

The Doctor's Story
Judge Clark

I had just returned from a late visit to a patient, and was glancing over a note left in my absence, when the night bell rang.

It was past eleven o'clock, and the office-boy being gone, I tossed aside the note and went to the door, where I found a dark-featured man who wished me to go to the bedside of a wounded friend.

I took down my surgical case, and accompanied the stranger to the street.

The latter called a hack from the next corner.

"It's a long way to walk," he explained, "and the moments are precious."

As I took my seat inside, he gave the driver his instructions which I failed to overhear, and then took his place at my side.

"I trust you will pardon me," he said, when we had gone a little distance; "it is through no distrust I offer the suggestion, but it may relieve you from answering embarrassing questions in the future if you will suffer your eyes to be bandaged till we reach our destination. You need have no fears, I assure you."

I hesitated for an instant, but the man's manner from the first had impressed me with his good faith, and I yielded to the proposal.

After tying his handkerchief securely over my eyes, my companion relapsed into silence, and neither of us spoke till, at the end of twenty minutes, the driver stopped.

"Let us alight here," said the stranger; and opening the door he took my arm and assisted me out.

After a short walk we ascended some steps. A door opened and closed again behind us, and then we passed up a flight of stairs and halted.

My guide tapped twice at the door, which I could hear unlock cautiously, after which I was led into a lighted apartment, as I was able to discover in spite of the bandage.

A deep moaning, as of one suffering intense pain, met my ears; and the handkerchief being at once removed, I saw stretched on a couch the form of a man from whose parted lips a bloody foam exuded, while his upturned, glassy eyes and rigid features betokened that his last hour was near.

On his right breast, which was exposed, a small red spot was visible, of which it needed no second glance of a practiced eye to divine that the man was dying from a pistol shot.

The scene before me, and the precautions taken in my introduction to it, awoke the suspicion that what I saw was the sequel to a startling crime.

My startled looks doubtless betrayed my thoughts; for a man who had been keeping watch at the sufferer's side, as he rose to give me place, said, hurriedly:

"It was a duel, sir, between two gentlemen who had been close friends. The quarrel was sudden, and they fought here in this room. One, as you see, lies wounded there, and the other has fled, for you know the law's severity in such cases towards all concerned, principals and seconds, which last position was filled by this gentleman and myself."

A brief inspection of the patient sufficed to determine that his case was hopeless. The ball had entered the chest and penetrated the lungs, whose action was well-nigh choked by internal hemorrhage.

There was nothing to be done but allay, as far as practicable, the sufferer's pain; and apprising his friends of this, and prescribing an anodyne with direction how to administer it, I rose to depart.

"By accident," said one of the men, "we are without money; but if you will accept this," placing in my hand a small silver watch apparently of no great value, "it may serve as some compensation for your trouble."

I took the watch more as a souvenir of the night's adventure than for its value, and, after being again blindfolded, was conducted to the street, where, after walking a little way, another hack was called, in which, accompanied by my previous companion, I was conveyed to the vicinity of my office, and set down without further words.

A week or more passed without happening of anything to recall the late occurrence, when one morning I had a call from a couple of strangers.

"You were acquainted, I believe," one of them began, "with a young man named Howard Beccles."

"Slightly," I answered; "we boarded at the same house until recently."

"Perhaps, then," interposed the other visitor, "you can give us some information as to his present whereabouts."

"I cannot. He has left the city, I believe;—at least I received a note from him some days since stating such to be his intention. There is the note," I said, handing over the one I was reading when called to attend the wounded man.

The two stranger bent their heads over it and scanned it together.

“Hah!” exclaimed he who had spoken first,—“I see he asks you here to meet him at an out-of-the-way place. Did you do so?”

“I did not,” I answered. “I came in late, and did not receive the message in time.”

The men conferred briefly aside. Then one of them spoke up quickly, while both eyed me sharply:

“A body identified as that of Howard Beccles has been found floating in the river with a bullet wound in the breast. He was never seen alive after the time at which he here appoints to meet you. As officers of the law it is our plain duty to follow every clew, and we must begin by searching these premises.”

One of the first objects brought to light was the watch already spoken of. It was opened eagerly, and again the two heads met in close inspection.

“I think we need proceed no further,” spoke up one of the men, excitedly. “This is the murdered man’s watch, bearing the maker’s name and number as we have them from the man who last repaired it.”

And before I had time to realize the situation, I was dragged away and locked in a cell on a charge of murder!

No one doubted my guilt. I was young and comparatively friendless; and, to the circumstance of the victim’s watch being found in my possession, and that of the note inviting me to meet him, others were soon added,—among them my mysterious movements on the night in question, which had not passed unnoticed.

My account of the manner in which I had gained possession of the watch was received with derision,—its improbability, in the minds of many, adding a fresh link to the chain of evidence against me.

A jury of my countrymen pronounced me guilty, and the judge, after denouncing me as a monster of iniquity, pronounced upon me the law’s dread sentence. The days sped rapidly after that. I had but a week left to live, when one day, as I peered through the grating of my cell, a new prisoner was led past. He turned his head and a cry escaped me. It was Howard Beccles!

“You here!” he exclaimed.

“Yes; condemned to die for your murder!”

“What a good joke if it wasn’t so serious!” he said; “and what fools judges and juries are sometimes. A year ago, in a neighboring city—I may as well own up, for they have clear proof against me—I made too free with my employer’s money. When you knew me I was a fugitive under an assumed name. The day I wrote you the note I had received an intimation that

detectives were on my track. I determined to sail for Europe, and wished to intrust you with some slight commissions before departing.

“After waiting as long as I could at the place appointed in my note, I was hurrying to go aboard the vessel on which I had taken passage, when I was attacked by three men. One of them grabbed my watch, while another attempted to secure my money. Before he could succeed I drew my pistol and fired, and the robber staggered back. In the confusion which ensued I escaped and reached the ship, which sailed almost immediately.

“But ill luck pursued me. The authorities gained trace of me, and here I am fast in their clutches. Doubtless you would have heard the good news sooner—for good it must be to you—but as I’ve been brought back in my own name, and haven’t seen any of my old acquaintances, I suppose that accounts for my identity with the late Howard Beccles not being sooner discovered.”

As I looked on the face before me, I was struck with its wonderful resemblance to the wounded man whom I had been so mysteriously called to attend, and whose body had evidently been disposed of by casting it into the river.

That day I walked forth a free man, devoutly thankful to that Superior Power to whose intervention I shall ever attribute my escape from a peril at the recollection of which I still shudder.

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