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AN ORACLE.

We had chickens a-plenty, and turkeys a-few, and one old gray goose of all things to clock. A guinea's the clackiest ever you know; she just keeps on saying, "Come back!" and "Come back!"

When I was a youngster and also a fool—They're, generally speaking, all one, more's the pity. I thought I'd quit farming and going to school and go make my fortune awhile in the city.

Mother cried a good deal, and my father looked grim. Though he gave me a sort of one-sided consent. But he said, "Recollect, we are always to him. You can fetch yourself back when you're money's all spent."

That doesn't take long when your pocketbook's thin. The board was so high, it was most of it eaten. Boys seemed at a discount; I had to give in. That the old man was right, and the young one was beaten.

To myself, 'twas another concern, as you'll guess. To go back to the farm and take up at the school. Though I knew it was true of me, nevertheless I shouldn't enjoy being called a young fool.

But somehow or other I heart, or it seemed, Above all the noise that old guinea hen's clack. I couldn't get clear of it; everywhere I screamed "That guinea's eternal 'Come back!' and 'Come back!'"

I footed it home, for my money was spent. The grass was a picture, the sky was another. And I sang to myself every step that I went. "I'm going to mother! I'm going to mother!"

An the very first thing that I heard at the gate Was that silly old guinea hen's clackety-clack. And I hallooed, "Shut up! You are speaking too late!"

Why, can't you see, stupid, that I have come back?"

—Margaret Vandegrift in Youth's Companion.

THE GOLDROOM.

The night mail from Paris panted into Calais Pier station only five minutes late. The usual scrambling exodus of passengers eager to get a snack at the buffet before the steamer was due to start began almost before the train had stopped.

My employment is that of traveling clerk to an express company, whose business it is to convey between Paris and London valuables intrusted to it by clients.

I was more than usually anxious that night, because it was marked by the inauguration of a new system. Hitherto the valuables had been placed by one of us in the goldroom rented by our company on the steamers. The room had been carefully locked, and the property had been left to take care of itself until it got to Dover, where it was met by another official of the company, who was provided with a duplicate key.

The captains of the boats were also in possession of keys in case it should be necessary for the safety of the ship to enter the goldroom.

These precautions, however, had proved insufficient. Although the locks on the goldroom door were safety ones of the most approved kind, impressions in wax had been obtained, false keys had been manufactured, and robberies had been frequent—perpetrated, without doubt, during the passage across the channel by a gang of expert thieves.

In consequence, an official was to accompany in future every consignment and keep watch and ward at the goldroom door.

That night the consignment was of small bulk, but of extraordinary value. It consisted of two tin boxes, one of which contained notes on the Bank of France, sent to the Bank of England in payment for a purchase of 500,000 sovereigns, the other box contained negotiable bonds, with coupons attached, of the new Turkish loan—the property of the largest financial house in the world. The bonds were worth £250,000, so that my total charge amounted to \$3,750,000.

Two of the company's porters had accompanied me from Paris to assist in shipping the boxes. As I stood on the platform watching my men haul the boxes from the treasury van I was tapped on the shoulder by one of the French detectives whose duty it is to keep an eye on the boats.

"You cross tonight under the new arrangement, Mr. Dutton, I think," he whispered.

"That is so," I replied. "Have you taken stock of my fellow passengers?"

"Yes," he said; "and I have not spotted any suspicious characters so far. Ah! stand aside there, mon ami; make way for madame," and the detective pulled me gently back a step to allow a solemn procession to pass along the platform to the gangway of the steamer.

A couple of railway porters were carrying a sick woman, by whose side walked a tall maid. Two other porters followed, wheeling a truck of unmistakable feminine luggage.

The detective stepped quickly to the side of the truck and read the address painted in large white letters on one of the packages.

"Mme. la Comtesse de Brune," he said as he rejoined me. "It is not a title with which I am familiar. Mon cher, it might be as well if you kept yourself acquainted with that lady's whereabouts on the boat."

"What! Have you cause for suspicion?" I asked.

"Not in the least. I did not recognize either the grande dame or her maid. Only when one comes across a title unknown to us of the French police it makes one cautious—that is all, my friend. Bon voyage."

The detective moved away, and I followed my men on board the boat, each carrying one of the boxes. On the gangway I met the captain, to whom I was well known—jolly old Captain Temple.

"Hullo, my boy!" he said. "So you're going with us. That's good; you'll relieve me from a lot of responsibility. I got my new key for your precious new lock from the agent today, but I've hit on a better dodge than all the locks in the world. Just come along with me."

Captain Temple led the way below. I followed with my men. The goldroom was situated on the main deck in a little recess aft of the saloon.

It was about 10 feet square and was

approached by a narrow passage 5 yards long running out of the saloon, in which, as we passed through, I noticed the invalid lady and her attendant being ushered into a stateroom by the stewardess. The stateroom was the nearest to the goldroom passage—a fact which further impressed upon me the hint given by the detective.

The captain opened the door of the goldroom with his key, and my men deposited the boxes on the floor. Captain Temple waited till I had dismissed them and then stooped down in another corner of the room and pulled at a small tag of wire that protruded through a hole.

When he had got enough wire to make a fair sized loop, he carried over one of the boxes, put the loop of wire around it and turned to me with a smile.

"There, Dutton," he said. "Now, if any one touches that box I shall know it up on the bridge as soon as you will in the saloon there—sooner, if you don't happen to spot them going in."

I complimented the skipper on his ingenuity, though I made the mental reservation that on occasions when I happened to be on duty his electric bell would never be used. I did not mean to take my eye off that passage during the voyage.

The captain put the other box on the top of the one to which the wire was attached, and after a last look round we locked the door, this time with my key, to make sure that the new lock answered satisfactorily to both of them.

It was a fine night, and the saloon was nearly empty, most of the passengers preferring the fresh air on deck. One respectable old gentleman, evidently a clergyman, was immersed in a book at the table that ran down the center of the saloon, but with these exceptions all the occupants of the place were ladies, and not many of them.

In my immediate vicinity only one lady was sitting, and I paid very little attention to her, all my thoughts being concentrated on the goldroom door, with just half a wink now and then toward the invalid lady's cabin.

But it soon came to my notice that the lady near me was in trouble of some kind. From my position I could see her without turning round, and I noticed that she kept her head in her hands and appeared to be shaken with suppressed sobbing.

At length she raised her face and looked at me. Her eyes were red with weeping and there were tears on her cheeks. She was quite young and very pretty—far too pretty to be traveling alone, I thought.

There was a pleading expression in her eyes as she looked at me which half suggested that she required some service at my hands, though I quite made up my mind not to grant it, whatever it might be, if it should take me from my post for one single instant. Beauty in distress was a decoy not altogether unknown in the annals of crime, and, at the risk of impoliteness, I would avoid all chance of becoming a victim.

Hesitating and struggling with emotion, the girl opened her lips and essayed to speak. The words seemed to come with difficulty and were almost inaudible.

"May I ask you to give me your attention for a moment?" she stammered. "Believe me, it is on a matter of great importance."

"I am on duty here," I answered, "and I cannot come over to you. You had better come a little nearer."

"It is about your duty I wish to speak," was her astounding reply as she moved over and took a seat by my side. "You are in charge of the goldroom, are you not?"

"Yes," I said shortly, not knowing what to expect.

She paused for a moment and then went on, speaking hurriedly in a whisper. "I wish to save my brother from the perpetration of a great crime," she said. "He is the dupe of a wicked man—of Red Jem, the notorious boat thief, and his gang. There is a plot on foot to steal the valuables from the goldroom tonight. A thousand times better for my brother to suffer punishment at the hands of the law for a first unsuccessful attempt than to become a hardened criminal. Oh, sir, stop him in time and be as merciful as your duty will permit."

The young lady need have no apprehension lest I should fail to stop the robbery, I said to myself. Then I asked aloud, "Where is your brother, then?"

"In the goldroom at this moment," was the reply, which took my breath away.

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "I have not moved from this spot since the goldroom door was locked."

"My brother slipped into the passage just after we started, while you were looking at that cabin door. He was concealed under the saloon table. And you do not know Red Jem, sir. He has master keys that will fit any lock."

I was puzzled sorely. I felt as sure as man could feel that no one could have passed into the passage without my seeing him. And, again, it was some one in the goldroom tampering with the boxes, how was it that the captain's boasted electric bell had not warned him up on the bridge?

However, my duty was obvious. I must unlock the door and see for myself if anything was wrong. I drew the key from my pocket and approached the door, followed by the weeping girl, who now began to show signs of repenting her confidence in me.

"He is only a lad, sir, only a lad. Spare him if you can, and remember that I, his sister, prevented the robbery."

I put the key in the lock, and the heavy door swung back, opening inward. There was no light in the place beyond what reached it from the saloon, and in the dim corner I could see the boxes just as we had left them. But there was no robber.

I took a step forward to look behind the door, in case perchance he was lurking there, and then in a moment I knew that I was done.

Like arms stole around my neck and pressed a filthy plaster of some substance over my mouth; several pairs of strong

hands gripped me from behind and cast me to the floor.

As I fell the door of the goldroom swung to, and all was darkness. A silent match blazed up, and a candle was lighted which shone on strange company.

Kneeling on my chest and binding me with a vigor which ill assorted with her assumed character was the "sick countess," whom I had seen carried on board.

Helping to hold me down was the tall maid who had walked by her side, while covering me with the shining barrel of a revolver was the girl who had induced me to open the doors, a horrid grin on her face in place of tears.

"There you are, friend Dutton," said the "countess," who was no other than Red Jem himself. "I think you will do now for the few minutes we shall require you. What a pity it is that your people have been so smart. You see that nice new lock compelled us to get you to be so obliging as to open the door for us. Look alive with the pigments, Bill, and get on with your makeup."

I was half dazed with the suddenness of the attack, but my senses were rapidly clearing, and I was beginning to appreciate the value of Captain Temple's electric bell. Whatever happened to me, I thought, the boxes would be all right—the alarm would ring directly they were touched.

I was soon to be undeceived. I was held against the wall by the powerful hands of Red Jem, looking strangely fantastic in his feminine dress.

The tall "maid" who had been addressed as Bill rapidly divested herself of her top clothing. Then my clothes were taken from me, and Bill put them on, standing revealed at last in his proper character of a neatly built young man of about my own height.

As soon as he was dressed in my clothes he took up an actor's paintbox and proceeded to make sundry alterations in his face. Bit by bit the likeness grew, till in front of me stood a counterpart of myself—a counterpart that my mother might have mistaken for the original.

"Now, Mr. Dutton," said Red Jem, "you see our little game perhaps. My friend Bill here will relieve you of your duties and will see the bonds safely ashore. Katie will take Bill's place as a much more appropriate maid and will escort me—the sick Comtesse de Brune—to her cabin while the coast is clear. Neat, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "but what are you going to do with me?"

"Ah, my dear friend," he replied, with a horrid grin on his painted face, "that is the sad part of it. You have got to die, Dutton. I'm sorry, but \$3,000,000 is worth a man's life. Bill, where's that knife? Nobody would be likely to hear the pistol down here, but it's best to make sure."

My counterfeit drew a glittering dagger from the clothes he had removed and gave it to Red Jem.

There was but one chance for me, and that was to ring the electric bell. To shout would be to incur certain death, and the odds were that in that out of the way place, amid the rush of water and the noise of the paddles, no one would hear my cry.

But how to get free in time! "I suppose you will give me two minutes to make my peace?" I said.

"Oh, yes, if you think it worth while to prolong the agony," said the thief. "Only be quick about it."

"It may seem odd to you, but I have scruples about these matters," I said. "Would you object to loosing this strap round my legs so that I can kneel? You see it is impossible to escape with the door locked and three of you here."

"I'm the best natured fellow in the world," replied the bloodthirsty scoundrel, and he stooped and unhooked the strap. "There, get to your prayers and don't be long about it. You can use your precious bondboxes as a desk, if you like."

In those last words he sealed his own fate and that of his companions.

Outwardly calm, but in reality trembling with excitement, I assumed a devotional attitude in the corner of the goldroom, resting my elbows on the top of the uppermost box. With my knees I gently pushed the lower one so as to bring a strain on the wire.

Once, twice, thrice, I pressed it and then knelt down in prayer, which it is very certain was not all make believe.

Red Jem and his companions were whispering by the door, and from the scraps of conversation that reached me I learned that my body was to be thrown overboard.

"Now, young man, time's up," said the principal villain at length, advancing to where I knelt, but as he did so I knew that I was saved.

There was a hurried rush of many feet outside, the door was thrown open, and Captain Temple, pistol in hand and followed by half a dozen men, burst in.

For a moment he was puzzled at the likeness between me and the robber known as Bill, but he soon grasped the situation. Red Jem and his gang will not trouble the Dover mailboats for many a day, and I have since heard that his wife—the Katie who so cleverly imposed upon me in the saloon and afterward held a pistol to my head—died in prison.

After all, it was the captain's invention, and not my care of the goldroom key which saved the company's property, and, what is not of so much importance, the life of one of its servants.—Boston Globe.

A Philosopher.

"Come, let's cross the street," said a man to a friend with whom he was walking. "I don't want to meet that fellow Spiggett. I owe him."

"Why are you so much afraid today? You met him yesterday and shook hands with him."

"Yes, but it was different then."

"Why so?"

"Because I had on old clothes yesterday, but I have on a new suit today, my dear fellow," affectionately taking his friend's arm. "Nothing can rival a suit of new clothes in the matter of inviting duns. If you owe a man, he thinks it is your duty to wear sack cloth and ashes until you pay him."—Texas Siftings.

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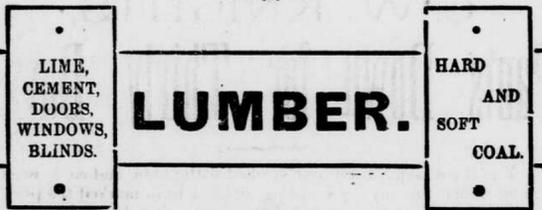
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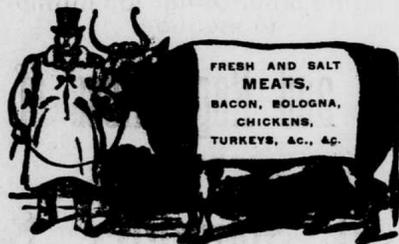
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