

How Mr. Mustell Paid His Note
by Judge Clark

“Darrell!”

It was Mr. Leatherwood’s voice from the inner office. The name called was my own; and, with the alacrity of an under clerk ambitious of promotion I responded to the summons.

“Jonah Mustell’s note fell due yesterday,” said Mr. Leatherwood, looking up as I entered. “I want you to ride over to Beechdale and present it. Of course, it won’t be paid, for, by his construction of the law-merchant, a debtor has the right to at least three distinct duns in addition to the days of grace. So the sooner we begin the better. Here’s the note, and an order on Trotter, the liveryman, for a horse.”

Mr. Leatherwood turned to his writing-desk after these instructions, and left me to follow them.

Beechdale was a country village about a dozen miles from the youthful Western city of which Mr. Leatherwood was the leading merchant.

The road had so many “forks” and turns that my head got turned at last, and in spite of my stock of itinerary information being kept replenished at regular intervals, I had the consolation, at the end of several weary hours, of finding myself many miles out of the way. Owing to which mishap it was late in the afternoon when I alighted at Mr. Mustell’s gate.

I cannot say I was won by that gentleman at first sight. There was a look of sinister cunning in his ferrety little eyes, when he met me at the door, neither agreeable nor trust-inspiring.

After an exchange of distant salutations, and on intimation from me that I had called on a matter of business, Mr. Mustell invited me to enter, and led the way to an apartment designed, apparently, to serve the double purpose of a sitting-room and office.

“I am sent by Mr. Leatherwood,” I said, taking the chair offered by Mr. Mustell, “to request payment of this note,” at the same time producing it.

The corners of Mr. Mustell’s mouth went down perceptibly. His brow clouded; his features hardened. Dun number one, it was plain, had failed in persuasive power. But for form’s sake, I should have waited for no other answer. Mr. Mustell was on the point of giving one, however, when the sound of footsteps in the hall attracted his attention.

With a hasty excuse he hurried from the room, closing the door as he did so.

I could hear Mr. Mustell greeting some one whom he called “Sharker;” and then there was the introduction of a “Mr. McLure,” after which there was a pause.

“You needn’t be afraid of Bob McLure,” said a voice which, I reasoned, belonged to Sharker. “He’s as true as steel.”

“H—sh!” came warningly from Mr. Mustell, who immediately conducted his visitors to a part of the house out of hearing.

At the end of half an hour Mr. Mustell returned. His manner was completely changed. His look was even cordial as he expressed his regret for having kept me waiting.

“As I was about to say when interrupted just now,” he proceeded blandly, “I have the money ready for the note. Tell Mr. Leatherwood I should have called upon him with it, but for a press of other business.”

Here was a surprise. How I had misjudged from appearances. I would have offered an apology had I known how to do so.

Mr. Mustell counted out the money in bank notes, all crisp and new, which I carefully buttoned up in an inside pocket, leaving the paid note on the table.

It was already growing late, and I had no time to lose if I would reach home at a seasonable hour.

Mr. Mustell came to the gate to see me off, and, after a parting the warmth of which contrasted strangely with the coolness of the meeting, I set out on a trot of which the vertical motion was somewhat disproportioned to that in advance.

I had reached the loneliest part of the road, and the sun was just setting, when I heard the sound of hoofs behind. I had hardly time to look about before two horsemen cantered up, one on each side.

He on the right seized my bridle with his left hand, and leaping down pointed a pistol at my head.

“Dismount!” he said, “if you value your life! There is money in your pocket, and I must have it!”

Reader, what would *you* have done in my place? I was without a weapon. I had taken no precautions for defence, for I had not expected to be the bearer of my present charge. Here I was, in a secluded spot, at the mercy of two desperate men. Well, whatever you, or another braver than myself, would have done, I adopted the prudent course, and surrendered at discretion.

In less than half-a-minute the money passed from my possession to that of the bearer of the pistol, whose companion, though merely a looker-on, was ready, doubtless, to offer aid in case of need.

The robbery completed, the two men rode off, leaving me to go my way in peace.

At a late hour I found Mr. Leatherwood at his house, and told him the whole story.

He made no reply, but rang for a servant.

“Go, call me the first policeman you meet,” he said, when the servant entered.

By a few searching questions he drew out what minor facts I had before omitted, by which time the servant had returned with an officer.

I supposed the object was to put the authorities on the criminals’ track without delay. Judge of my surprise, therefore, at what followed.

“I give this young man in charge,” said Mr. Leatherwood. “He pretends to have been robbed of a considerable sum intrusted to him; but the circumstances are too suspicious to pass without investigation.”

“Surely,” I faltered, “you do not suspect—”

“I certainly *do*,” was the curt reply. “These pretended robberies are an old dodge. And this one doesn’t appear to have been very adroitly planned. For instance, how could any one have known you had the money about you?”

The policeman took my arm, when Mr. Leatherwood resumed:

“I would not have him sent to prison till after the examination tomorrow. Keep him safely till then, and I will see to the expense.”

Thus, though held in close custody, I was spared, for the present, the degradation of confinement in the common jail.

I will not prolong this story by a recital of my feelings till the following afternoon, when I was brought before a magistrate.

Mr. Mustell, who had been sent for, was the first witness called. His testimony was full and circumstantial, and true—every word of it.

“Call Mr. McLure,” said the state’s attorney.

I started at the name. So did Mr. Mustell, even more than myself. But imagine my amazement when, from an adjoining room, the identical person appeared who had looked on at the robbery!

“Be sworn, Mr. McLure,” said the attorney.

I could restrain myself no longer. Was my liberty to be sworn away by the very wretches of whom I was the victim?

“That man,” I exclaimed, “is one of the villains who did the deed!”

“Silence!” shouted a tipstaff.

The witness, with perfect coolness as well as accuracy, narrated every fact as it occurred. I was astounded to see a man thus criminate himself. But a few more questions served to clear the matter up.

“What is your occupation, Mr. McLure?”

“That of a detective.”

“Do you know one Sharker?”

“I do. I arrested him last night.”

“What is *he* by profession?”

“A counterfeiter.”

“Have you the money taken from Mr. Darrell?”

“Yes; here it is.”

The roll of bills I had lost was produced, every one of which proved spurious.

Here was another surprise, but McLure was ready with the explanation. Mustell belonged to the same band Sharker did. McLure wound himself into the latter’s confidence, and through him secured an introduction to Mustell the day I called to collect the note—at which time the scheme was laid to pay the false bills to me, and rob me of them afterwards to prevent discovery—an enterprise in which the detective, for reasons of his own, consented to bear Sharker company.

The result was that Mustell and his friend entered the public service, while I returned to that of Mr. Leatherwood, devoting my leisure time, for a season, to a close study of the “Counterfeit Detector.”

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