

"Fifteen year ago," Tom went on, "there was a fire down in Essex, 'n' you 'n' me was both there. An old man was burned up, burned alive! After the fire I went away—had ter hurry er I'd a gut me neck stretched. I changed about, follerin' the sea 'n' sich, 'till I struck the mills. 'T was there that I learned about the chemicals. When I was travelin' from Millbury ter Coldbrook 'n' back after jobs as bleacher, I run onter yer sister as lives out ter Kingston. She 'n' me used ter be great friends. She likes me, she does, 'n' sometimes we've talked about old times, when she was a gall 'n' used ter be a strollin' down 'round Essex point."

What a pitiful travesty on that firmness which had challenged the admiration of men was revealed in that unmasking. Almost ludicrous in an exaggerated intensity was the stare on the gentleman's face. His head was canted sidewise, his colorless lips separated, his eyes so wide open that wrinkles were formed across his brow. With hands so tightly shut that the finger nails made deep indentations in the palms, and head crouched as though expecting a blow, and breath coming feverishly, Mr. Goldthurst waited.

"I'm most done," said Tom. "Ye burned the house, 'n' I had ter clear out fer it. Ye pinte yer finger ter me 'n' that settled me. I've ben a follerin' o' ye since. I'm glad ye've ben lucky, 'cause I was a goin' ter git ye ter divvy, some day. If 'twan't fer the bunglin' job yer sister done, I wouldn't a said anythin' 'bout this bus'ness ter night, but I gut a s'prise tother day. That girl baby was saved from the wreck. I seed her, 'n' she had a stone hangin' on ner neck jist like the one I brought from Liverpool!"

From his commencement Tom had not once changed his tone from the jovial growl. At every sentence his listener appeared to shrink into himself, till at the finish, an old man, bowed and shrivelled, sat in the furthest corner.

Tom backed to the desk, and removing the revolver that glistened on one of the shelves, pointed both weapons, and said:

"I've waited a long time, 'n' want ye ter begin ter pay up ter night. It's an old score, 's I sed, 'n' time is when somethin' was did 'bout settlin' it. I ain't goin' ter press ye. The terms 'll be easy. Gin me two thousand now, 'n' two thousand a month till it's fixed, then we'll see what we can do 'bout makin' another deal. What I want is the money, 'n' I want it quick! Ye may come ter the desk, if that's where ye keeps it."

Mr. Goldthurst unsteadily crossed the room and fell into the chair.

"I haven't two thousand dollars," he said, in a peculiar voice.

"How much hev ye gut?" Tom asked. He was still grinning.

"Two hundred."

"Well, gin me that. I ain't a goin' ter push ye. I'll come agin termorrer night. I don't hev nothin' ter do nights."

Mr. Goldthurst seemed but half awake. The familiar conversational cadence in the vagabond's voice caused no change in the set features. He was gnawing his mustache and staring straight in front of him.

"Come!" said Tom, who was growing tired of standing, "if ye don't want me no longer I'll take the money 'n' go along."

Mr. Goldthurst roused himself, opened the safe, took therefrom a package of money, then placed it on the desk beside him.

"Don't ye go away from here!" said Tom, quickly catching up the bills. "If ye do, I'll hev ter appeal ter the law ter git back me good name. I'll come agin termorrer night."

"Don't come for a week," said Mr. Goldthurst, in such a strange, hollow voice that Tom stopped in his backward movement to regard him. "In a week I can talk with you better."

"All right," said Tom, "I'll come a week from ter night," and he went out.

It would appear that having accumulated this snug little nest egg, Tom's appetite became whetted to a razor-like sharpness. He grasped the bag, but instead of repairing to his boat he squeezed himself through the gate in the cliff walk and directed his steps toward the domicile of his partner apprentice. Having reached the side door, he selected various tools from the bag and busily essayed to effect an entrance.

For several minutes after Tom left him, Mr. Goldthurst leaned on his desk, his eyes fixed on the flickering flame of the lamp, then he arose and paced the floor.

"I am so hounded everywhere that my courage is failing me," he muttered. "To have this man come up now with his proofs,—what was it he said about the baby? Pshaw! he is a lying, drunken idiot. I must get him out of the way. He comes here to bleed me."

As he walked he neared the table, and his eyes fell on a portrait of his daughter. Mechanically he picked it from the easel and examined the beautiful face with a cold, meaningless stare, then he flushed, and his eyes glittered.

"May you become so low and degraded, may want and suffering so follow you, that the coldest ray of happiness you have known in my house will be as a gleam of sunlight into hell."

So fierce was he as he threw the picture to the floor that he shook in every limb. He made a few more turns about the room, then kneeled before the safe. Taking out a bundle of papers, he reseated himself at the desk, but only to stare straight before him.

"I must drive him from my mind," he muttered; then leaning his head on his hand, "I did well to give him the money; it will keep him still for a week, and whatever is coming to me, let it be good or bad, will come before then."

Nervously he handled the package. Although to all outward appearances it was as he had left it, a vague fear possessed him that it might have been tampered with. A singular deadening pressure was in his head, and he passed his hand rapidly across his brow. In a half stupid way altogether foreign to him, he wondered what he should do if the papers were gone. It was late and he was getting drowsy. It was cold, also, for shivers ran through his frame. That very day he had read of a man who had taken his own life,—a man in good position, who had appropriated money belonging to others. The large type of the article's heading came before him, even though his eyes were so heavy that they were closed.

"Dissipation! Vice! Ruin and Suicide!"