

The Midnight Visit
The Story of a Young Physician

Rap—rap—rap. I was fast asleep and dreaming when I first heard it, and it was a little dusky gnome down in a gold mine who was chipping bits of gold off of the great masses of ore to put into my waste paper basket, which I joyously held for him. Rap—rap—rap—rap—rap—rap—rap—again. Now I knew that I was dreaming and tried my best not to wake up, but there was no help for it. I felt my golden dream slipping away; I knew I was in bed in my office. I saw the head board of the patent humbug that was “a chest of drawers by day,” the little night lamp on the mantel-piece, my clothes about the room on chairs, the book-shelves all ghostly and shadowy in the faint light, but I felt no responsibility about getting up. It was warm and snug under the counterpane, and cold outside, I knew.

Rap—rap—rap. Oh, let them knock. Wait—it wouldn’t do. I began to realize that I was a young physician and that this rapping might be performed by a messenger from a patient. Patients were not numerous, nor were they likely to be, I feared. Accordingly I jumped out of bed and rushed to the window, and lifting the sash, saw a buggy, in which was seated a man, while another man, who had evidently alighted from it, stood at the door.

He stepped backward as he heard the noise I made in raising the window, and said in the deep tones one naturally expects of a large man:

“The doctor?”

“Yes,” I said.

“There has been an accident,” he continued. “Bring your surgical instruments with you and come with us as soon as possible, if you please.”

“In one moment,” I replied, and turning from the window, dressed myself, caught up my case of instruments and hurried down stairs.

The man who still stood in the road motioned to me to step into the buggy, and followed me. We were wedged so closely together that it was quite impossible for me to move, but I could see that my companions wore caps drawn down over their eyes, and handkerchiefs tied about them and over their mouths.

The weather was scarcely cold enough to account for such muffling, and I had already begun to feel that all was not quite well, when the man who had before spoken addressed me.

“Doctor,” he said, in the most conciliatory tones, “we are about to do something rather unusual, but I assure you no harm is intended by or will follow it. I desire to bandage your eyes with this handkerchief for awhile.” As he spoke he produced from his pocket a large square of yellow silk. “It is soft and will not be injurious. It will be removed when you have arrived at your destination. I advise you to make no resistance, and assure you that your fee will be an immense one, and that

you will be brought back to your office as well as you left it. Moreover, we can do by force what we desire to do with your permission, as we are both well armed.”

For a moment I hesitated; then I said to myself: “The man means what he says; certainly it is not worth their while to rob me; my life cannot be desired by any one. I will see the adventure to the end.” Aloud I replied: “I rely on your assurance. Do as you please.”

In another moment the handkerchief was over my eyes and we sped on in darkness.

Our journey lasted for half an hour, as nearly as I could judge. When we stopped, the wheels had rattled for some time upon the stones of a badly paved street.

The man who drove had not spoken a word all this while; the other now once more addressed me.

“Trust entirely to me,” he said. “You shall have the use of your eyes again in a moment.”

Then he guided me up two steps, and along what seemed to be an entry, which had an odor with which I was familiar in my visits to the poorer order of tenement houses—a combination of dirt, soapsuds, coarse cookery, and tobacco; and opening a door, closing it instantly behind him and turned a key in the lock.

“You may remove the handkerchief now, Doctor,” he said, in exceedingly pleasant tones.

I obeyed at once. At first the light, albeit only that of a kerosene lamp, dazzled me too much to allow me to see anything; but in a moment I was aware that I stood in a bare, whitewashed room, the doors and windows of which were barred like those of a prison. It contained a table and a few chairs; on one of these sat a man in his shirt sleeves, whose head was resting on his right hand in an attitude which indicated great suffering, —the left hand was wrapped in a cloth and thrust into his bosom.

“This is your patient,” said the spokesman of the party; and the man lifted his head, and I saw that he also had a kerchief fastened about the lower part of his face, while a cap was pulled down to his eyebrows. In effect all three men were masked.

“The injury is very serious,” continued the speaker. “It has been neglected during a journey. Kindly examine it at once.”

Then the wounded man, without a word, held out his arm, from which the other removed the bandage, and I saw a hand from which the little finger had been recently torn away. It was horribly swollen, and straight from the finger up the arm ran a straight red line. I gazed at it in horror; nothing but an amputation could save the man’s life; without it he must die in a few hours.

“I must have assistance,” I said. “Call in some well known surgeon. This is a case I cannot undertake alone.”

“You must,” replied the only man of the three who had yet spoken. “You are skillful; we know all about you. You are better than some older men for any case. This gentleman knows already what you fear to tell him. He must lose his hand or die!”

I bowed.

“Today his hand—tomorrow his arm,” I said.

“We are ready to assist you,” replied the man.

“But, good heavens! I am not ready to perform so delicate an operation to risk a life,” I said.

“Your nerves are steady. You are a good surgeon. You are acting under orders. Divest yourself of all responsibility, and go to work,” said the speaker. “We have chloroform on hand. You will find us all brave men.”

As he spoke the injured man quietly laid his arm upon the table.

The deed was done. The patient with his arm bound against his breast, arose. The two other men at once enveloped him in a large cloak of richest material. As they removed their outer garments, I saw that all three were splendidly dressed; and the one whom I must call the spokesman, for I have no other name for him, now handed me a roll of coin.

“Count it,” he said.

I obeyed. The money was in gold pieces—the sum five hundred dollars.

“Are you satisfied?” inquired the spokesman.

I bowed. He drew the handkerchief from his pocket, once more bandaged my eyes, and led me to the carriage. This time only one man rode with me. A little way from my own door he set my eyes at liberty, and inquired if I had any objection to alighting then and there. To this I replied by instantly jumping down.

“Good-night,” he said.

“Good-night,” I replied.

And away he drove at a rapid rate. I returned to my office, almost fancying myself the victim of a dream and not likely to sleep that night. I counted my money, hid it safely away, made plans for its expenditure, and asked myself, over and over again, in what unlawful deed the men I had served had been engaged and how the sufferer had been injured. The wound was unlike anything I had ever seen; the effect produced by it unusual. I lit my lamp, rekindled my fire and sat down before it. As I did so my eyes fell upon the morning’s paper. It was lying still in its folds upon

the table. I had not looked at it that day. As I took it up and opened it, the first word that struck my eye was this ghastly one—MURDER! And beneath it lay this paragraph:

“A most horrible murder was committed at —— —— last night. The victim was Evan Evans, a Welshman, fifty years of age, and reported to be a miser. He was ill of erysipelas, but refused to have a nurse. His house was entered and robbed, and personal violence was probably resorted to extort from him a confession of the whereabouts of his valuables and money; for he was found covered with wounds, and with his teeth still tightly closed upon what proved to be a human finger, which he had bitten off. There is no doubt that the robbers secured a great amount of plunder, and there is terrible excitement in the neighborhood.”

As I finished this paragraph the paper dropped from my hands, and I knew that I had been that night in the presence of the murderer of Evan Evans.

New York Ledger, July 31, 1880