

Signed with My Own Blood

—
by Captain Howard
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In the spring of 1850 I entered the detective force. I will not here give the whys and wherefores for so doing, but leave the reader to conjecture. It is said that when a man becomes a detective – a man hunter – he is desperate. The saying was applicable to my step. But why did you do it, Captain? asks an inquisitive reader. Perhaps, my dear friend, I had been jilted; perhaps a great commercial crash had left me penniless, or doubtless I found the years of bachelorhood gathering about me, and I, with “no visible means of support.” The last conjecture is most probable, don’t you think so?

But to the story – to the leaf I pluck from the tree of a detective’s life.

I was seated one morning on the steps of the W---- House, waiting for breakfast, when little Dick, the errand boy of headquarters, ran up and whispered in my ear:

“Captain, the chief wants you.”

“Is his business urgent, Dick?” I asked, for I did not relish a walk with an empty stomach.

“No; you can eat your breakfast,” and the boy bounded away.

After partaking of my morning’s meal consisting of coffee, ham and eggs – a dish I relish – I sauntered away toward headquarters. As I entered Eight street I saw several groups of men talking excitedly, and I knew that something important had taken place, with which my summons to headquarters was connected, I quickened my steps, and not long afterwards stepped into the office.

“Take a chair, Howard,” said Matsell.

I seated myself, and he continued:

“A murder was committed last night. Some person or persons assassinated Mr. Royston, the banker, in his chamber.”

“They did!” I exclaimed.

“Yes; you will have to work out the case, as the rest of the force are engaged. A reward of five thousand dollars is offered for the arrest of the murderer.”

“I will do what I can to bring him to justice,” I answered, “and will proceed at once to the scene of the midnight murder.”

I went direct to the banker's mansion, and was shown to the room where the body still lay as it had been found. An examination of it and the chamber gave me a clue by which I hoped to secure the villains, for I knew that two persons were concerned in the tragedy. I went to work with success in the distance, and in a month felt the rogues almost within my grasp. But on the threshold of accomplishment I was thwarted.

One night; as I was standing by [a] lamp post – my head bowed upon my breast, meditatively, a hand touched my arm and looking up I confronted a richly dressed female. Her face was covered by a veil, through which I caught a gleam of her eyes – fiery eyes – like the flashes of lightening from an inky sky.

“Ha! I have found you at last, have I?” she said.

“It seems so,” I replied, “What do you want with me?”

“Do you ever listen to death-bed confessions?”

“Very often.”

“I have a friend who is nearing the portals of that undiscovered country. – He has a secret – one that he has carried in his heart these many years – which he wishes to confide to you.”

“Why to me?” I asked. “There are ministers who will hear it, and soothe his dying moments with comfortable thoughts.”

“He will confess to you alone, as his confession is about a case you worked [on] once. Will you go?”

I hesitated. The woman might be sincere or she might be a decoy to lead me into a net set by thieves and murderers, who wished to rid the world of me. But that case I had worked on, I started. Perhaps he knew about the great Martin mystery, upon which I was engaged for two years.

Without answering the woman's question, I asked one.

“Where is your friend?”

“I will not tell you, sir. If you will not go, say as much, and he will die with the secret untold.”

“What is his name, then?”

“Ah! you doubt my sincerity. I will go.”

And she stepped away.

I reflected a moment and resolved to accompany her, let good or evil be the result, I sprang forward and touched her arm.

“I will accompany you.”

“Thanks,” she said, turning. “Allow me to bandage your eyes.”

She produced a kerchief.

I protested against such a proceeding, but finding her inexorable, I suffered myself to be blindfolded.

On, we went. I tried to enter into a conversation with my mysterious guide, but was unsuccessful. I gained no information save that the man to whom I was being conducted lay dying in a basement. After walking some distance, a mile or two, I should judge, we stopped. My guide knocked at a door, which was opened. Down a flight of steps I was led till another door was reached, which opened. I was pushed forward, the woman saying:

“He is here.”

I heard the door shut, the lock turned, and steps ascend the stairs. I tore the bandage from my eyes, and looked around. I was in a small room, evidently in a cellar, in a poor portion of the city, for the apartment was very small. A lamp burned upon a rude table, upon which lay writing materials. But what attracted my attention most was two masked men, a few feet from me, directing two pistols at my breast. I had been deceived and drawn into a murderer’s nest.

Quick as thought my hand moved to my revolver, but the ominous click, click checked me.

“Two can play at that game, Tom Howard,” said one of the masks.

“You know me then?”

“Of course we do and take pleasure in informing you that your life is in our hands.”

“And you intend depriving me of it,” I ventured to say.

“Well – no – yes. If you sign a certain instrument of writing, you live – if not you die.”

“[I] would like to know in whose presence I stand,” said I, stepping forward.

“The murderers of John Royston, the banker,” replied the masks.

I recognized one of the voices instantly as belonging to a tall dark-faced fellow, who for some months I had followed like a sleuth hound.

“Ha!” I cried, “it is you, my covey. Two more days, and your career of crime would have ended.”

“You must catch a man before you hang him, my dear Howard,” was the taunting rejoinder.

“We’ll see, sir.”

“A truce to this badinage,” said one of the men, stepping up to the table, while his companion kept a pistol at my breast, “you must sign this paper if you value your life.”

I went to the table and read the following oath, written in an uneven but legible chirography:

“I, Thomas Howard, a detective, do solemnly swear that I will desist from the pursuit of the murderers of John Royston, banker, for the period of one year, so help me God;”

“Signed by my own blood, this, the 12th day of July, 185–.”

I turned to the men after reading, and said:

“What does ‘signed with my own blood’ mean?”

“Exactly what is said,” was the one-elucidating reply.

“Then I refuse to sign.”

“You are rash, Tom Howard. The bond is good for one year only. Sign it and live.”

There was something so significant in this last sentence, that I changed my resolution.

“I will sign,” I said; “but at the end of the year mentioned in my bond, I will hunt you down and bring you before outraged justice.”

“No boasting, sir; make ready to have some blood spilled—” and one of the assassins laid aside his pistol and produced a lancet.

I bared my arm to the elbow; but he laughed saying;

“Not your arm, Howard; the blood must come from nearest the heart. – Bare your bosom.”

“Is this another Shylock affair?”

“No sir; we want no flesh – merely blood.”

I bared my breast; he made an incision directly over my heart; caught the blood in a spoon, dipped a pen into it, and placed it in my hand. I bent forward and signed the bond. The bandage was then replaced over my eyes, the woman who had brought me then appeared, and conducted

me through several streets, when she suddenly left me. I removed the kerchief, went to headquarters and announced my intention of sticking to my oath. The Royston case was put into the hands of Dick Clay, while I was detailed to work up a burglary.

Time passed, when one morning I was summoned to the city prison to hear the confession of a woman who attempted suicide. She was dying, but a faint smile appeared on her hectic cheeks as I entered the cell.

“Mr. Howard,” she said, “I have laid violent hands upon my life and am dying. I sent for you. Let me see, this is the —”

“Eleventh of July,” I answered, seeing her hesitate.

“One year ago come tomorrow night, you signed a bond to desist from pursuing the murderers of John Royston.”

“I did.”

“The bond is null and void tomorrow night, and you are at liberty to pursue them.”

“Which I intend doing.”

“Listen, then, to my confession. Last January, two men entered John Royston’s house and murdered him. I assisted them. We escaped detection until you got on our tracks. We intended to leave the city, but you remember how you foiled us. You were weaving your web around us, and there was left but one course by which we might escape. I decoyed you into that cellar, where you gave a bond not to follow us.

“The men left the city, but I remained, as I did not fear Dick Clay. It was I who sent him on a false trail, from whence he returned discomfited, and I was arrested, but succeeded in clearing myself. The murderers are in Paris at this time.”

“How will I find them in the great city? Can you give me no clue?”

“They purchased a flower store with the money taken from Royston’s safe. There is a letter under my pillow. I received it from them a month ago. Its contents may throw some light upon their exact whereabouts. The names are – bend nearer – are –.”

“What?” I cried.

“Ran – Ban–. I am gone!” and she fell back dead.

I got the letter she had spoken of, but it helped me not at all. It was dated at Paris, and had two Y’s in place of a signature.

I went to Paris in the next vessel, and arriving there, searched two weeks but in vain. I was on the point of giving up when I encountered an American – a jeweler – who had resided in Paris some years. I inquired of him if he knew of any flower store kept by Americans. Yes, he knew of but one, Rue Beppo. He believed it was owned by “Ranlin & Bro.” That was the place I was hunting for, the names that the dying woman tried to pronounce; began thus: “Ran” – the remainder was “lin.”

But the Rue Beppo was the last place on earth I would have looked for a flower store.

When I reached my hotel I set to work and removed the heavy beard and moustache which adorned my face, and repaired to the Rue Beppo: – I entered the flower store, and a clerk awaited my pleasure. I desired to see the proprietors. They appeared and I introduced myself as Geo. Hall, of Galveston. They did not recognize me.

I could hardly restrain myself when in the persons of the firm I recognized the murderers of the banker.

“Gentlemen,” said I, after talking a while with them, “were you ever in New York?”

“Oh, yes,” said one, “we lived there several years.”

“Did you know one Annie Graham residing there?”

Their lips grew ashy and they rose to their feet.

“What of her?”

“She is dead.”

“Well?”

“And before she died she confessed.”

They stepped forward shouting:

“Who are you!”

“Tom Howard, at your service.”

And at the same time I drew a brace of revolvers and leveled them at their heads. “Gentlemen, the bond having expired, I have done what I said I would do that night. I have tracked you, and now you are my prisoners. – Come with me.”

Weak as lambs they followed, speaking not a word. At the door we were met by a squad of French police, whom I stationed near as reinforcements in case of necessity. The villains were

locked up till a vessel sailed for the United States and I had the pleasure of being their companion during the voyage.

When the ship reached New York, I delivered my prisoners over to the authorities who tried them found them, guilty, and they expiated their crimes on the scaffold. The people were surprised when they learned of the detection of the Royston murderers after such a lapse of time. They did not know that I was under a bond for one year.

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