

The Picture
THE STORY OF THE KEEPER OF THE JAIL
by Mary Kyle Dallas

My name is Dodge. I'm the keeper of the Honey Hill jail. It's an easy place, I must admit. The salary is small, but there is very little to do. We don't have many prisoners. One or two idle loafers about the village get turned in occasionally, and once every year or so we have a burglar.

I have my garden, and the children play in it, and sometimes I forget the whole place does not belong to me. For two or three stupid old men making shoes and a shabby woman or two binding them, isn't much of a prison.

Why, I've gone off all day and left the keys with my wife, for the prisoners would never have thought of escaping if the door had been open. They were [too] comfortable.

That is the way it was, anyhow, when *he* came. Who was he? Well, he said his name was Smith, but, I suppose, that he really had another. He came to the town and wandered about day after day, behaving in the strangest way, and at last he went to the magistrate and asked to be locked up in prison.

"Why?" says the magistrate. "What have you done?"

"No matter what," says he, "but I deserve it."

Of course he couldn't be committed for *that*, but he had his way at last. He walked into a shop and put his hand into the money-drawer. So I got him. He came in one morning—a gentleman every inch of him—but as thin as you could fancy a man, and every now and then looking over his shoulder.

"Shut the door, quick! Shut the door," he said, as he came in. "Don't let *him* in."

"Why, is there any one else outside?" asked I.

"No," said the officer, "it's all fancy. He's been talking that way ever since I took him in charge.—Crazy, I guess," he whispered.

I thought it might be so then, but after that Mr. Smith did not say anything that could make me think so.

He had a way of looking over his shoulder, as I said, and a way of groaning, but he paid for extras without a question, and he got me to buy him lots of things, paints of all colors, and an artist's easel, and chalk and brushes and pencils.

“To pass the time away painting,” he said.

“Why, sir, then maybe you’ve been an artist in your time,” said I.

“Well, something of one,” said he, “but it will pass the time, it will pass the time.”

So there he sat and painted in his cell a portrait of a man. I kept a curtain over it, because it scared women and children so. It scared me at first, but I got used to it. A deadly white face and staring eyes, and the finger pointing right at you.

Oh, I tell you. I’ve stood behind his chair and watched him work and work and work at it, and first he painted the eyes, and they seemed to follow you all about the room, and then one feature after the other. He worked at it three months—He was in for three months—and then there it was all finished. But while he painted, he kept looking over his shoulder, looking over his shoulder all the time.

Well, at the end of the three months, he fell sick. We sent for the prison doctor, and he said, “Consumption;” and so, as he was dying, and paid his way well, and was no expense at all, why they let him stay. Wife waited on him. I helped nurse him, and the doctor came regularly. He said he was a very well educated man and that he had lived amongst tip top people. And there he lay dying by slow degrees, *so* slow, you could see no difference day by day; but there was a deal, in the long run. Weaker and weaker he grew. At last he gave up sitting in a chair and took to his bed. And there came a night when the doctor and I sat with him knowing the day would never dawn for him, when all of a sudden he spoke out sharp and quick, and said he:

“Which of you will do a favor for a poor, sinful, dying man?”

We both answered at once, and he looked up grateful and happy, and said he:

“I want you to see that nothing happens to my picture. That picture I’ve painted here. I’ll tell you all about it. There is no need of having a secret now. I shall have no secrets soon. I shall leave my body behind me before day-light, and a soul cannot hide from God’s eye. My punishment is before me, or my pardon. God knows how I was tortured—how I suffered—how my brain reeled.

“Man can never know. I couldn’t tell you,” he said, holding out his thin, pale hands to us. “I couldn’t tell you all the agony that I endured,” and he hid his face in the pillow. “It was a woman who drove me to it,” he said, after awhile. “I loved her. She was beautiful. She tempted me on and on, and jilted me at last, and for an empty-headed fop—a man who had been insolent to me, who laughed at me now that he had won the prize I coveted.

“The night before his wedding-day I hid myself in the path near her house, through which he must pass when he parted from her. It was thickly set with trees and the shadows were deep.

“I was so near the house that I saw her come to the door with her lover and saw him kiss her lips and press her to his heart. That maddened me. I had only meant to fight with him, but I always wore a pistol, and it came into my mind that I could put a bullet through his heart as he passed me, and keep his wedding-day from him forever.

“I took the pistol from my belt, cocked it, and waited. He came gayly down the path, whistling a merry tune. For one instant I saw him gay, light of foot, bright of eye; the next he lay a dead thing at my feet. I dragged his body amongst the bushes, and looked at it as it grew cold and stiffened.

“Then I got a spade, and in the silence of midnight, dug a grave. I laid him in it and heaped the sod above his head, and now I thought there was no more of him.

“I turned away. Before I had gone many steps I heard something at my shoulder. I turned and saw him following me. I knew he lay dead in the grave I had made, but there he was, pointing at me, mocking me, yet, with such a ghastly, white face, and such horrible dead eyes.

“From that moment he never left me. I went to Europe; he was behind me on shipboard, rode with me in diligences, sat behind me in rail-cars, came between me and my very servants, so that I started and stared and they learned to think me mad. I went to tropical lands, to frozen regions, up mountains, down into mines. There he was whenever I glanced over my shoulder. At last I came back to America, and one day it struck me that if I could get into prison I might have him barred out.

“I did it, but he followed me. I was in despair; but here a new thought seized me. I would paint him. It came to me like a flash, that it would be the way to have him at last before me, not always at my back.

“I began. You saw me, Keeper Dodge. I painted his eyes at first; then he was less awful, for when I looked over my shoulder, he did not stare at me so. Slowly I got all his features upon the canvas; last of all, his long, white, horrible hand, pointing at me. There he was. There you see him. But the ruse was admirable; he never followed me again.

“I’ve a plan.” Here he dropped back in the bed and gasped, but in a moment more sat up grasping both our wrists. “I’ve a plan,” he faintly articulated. “I think you will help me. You’ve promised. Swear—swear!”

“Yes, yes, it is all right,” said the doctor, “we’ll do what we can.”

“Why, then,” cried the poor, mad soul. “Why, then I’ll leave him behind me, shut up in that picture, shut up in prison. He cannot follow me all through Eternity, then, as he would if he were free.

“He shall not accuse me. Never destroy the picture. Keeper Dodge, you will hang it in this cell and keep it safe I know. There’s money that I leave behind that will pay you for your trouble. Promise?”

“Yes,” said I. “I’ll keep the picture safe.”

“Then I can lie down and die,” said he. “I can try to pray,” and he closed his eyes.

He lay quite still there for hours. We thought he was gone, but all of a sudden he started up:

“There—there—there!” he screamed; “he’s coming out of the picture; he’s going with me. Stop him! stop him! He’s going with me,” and fell back dead.

We buried him next day. But now comes the queerest part of my story. I shut that picture up in the cell. I didn’t care to look at it. It made me feel as if I was looking at a ghost; and it was a year before I opened the cell door.

When I did the picture was gone. I don’t mean the canvas. That was all safe; but the picture was all gone out of it—vanished somehow. The doctor talked about paints of the wrong kind and the effect of damp—and I don’t know what. But I, for my part, can never get it out of my mind that that horrible thing with the staring eyes and dead white face and pointing finger, *has* followed his murderer into the other world.

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