pray. The hours sped on, and it lacked one day more for the execution. Fletcher had given up all hope of a reprieve, and listened to the building of the scaffold with a solemn feeling born of despair.

“I've brought another gal to see you this time, Fletcher. It's very probable she won't be so agreeable-like as t'other one, but will do as much good, I reckon.”

A woman in black stood before the bed on which Fletcher reclined. He recognized Mrs. Lancaster, the wife of the murdered man.

“Ah, this does me good,” said she, taking a step nearer and shaking her clenched fist in his face. “It does not pay to take a fellow creature's life, does it? Don't you speak to me, you villain—don't dare to open your mouth. I came here to gloat over your misery, and see how the prospect

of leaving your wife and babies affected you. Oh, you tremble. I have found the tender chord. My husband's wife and children were nothing—oh, no. Wretch, villain, may the law be fully justified.”

The woman, to all appearance, exasperated beyond the power of further utterance, stepped nearer, and, with a sly movement, hid one of her gloves under the pillow of the bewildered man.

“Have you finished, ma'am,” inquired the turnkey, with his hand on the door.

“Now, really, Fletcher, don't you rather prefer an interview of this kind to one of those lollygagging sort you have had so many of lately? 'Twill do you more good—ten to one. What are you doing now?”

“Giving him one more look, that is all. Murderer! robber! wretch! I want to engrave his picture on my brain so indelibly that I can never forget a single feature.”

“By the crown, your old man must have had a Tartar! Oh, ho, ho, ho!” and the fat turnkey shook his fat sides with laughter. “I don't believe he's got it much better where he is staying now than he had with you. It takes a woman to use up the King's English. I always said so, now I know it.”

Mrs. Lancaster drew her veil over her face, and quietly left the prison. As soon as he dared, with trembling fingers, Lloyd drew forth the glove. In it was a vial containing a mixture of chloroform or ether, a small sharp instrument to file his shackles, and a note. It read thus:

You are not the man, and I cannot allow you to be hung. Overpower the keeper, take his clothes, and leave. Go to the old rookery, No. — first floor where a disguise awaits you, and the God help you, for you must conceal yourself.

Lloyd, with a wildly beating heart, concealed the articles and tried to think. The keeper did not enter the cell till he brought his tea, and how could he accomplish his purpose then? There would be too many astir in the prison then, and he might be detected.

“Defeated now, with the weapons of deliverance in my hands. No, indeed, Lloyd Fletcher!”

“Fletcher, I suppose you know that according to the prison rules you are not allowed to stay alone tonight. It would be barbarous to leave a feller without good company his last night on earth,” said the turnkey, an hour or two after Mrs. Lancaster's visit.

“You'll have to take your pick between old Father Walsh and myself, but I suppose you will take me, bad as you hate me, afore that hypocrite.”

“Why can't I have my wife?” asked Lloyd, with a voice full of bitterness.

“Oh, wives ain't allowable on such occasions. She'll be around in the morning an hour or two; but talk quick, which will you have?”

“What difference do you think it makes to me, you heartless wretch, who watches with my last moments on earth, when my only friend is denied me?”

So it was arranged. The turnkey was to occupy his cell, and Lloyd went to work with his little instrument to file the handcuffs and chains which bound him. It was slow and tedious, but in an hour’s time he had the satisfaction of one free hand, and had the power to remove his limbs from the galling rattling torments which had so firmly held him.

“I must be able to throw these fetters off, or I am lost.” So he worked away industriously until the obstinate link was displaced, and he could wear, or leave them off at his pleasure. Ten o’clock arrived, and the turnkey had his cot brought in the cell.

“When are you going to turn in Fletcher? I’m as tired as an East India nigger. Plagy afraid I shan’t be much company tonight; better had the priest. You wrote all your letters yesterday Fletcher, didn’t you?” and the keeper yawned deeply, turned once or twice, and in five minutes was snoring profoundly.

“Now is my time,” thought Fletcher. “It will not do to wait. Heaven help me.”

Noiselessly he stepped from the chains and drew off the torturing handcuffs. It was but the work of a moment to saturate the handkerchief with the mixture, and in less time than it takes to tell it, Lloyd had stripped the hardened wretch. There was a trifling difference in height, but Lloyd lacked the aldermanic proportions of the jailor. However, he managed that quickly and easily, unlocked the door of the cell, stepped into the corridor, locked it again, carefully withdrew the key, and imitated as nearly as possible the dull, heavy tread of the keeper. The jail physician was just leaving the building, and Lloyd walked along after him, as if to see him safely out. Only one subordinate guarded the entrance, and so Lloyd and the doctor walked out together, without exciting the slightest suspicion.

He reached the old rookery, donned his attire, which proved to be a soldier’s uniform, removed the black wig of the keeper, and substituted a light, curly one, and before twelve o’clock had reached the house of a friend, two or three miles from the city, told his story, and was warmly received and promised protection. Lloyd felt sure he had left no clue by which he could be traced to this spot, and, almost overcome by his great happiness, he fell on his knees and thanked the God he had previously foreswore, for the miraculous escape.

The next morning all was astir in the prison, but our turnkey did not make his appearance; what could it mean? A key was produced to open the cell door, and the nude, inanimate figure of the fat keeper was presented to their astonished view. In the middle of the cell was the prisoner’s wardrobe; all he could spare from the make-up of the turnkey’s lusty proportions. A little cold water and fresh air revived him, but he could throw no light on the mysterious disappearance of Fletcher. He had seen nothing, knew nothing, and remembered nothing. Mrs. Fletcher was arrested on suspicion of assisting her husband to escape, but nothing could be proven, and in a few days saw her liberty. She was confident that her darling was safe, but could form no idea of the mode, or where he was concealed. However, now that so much was gained, she felt that she could afford to wait for the rest. Large rewards were offered for the prisoner’s apprehension;

large posters were placarded everywhere; and the detectives were set to work to ferret out his hiding place, but in vain. When the excitement was at its height, the ante-mortem statement and confession of a dying man were brought before the court, entirely exonerating Lloyd Fletcher from complicity in the murder. The man was Mrs. Lancaster's foster-brother. He had drugged and beaten poor Fletcher the night of the perpetration of the crime, stolen his pistol and committed the deed himself. Mrs. Lancaster had been from the first exceedingly suspicious of him, but proofs were not in her power, she had used every means possible to restore Lloyd his liberty, trusting to time and a merciful God for the rest. How well she acted her part and succeeded in her endeavors, the reader is aware. Fletcher was immediately pardoned, and drawn by the excited Londoners to his residence.

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