

A Gentle Knave



by

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I FOUND the window without a bit of trouble. I have a faculty for getting round in the dark that Burkett says will be worth a lot to me in this business; but I think even he would have been surprised, maybe a little jealous—for he's a mean-dispositioned cuss—at the slick way I followed his directions.

Of course, it wasn't all smooth sailing. I climbed the fence twenty paces to the left of the gate, as he had told me to, and landed sprawling on the up-turned legs of an iron seat. One nipped line on me shin, and I thought a dog had me for sure.

"Get out!" I growled, kicked at it, and skinned the other shin.

Forty paces due east and I came to the house; came to it hard, sort of prematurely, as you might say, and head down like a cantankerous old ram, for the rain was driving something fierce.

A moist, plump bush caught me on the recoil, and no great harm was done, except to my feelings.

Then I felt along the wall for a spell, squinting up in the dark for the little window, and at last found it just where Burkett had said I would.

The next thing was to get through it. I'd rather have tackled a more sizable window, for my proportions are those of the rain-barrel rather than the clothes-pole; but Burkett had told me the whole house was battened down like the steerage in a storm; and it was this one or none. At length I got a rather slippery footing on the watershed, and, reaching up, busted in the heavy glass.

Of course, mere trifles like falling off twice while I was trimming down the edges, and dropping my bag into the bushes beneath where I wallowed and swore, and all but swam, before I found it, I accepted as part of the business; but they got me hot under the collar, just the same.

Yes, the whole system was rotten, just as Burkett had said it was, I thought savagely.

The man that owned this big, stubborn pile of brick and stone had left his shirt-collar open, a shoe untied, or something of the kind; and, catching cold, had hurried off to an evil-smelling puddle in Europe. Here was I, just as good as he, just as smart, and not quite as susceptible to colds, perched on his infernally narrow watershed, with nothing but the hope of a more just division of his wealth to cheer me in my midnight toil.

This was my first venture; but, by cracky! it wouldn't be the last, I exulted as the jagged pieces of glass went clattering to the floor inside.

I'd tried for years to make an honest living, and how had I succeeded? When I had fallen in with Burkett, a month before, I didn't have a cent—or a sock—to my name. The world owed me a living—

The last piece was out. I hoisted myself into the opening, fought like a trapped rat for a minute, then landed, head on, among the glass.

"And by the jumping John Rogers! if she wouldn't give it to me peaceably, I would take it from her person!" I growled savagely and got to my feet.

To my surprise the door my groping hands touched was not locked. I opened it—and faced a well-lighted room.

A man sat directly before me, stretched out comfortably in a big chair, his feet on the rest, his hands lying along the arms.

“Dear me, but you did land hard! Hurt you much?” he asked pleasantly.

I didn’t answer right off; just stared at him foolishly. He had a gun, of course, or he wouldn’t be so complacent. I had one, too; but mine was in the bag I had dropped in the window before I had crawled through it. With the owner of the house in Europe, I hadn’t seen any sense risking having it shaved off of me in the needle’s eye stunt I had just pulled off; but now I was sure up against it.

Here he was, home again. I’d be a nice target pawing round the floor for the bag; a still nicer one if I attempted to again crawl through the window; a two-foot bull’s-eye that his shot would find as unerringly as my mother’s slipper used to years ago.

“I am sorry you should have had so much trouble getting in,” he went on politely. “Especially as the vestibule door is unlocked.”

“Un-unlocked!” I stammered.

“Yes; my man Todd and Filsom went out that way not long ago. But come in—do? How very inhospitable of me not to have asked you before!”

For a moment I was tempted to bolt. Then the thought of how Burkett would jeer stiffened me.

“Don’t move!” I blustered, slipping my hand behind me and creeping slowly toward him. “Don’t move, or I’ll fill you so full of shot—”

“Good Heavens, man!” He pretended to be scared, but his eyes were twinkling. “What kind of a weapon have you got?”

“I’ll show you if you move a finger!” I threatened. “Now, hand over your gun!”

“Haven’t one.”

“Aw, come, now! Hand it over!”

I braced right up to him, though the thickest part of me kept shrinking toward my backbone.

“I told you I didn’t have one!” There was a snap now in both his voice and eyes that told me he was telling the truth. “But that isn’t saying I won’t get one,” he added, laughing slyly.

There was a table with lots of drawers beside him. Quick as scat I butted it back with my thigh, then grinned down at him. He shook his head and sighed.

“You’re too quick-witted for me, I am afraid.”

“You bet I am!” I blustered, big and chesty.

“But what are you going to do with me when you leave the room?” he asked, as though seeing a ray of hope.

I did some tall thinking while pretending to go through my pockets for something. There were closets, of; course; but I’d likely rouse the whole house getting him into one. That gave me another thought that brought the sweat; what was to hinder him—

“S-h!” I growled when he started to speak again, pretending to reach for my gun. “S-h! Some one will hear you!”

“There’s no one nearer than that white house you passed a mile back,” he told me calmly.

“What are you giving me?”

“The truth! Todd and Filsom started for town an hour ago; they can’t get back before morning.” I must have still looked suspicious, for he stopped smiling, and the little snap came into his eyes again. “Believe me or not, as you please.”

With that, he yawned and settled his head more comfortably against the chair.

I believed him. Men with eyes like his don’t lie. For a moment I had a notion of putting him on his honor; then realized that it would take more gall than I had to ask him to promise not to move while I lifted his valuables from under his very nose.

“I suppose you would object to me getting my handkerchief?” he asked.

I laughed, and taking a perfectly clean one from my pocket, handed it to him. He wasn’t going to get a chance to slip his hand in his pocket if I knew it. He sighed again as though awful tired.

“I don’t want it, after all; but you might take mine from my breast-pocket here and lay it across my right hand, in case I need it again.”

There could be no harm in that, I thought; so, before he had finished telling me, I had taken the big silk handkerchief I hadn’t noticed before and dropped it over his hand. I didn’t stop there. No sir-ee! I’m too quick-witted for that. Seeing it there gave me an idea; and, quicker’n scat, I passed it on around and tied it tight.

My handkerchief did for his other hand; and if ever you saw admiration in a man’s eyes, it was in his when he seen what I’d done.

“With that keen mind of yours, you ought to be a great financier!” he said, and his voice was

positively awed.

"Maybe I will be—after to-night," I told him, with a wink. "Now, I'll just tie you up a little tighter, and then I'll start in being a financier."

"There's that afghan over there," he suggested, when he saw me looking around for something. "Here! Run it through the chair-arms above my knees, and then wrap it round and round my legs and the foot-rest at the same time."

"And tie it down here where you can't reach it if you do get loose," I added. "It'll keep you warm, too; you seem sort of shivery."

He looked up at me, his eyes getting wide.

"Who would have thought of that but you? I am cold," he said and laid his head back deeper in the chair.

I brought an overcoat from the couch and tucked it over him. I saw no reason why he shouldn't be comfortable while I was picking him. That done, I stood and looked down at him, my hands deep in my pockets.

I knew I ought to gloat over having one of the oppressors of the poor tied up like a bunch of asparagus and at my mercy. That slaving old anarchist, Burkett, and all the other long-haired ranters I'd listened to for the past month, had said I should.

I'd sworn on the head of a molasses barrel in Prochasky's cellar, by the light of a tallow-dip, that I'd help all I could in a more just division of wealth. I'd growled "Down with the rich!" and "Up with the laboring man!" and I hadn't touched my cap to the Senator when I caught his hat that had blown off; but tossed it into the car with a "There you are, Besom," that had made him gasp.

There was something about this man, though, that was different. I didn't know why I should feel so, but every time he looked at me with his clear, gray eyes I felt like a hound-dog caught with a sheep.

It wasn't because he was rich and educated, and I wasn't; it wasn't because he looked clean and handsome in a sort of purple gown that had green devils chasin' snakes all over it, and a diamond ring on his finger, or velvet slippers on his feet.

It was something in the man himself that made my eyes shifty every time he looked at me. They wouldn't if I had been working for him, I felt sure; but, in my present business, they did, good and plenty. He was looking at me now, and my eyes felt

like Noah's dove the first time out.

"Man! How wet and cold you are!" he said, scowling. "Go into the little vestibule you fell into and see if there isn't a coat back of the door. I always used to keep one there."

I did; and when I came back he was chuckling.

"Now see if you can't find enough clothes to fit you, out in that bag marked 'J. T.' over there. I know Todd doesn't intend wearing them again."

He was mighty generous, I thought, as I drew on a pair of checked pants in the hall; or did he think I'd take 'em anyway and he might as well stop my drizzling round over his velvet rugs first off. When I went back I found him trying to scratch his eye with his cheek; and did it for him.

"Thanks! What a gentle knave it is;" he said the last under his breath, but I heard, and didn't know whether to be mad or pleased.

"Now, before you begin the serious business of the night—Man! Man!" He stopped and looked up at me, smiling, wondering. "What a setting for a crime!"

"There ain't going to be any crime!" I blustered; "just a little evening up—"

"This lonely place"—he went right on as though he hadn't heard me—"this dark and barricaded house! The storm without and I within, trussed up like a pheasant ready for the spit."

"The what?—Lord, man! you don't think I'd—" I began, wondering what kind of a blackguard he took me for; but he went right on:

"The time—that smallest hour of night when ghosts do walk and graves do yawn and spew their dead—"

"Cut it!" I felt my hair raising.

"And, master of it all, a big and burly ruffian of gentle, nunlike ministering, and eyes as soft and guileless as those of kine."

"Stow the poetry! What is it you want?"

I was getting kind of riled at his making fun of me; seeing which, he laughed and said natural:

"I want a drink."

"Of which?"

"Water. You'll find it on ice in the kitchen."

I found both, and was just pouring some into a pitcher when he called:

"You don't see anything else on the table, do you?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"A corkscrew and two empty bottles."

"Anything else?"

"A basket. It's got—yes! it is—it's a basket of food!"

I felt my mouth water.

"Let's see?"

I took it in and set it on a chair beside him.

"Let's see?" he said again; and his eyes looked as eager as my stomach felt.

I pulled up the table and began setting the things out on it.

"Chicken 'n pie 'n doughnuts 'n—" I stopped my drooling with a chunk of ham. "Ain't had nothing to eat since-morning," I apologized.

"And I since noon. Give me a bite!"

I did, and he wasn't very dainty about it, either; just plain man.

"Good! But rather dry, isn't it?"

"Wish we had some coffee," I mumbled with the heel of a loaf crosswise in my throat.

"They had it for supper: I smelled it."

"What'll I cook it on?" I asked.

"I think they used the chafing-dish. Don't set the house afire with it."

I didn't; but I burned the oilcloth off the table, and scorched the towels I tried to whip the cussed stuff out with, not being used to such exuberant fuel.

We ate for an hour, bite and bite about; drinks ditto. I'd busted some boxes and put 'em on the fire, and the roaring tempest outside seemed to make 'em burn twice as bright. I was warm and dry and getting full, none of which, it seemed to me, I'd been for a year; so when he asked a question or two I began to reminisce as naturally as a drunk to cry.

There wasn't much to tell. It began with timid orphan and ended with bold anarchist. We'd come to cigars by this, and I got up and stood on the hearth, my feet wide apart. His eyes were sort of wistful and sad as he looked up at me.

"I understand; go on!" he said.

"I've worked like a dog ever since I was big enough to tote scraps to the chickens—for the other fellow!" I growled, savage; "and, with it all, I've been his door-mat; the springs to his buggy; the rubber-heels to his shoes, but I never will again!"

Seeing he was interested, and encouraged by a question or two, I went right on, and sweated out a lot of rot I'd got into my system while sitting on the molasses barrel in Prochasky's cellar.

I ranted about capital and labor; about equality and rights, and ended by hollering, my hand in the breast of my audience's coat: "Never more will I touch my hat or say 'sir' to any living man; never more will I labor by the sweat of my brow for a pittance; but I'll take—"

A long sigh brought me up short. He had slouched down in his chair and his face looked ghastly in the daylight that was filtering in through the vestibule door.

I must have looked round pretty wild, for he laughed. Then he got sober and said:

"Sit down, Joe; I've got something to tell you."

"I—why—good Lord, man!" I cried in a panic, bolting for my truck on the vestibule floor. "Todd and the cook—"

"Are—not—coming—back. Sit down, I tell you!"

Gulping, reluctant, but feeling better with my hand on the gun in the bag, I sat down on the edge of the chair. He looked at me, his big, tired eyes sort of pitying.

"I have a disappointment for you," he said at last. "There isn't a sou's worth left in the house."

"Wh-what!"

"Not a sou's worth. That rascally Todd and the cook have decamped with everything they could carry."

"But, you—wh—why didn't you—" Something in his eyes stopped me.

"I am paralyzed from my head down, Joe; paralyzed!"

My heels slithered softly along the floor as far away from me as they could get: my hands slid off the arms of the chair, and my jaw sank gently into the bosom of my shirt.

"P'ralyzed!" I heard whispered; and I guess it was me.

"Yes. You can imagine how glad I was to hear you fall into the vestibule. I might not have been found in time, you know, Joe."

I looked at him; hollow-eyed, bound tight enough to hold an ox; but with that brave smile still on his face.

"I got you to tie me up—Man! Man!" He stopped to laugh softly, then went on: "I thought you would never take the hint, though, and that was the only way I knew to get fed without your knowing the fix I was in; and then I amused you in every way I could, for I was afraid you might leave

me as the others had done; that is, I was afraid at first: I'm not now."

He smiled at me; trusting, confiding. Suddenly his lips began to quiver, and he shut his eyes tight.

"I'm so tired, Joe," he whispered.

I can't remember rightly just what I did; but I think I stared at him a minute longer; then, with a sort of whimpering snarl, I fell on him. I untied his hands; I unwound the scarf from his legs; I picked him up and ran with him to the bed in the room beyond. I undressed him and put him in as though he was a baby; and the look he gave me as I smoothed out his pillow nearly set me to blubbering.

"You won't leave me, Joe?" He turned his head, caught my hand beneath it, and pressed his cheek into it.

"No, sir; never! Now you try to get to sleep, sir, for I've something to attend to."

"What?"

"I'm going to telephone to every town round

here to catch them thieves!" I growled. "They didn't cut your wires?"

"They didn't think it worth while—with only me here."

"We'll show 'em that you're a better man than the two of 'em," I said, and flung the windows open wide; then drew the shades. "It's a lovely morning after the rain, sir."

"Yes."

"And, after you've had a good rest, we'll get out in it, sir."

I stooped over him and tucked the coverlet under his chin. I left my hand on his shoulder for a minute, and, when I could, I said:

"Warm?"

"Yes."

"Comfortable?"

"Very."

"Then, good-by for a little while, Mr. Jefferson."

"Good-by, for a little while, Joe."