

# The Hardest Kind of Hard

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IT was the sort of thing that couldn't have happened to anybody but Lane.

He had bought the suit especially for the escort of Miss Erbury to the Imperiale Grand Opera Company—one night only—and it had been delivered to him that very afternoon at the bank. Just when he was admiring it in his careless way, Barret played a joke that resulted in Lane's spilling a bottle of red ink over the broadcloth. Then, to climax it all, Papa Erbury, who was president of the Helvetia Bank, blundered in at the exact moment when Lane was trying to mop out the ink spots with milk.

Everyone of the two dozen hairs on Papa Erbury's head bristled with indignation as he remarked passionately that a bank wasn't a house-cleaning shop, and that if Lane had so much spare time he might as well spend an evening getting the books ready for the semiannual house tidying.

An hour later, as Lane was walking to the vault with the ledgers, Barret looked up suddenly.

"Thought you were billed to work to-night," he said, with just the proper shade of surprise in his voice.

"He—he didn't say to-night, did he?" asked Lane in alarm.

"Sure."

"Why, I—I thought he meant any evening this week."

"Wrong, my boy."

"But I can't work on the books tonight, Barret. I have tickets for the opera; going to take Miss Erbury, you know, and—"

"Too bad," the other said sympathetically. "Too bad." He wrinkled his brow for a moment. "Look here, Lane, Miss Erbury mustn't be disappointed. Tell you what I'll do; I'll take her myself. I can explain, of course, and—"

Very sadly, therefore, Lane handed over the opera tickets to Barret and thanked him for the suggestion. Barret was a deadly rival, but there wasn't any other eligible in Helvetia.

So Barret—blight him for his domineering mind!—took Miss Erbury to the opera—which was pretty bad, thank you!—and squeeze her arm gently, and on the way home deftly switched the conversation to bravery. This was because he had in his repertoire a series of personal incidents in which he starred, and also because he knew poor Lane hadn't enough self-reliance to spread much conversation of that sort.

"Yes," said Miss Erbury finally, "yes, I do admire bravery in men—always."

"It's our business to be brave," retorted Mr. Barret; and then the big idea vibrated

in his brain, a little hazy at first, but clearing rapidly under the warming sun of his imagination.

She raised a forefinger. "But all men aren't brave, you know. I could tell you ever so many instances. And I simply couldn't tolerate a man who lacked courage—not for a minute."

"Splendid!" thought Barret. "This scheme is going to work itself out." And on his exultant way homeward, the sight of Lane at his desk stiffened the plan till it became as definite as a working drawing.

The place—the time—the man! The game must be sprung that very night.

Barret put on steam and ran full speed to his boarding house. In an upstairs closet lay the Fourth of July things which little Elmer had bought the day before the measles lit on him. Now the noise makers were being saved thriftily for next year. Silently Barret removed a giant firecracker, leaving in its stead a cash equivalent for little Elmer. Then, snatching some matches from the hall box, he hurried out into the street.

The plan was simple. He would sneak up the bank's alleyway and touch off the firecracker directly under the window where Lane was working. Lane, poor nervous devil that he was, would rush out yelling for dear life. A tip to Charley Kerns, reporter on the *Helvetia Daily Item*, and Miss Erbury would have the tale served up to her with the morning breakfast food. If the thing went well, too, Barret would conceal all traces of the firecracker, smear some mud on his face and clothes, and step into the drama as a hero.

"Yes," he would say jerkily and modestly, "I saw the fellow there—under the window. I tried—tried to save Lane—by heading him off. We struggled—hard. But—but he choked me. Just as I was losing my senses something went off.

That's all I remember—about it."

Helen, Heaven bless her, after one last giggle at the thought of Lane's yelping for the police, would fall into Barret's arms, while Papa Erbury would say: "Chester, my boy, I have long been waiting for an excuse to give you the vacant cashiership. I know that your name will be approved by the directors before next week." *Tableau!*

Barret had reached the bank now, in ample time as it proved, for Lane was still at his desk. Smiling with satisfaction, the conspirator restrained an impulse to pat himself on the head. Then, whipping the firecracker from his coat, he ducked into the alley.

At eleven-fifty Lane set the time lock on the big vault to close on the stroke of midnight and paused for a moment's thought.

"I wonder if Erbury really said I was to work this evening," he reflected. "Maybe Barret just said so to fool me into giving him the tickets. Anyhow, I should have verified it."

He put out the lights, with the exception of the one that was always left burning, and wheeled the books into the vault. With the rolling book carrier in place, he started to close the massive vault door. It was a back-breaking, joint-cracking brute of a door, but with a heave and a grunt he got it going. Then, suddenly, a doubt chilled his heart. Had he entered that last total in the ledger, or had he merely footed it on a loose sheet of paper?

"Oh, I guess I entered it," he told himself sleepily, "unless—unless—"

He remembered his doubt about the order to work that night. After all, this was something he could verify without asking embarrassing questions. With a jerk back at the closing door, he flung himself in front of it and into the vault. Ponderously

it shut to after him.

He started at the sound, but his apprehension passed quickly. It was shut, but in no way fastened. The time lock would not shoot the bolts for nearly ten minutes, and all he wanted to do was to get the ledger out and make sure he had completed the job. With quick fingers he turned on the incandescent light in the vault and opened the big book.

The total was duly recorded. But a new qualm assailed him. Had he altered the figures back through the other books, after he had struck a wrong balance?

He hauled them forth, one by one, and began checking through them. The time lock began to make a peculiar clicking sound, but he did not notice it.

“Right as a trivet,” he told himself triumphantly. “Glad I made sure, though, because—”

The time lock buzzed noisily, sputtered, rattled, and then thudded home its bolt. He was locked in.

A wave of disgust swallowed him so deeply that he came up gasping. He had been restoring his confidence in the figures, and now—well, look what had happened!

To be sure, there was no real danger. He would not smother by eight-thirty the next morning. No such dramatic good luck to prove his adherence to duty; the vault was too comfortably large, and was ventilated, besides. He would be found there in his folly, Barret would give vent to a contemptuous snicker, the old man would snort angrily, the scrub woman would shriek with laughter, and the next day Charley Kerns would give the incident a big joshing write-up in the *Item*.

He paced the cell like a menagerie animal till the pent air dulled his rage. What was the use of all this emotion, anyhow? It wouldn't open the door. With a sigh he took off his coat, wrapped it

about his shoulders, and with the big ledger as a pillow lay down on the vault floor. Because he had been up late the night before, and because he had wrestled for hours that night with the figures in the books, his eyes shut of their own accord, and presently he was snoring.

When he awoke he did not know whether he had been asleep for hours or only for minutes, but he emerged from the blank of unconsciousness feeling that the world rested upon his shoulders and that it was a very heavy world indeed. He was also under the impression that Satan or somebody else was trying to rivet the planet to him; the buzz of the drill was unpleasantly close to his ears. .

Then something happened, which was nothing more or less than a tremendous explosion. In an instant he was on his feet, head ringing, nostrils choked with a strangling vapor that dimmed the incandescent overhead. Like a battering-ram the smoke drove him back against the farther wall of the vault. But presently he fought his way toward the door, blindly carrying his pillow ledger as though it were his most cherished possession. The fumes were growing thicker, but in spite of this fact his brain was clearing.

He threw himself against the door, noting in a slow surprised way that the lock gave at his impact. Before he could ask himself any questions, he was outside the vault, ledger in hand.

Then he understood.

There before him, crouching in the moonlight, face shrouded by a handkerchief, was the squat figure of a man. At the sight of Lane, stalking from the vault, the masked person threw up his hands and screamed, stumbling uncertainly forward.

But Lane was already upon him. Incidentally, quite unnerved at being taken for a ghost; Lane dropped the ledger, so

that one of its copper-bound corners caught the sprawling man on the head. He floundered to a pleasing quietude as Lane stood dazedly over him.

*Sping! Spat!* Two bullets splintered a desk. Apparently the prostrate man had friends with him. But a change was working in Lane. His involuntary victory over the intruder had lifted the fear from his heart, and he felt as cool and at ease as though he were adding a column of figures.

Under the teller's window hung the revolver kept for emergencies. Lane grabbed it and fired six times at the big window. The bullets stung the plate glass without pity and then made big holes in Heinke's board fence across the street. But they had their effect, nevertheless, for no more shots came from the front of the bank, and Lane saw at least one silhouette scoot from the door to some safer zone.

He turned just in time to see the man who had been hit by the ledger in act of staggering to his feet. As the handkerchief slipped from the safe blower's face Lane dropped his hands in surprise. The man before him was an adult likeness of a boy who had been a schoolmate years before. Maybe he was not Pete—in the classic lexicon of youth, "Toughy Pete;" but he looked enough like it to inspire Lane with the old fear.

"Yah!" snarled the safeblower, slipping one hand behind him. But Lane, interpreting the move, dropped his own useless weapon and, springing forward, grasped the arm with all his fingers and thumbs.

"Where are the police? Why don't they come?" Lane thought.

And then it began.

It was a battle for the poet to celebrate, but unhappily none was present. If the Pete person managed to draw his revolver, Lane knew, there would be a vacant

clerkship in the Helvetia Bank. The other contestant was the stronger, the more agile, the more versed in the niceties of rough-and-tumble fighting; but Lane was fighting for his life.

Pete raised his left foot for a stamp on Lane's instep, but the clerk anticipated the move by kicking viciously at his former schoolmate's shins. Thus foiled, the robber tried to insert his fore and middle fingers in Lane's eye but the other countered by butting.

"Yuh can't lick me, yuh four-flusher!" breathed Toughy Pete heavily.

In the days of his youth Lane had encountered the original Pete once and once only. The conflict had been short and decisive. But that scruffle hadn't concerned a loaded revolver. This time Lane couldn't afford to be licked; so, sick with fear, he struggled on. Where his strength came from he did not know; he was aware only that it was a case of fight or die, and he fought.

The gun was in sight now, though Lane had forced back the hand till the muzzle was pointing at the ceiling. Pete pounded desperately at the clerk's face, but Lane wisely had drawn to close quarters, warding off some blows with his shoulder and taking others on the top of his head. All his energy centered on the artillery. Back went the gun hand, then fingers yielding to the urge of Lane's strength.

"I'll get yuh yet," roared Pete.

But at that moment the hand holding the weapon relaxed under the strain, and the gun clattered noisily to the floor.

A stiff punch sent Lane staggering back, but he recovered and closed in, hooking wildly. A splotch of red on the other's lip encouraged him; he felt an unfamiliar courage and confidence spurring him on. He was doing something that he had never done in the past; he was

trying hard—not the ordinary kind of hard, but the hardest kind of hard. It seemed to him he had never before known what it was to be really in earnest. All his years he had drifted along in a half-hearted fashion, but now he was taking his place in the front of the battle.

The punch he stopped with his cheek would have taken the heart out of him an hour before. Now it only sent him back keener than ever, with the lust for further fighting. He was actually beginning to enjoy this strange, fearful concentration of effort.

He warded off a blow with his left forearm and stepped in with the weight of his body following his right fist. It landed squarely on the man's jaw. Toughy Pete reeled back, staggering uncertainly, and then dropped limply to the floor.

Only for a moment did Lane stand panting and open-mouthed. Then he began to tie up the marauder with a quantity of that cord which the Helvetia Bank used for its express packages.

He had licked Toughy Pete, or, at least, somebody as good as Toughy Pete; and as he dwelt on this fact the reason why popped into his brain; also the reason why he hadn't done much of anything in the past. He had won because for the first time in his life he had turned every power of his body toward one end. He had failed in the past through lack of confidence and self-reliance. Until a moment before he had never really put his heart into doing some one thing and sticking by it till it was done.

"I can be a world beater, and I will be one. But I'll begin right at home," he muttered as he picked up the telephone.

In answer to his call the police arrived first, bustling and important; but papa Erbury—street clothes over pajamas—was a close second.

It may be unnecessary to relate how

Pete's closed eyes made the chief careless, and how, after the cord was untied and before the handcuffs were snapped, it pleased Lane to behold the ingenious safe blower punch Helvetia's chief in the pit of the stomach, squash papa Erbury's hat over his eyes, send Lane himself reeling from a blow on the shoulder, bowl Officer Schmidt into the arms of Officer Quinn, and finally vanish out the door before a single revolver objected. And it is easy to picture how the three gallant policemen sprinted out into the night, firing freely at the desperado, as broken windows on Main Street testified the next morning.

In any event these are minor details. This is Lane's story. He said:

"Mr. Erbury!"

"Well, Lane, what is it?" The autocrat of the Helvetia Bank turned from the door.

"Mr. Erbury, I am a business man, and I am going to talk business to you. I saved your bank, but that's all right. We won't mention it. A night watchman would have done it better."

"Well, sir?" repeated president and papa Erbury with a flash of puzzled temper. He was not in the habit of listening to that sort of talk from subordinates.

"I'm a darned valuable man, Mr. Erbury, and the funny thing is that I've just found it out. I've been in your bank for seven years, and I know just how to run it, from the hour hand to the hair spring. What I—"

The father of Helen was blowing out his cheeks like a pair of bellows. "Are you trying to tell me," he almost shouted, "that you've got a better job in sight?"

Lane smiled a superior smile, the smile of a man who had found himself.

"Better job in sight! Why, my dear sir, if I were to start cleaning streets I'd be earning almost as much money as I get here, and have all my nights off, besides.

But I didn't start to tell you that. All I want to find out is this: Do you want me or not? You haven't filled the cashier's position, and I'm the man in line for it, as well as the best man in line for it. Now, if you want me to stick around, you'll have to see that I get the cashiership at the cashier's salary—and right off. Remember, you'll have to talk quick and in plain figures, because that's the only language I understand. Think it over for five minutes."

President Erbury opened his mouth as though to speak, but no words came. Lane dropped into the chair and picked up the telephone.

"Hello, central, give me one-one-six-five. Hello! No, this isn't Mr. Erbury, but everything's all right. This is Lane, and I want to speak to Miss Helen Erbury. Yes, I know it's unusual, but it's very important."

The president was now backed against the wall, gasping, his face still showing the frank surprise which a fish exhibits when pulled from the water.

"Hello, Helen. Yes, that's just who it is. Helen, do you know I've just found out how much I want you? Honestly! Your father is deciding whether he's going to let me out or keep me as cashier of the little old Helvetia Bank. Now, you know how I feel about you, and I've come to the conclusion that I've wasted enough time looking sad whenever you dance with another fellow. What do you say? If it's 'yes,' pack your trunk, because unless papa Erbury gives me what I want we'll start for Chicago and a justice of the peace to-morrow a. m. . . . Hello! Hello! . . . No, you can't have any time to think it over. You've known me for seven years, ever since I struck this burg, and I've played second fiddle till my arm's tired, and I'm

going to quit. Now, what do you want to do: pack your trunk or bang up the receiver?"

The answer was a long time coming, but it was worth waiting for.

Lane looked at papa Erbury with a smile. "She's gone to pack her trunk. "Now, do I get the cashier's job or don't I? Time is money, and I'm in a big hurry, I want to get married to-morrow. Don't worry about us. Now that I'm acquainted with myself at last, I can always land a better job. I'm a lucky guy, and I know it."

But papa Erbury could only nod his head dumbly, in token of the fact that a stone wall had fallen on him, and that he did not quite understand it.

Just as Lane picked up the telephone again the door opened. Kerns was there, copy paper in hand, and with him were Officers Schmidt and Quinn and the chief. They were carrying a man who had been tied into a neat ball, with his mouth gagged by a large firecracker. His face was covered with mud, and he was spluttering indignantly.

"No," announced the chief with the air of a man who solves the problem of the universe, "no, I don't think this fella had nothin' to do with blowin' up the vault. Most likely he's another crook that the gang found in the way and tied up like this and chucked down in the cellar, where we found him. But who is he? And what was he doing in the alley with a giant firecracker?"

Papa Erbury looked at Barret.

"Him?" he said confusedly; "oh, him—he—he's second fiddle around here. I guess." He turned to the late hero. "Going my way, Lane?"

"I certainly am," said the new cashier of the Helvetia Bank.