

"Peril and the Price"

(Continued from page 7)

some unexpected tricks, and the next thing I knew I was lying wide awake with the sunlight shining through the window. There was the natural start of surprise at my unaccustomed surroundings, and then I arose and began very deliberately to make my toilet, keeping back, so far as possible, my natural inclination to try to anticipate coming events.

I could hear somewhere a clock striking the hour of nine, and then there was a knock and, through what appeared to be the opening of a speaking tube, I heard the woman's voice bidding me prepare for breakfast, which would appear in a few minutes. It came, tenderloin, eggs, rolls, toast, fried potatoes, everything the best possible, together with a great, steaming pot of coffee.

"Seems you liked the sandwiches," she said, grinning as she removed the empty plate. "Mebbe you'll like the breakfast, too. There's lots worse places to stay than here."

"No doubt," I said briefly, as I sat down to the breakfast with an appetite which, thanks to youth and health, nothing could long keep away.

"An' there's a better dinner comin'," she grinned. "The boss told me to go the limit in fixin' up a Thanksgiving dinner for you, an' what he says goes."

"When will I see the boss?" I asked as amiably as I could.

"Well, now!" the woman said. "I'll be when he is good an' ready an' not before. He never allows any questions. What I told you last night he told me to tell an' that's all. But he's a powerful nice man when you do what he tells you, an' when you don't, well! You'd just better look out, that's all!"

She left me, and in due time returned for the dishes. About four o'clock the dinner came, an elaborate affair with the inevitable roast turkey and a bottle of champagne. With it came several morning papers and a handful of cigars, the latter of which were of no use to me. I finished the dinner and retired to the sofa to read the day's news. But the paper soon fell from my hand as I sat staring, staring at the face of Lucy Dean. It showed her a few years older than I had known her, but there was no mistaking the face which had been in my dreams, sleeping or waking for seven long years. The mystery of that portrait in that house of crime was no less than that of my detention there.

I rose and paced about the room in wild excitement. Not only was there mystery upon mystery, but the floodgates were open after all those years and, for the first time in my life, I was in love! No longer was it a vague and soothing sentiment, but a burning passion, an absolute devotion, an unutterable longing, an overmastering desire. I would hunt for her until I found her, and I would make her mine. Unless—! The thought came to me and for a moment clutched my heart in a grasp of ice. Then I flung it fiercely away. She was living, she was unwed, she would be, should be mine!

The door opened softly and closed. A gigantic person, whose purple face indicated many years of luxurious living, stood before me.

"I hope you enjoyed your dinner," he said, in soft, well modulated tones.

"I am your prisoner. Why do you waste courtesy upon me?" I answered, with anger almost choking me.

"You are my guest," he snavely answered. "May I take a chair? Thank you! I will admit that my invitation for you to spend Thanksgiving Day at my home was a trifle informal, but it was sufficiently pressing, as you must admit."

"I am helpless and must submit to your insults, as I did to your criminal attack upon my liberty."

"Insults? Not the least in the world. You are my guest because I chose to have you come. Have you had reason to complain of your treatment? Would any hotel in New York have given you better food? Have you ever slept in a better room or in one with more interesting pictures?"

He shot a glance at me as he asked the last question, which came very near its evident intention of surprising me into a confusion which would tell that I had recognized the portrait.

"Other than being unwarrantably and unlawfully deprived of my freedom, I have no complaint to make," I answered, coldly.

"For that deprivation of liberty I mean to compensate you," he said. "Just be reasonable and you will regard your coming here as one of the luckiest things of your life. Try another of the cigars."

"I don't smoke," I answered shortly.

"You miss one of the greatest blessings of life," he said, reaching for a cigar. "You don't mind if I smoke? Thank you!"

He lit a cigar and leaned back with his eyes upon the ceiling.

"Pardon me if I seem personal," he said, "but I presume that your salary is somewhere between one and two thousand dollars a year?"

"That is a matter concerning myself and my employers."

"To be sure! To be sure! And, pardon me, it concerns me also, for I have a mind to offer you double your present salary, whatever it may be."

"You have taken extraordinary means to bring your offer to my attention."

"Necessity, my boy, necessity! I did not wish, by any chance, to have any one else hear of my offer. And I did not desire to take any chance of having my offer refused."

"But I do refuse it!" I said, emphatically.

The man smiled.

"I expected to hear you say that," he said. "Of course you refuse, and that proves the wisdom and necessity of bringing you here. If I had made the offer at your lodgings you might have refused and persisted in your refusal. Now you will have time to reflect."

"Your talk is useless," I said. "Restore my liberty and then, if you have any proposition to make, I will hear you."

"Really," said the other, "I thought I had just this moment made it clear to you why that course is impossible. If I did that you might refuse. As it is," he added with a meaning look, "you will accept."

"And why," I asked, "do you think I would be useful to you in your business? I am very sure that I should not."

"I have my reasons," he said. "What do you think my business is?"

"I think," I said, very deliberately, but shaking a little at my own hardihood, "that you are some kind of a thief."

The man flushed a deeper purple.

"That is a pretty rude word," he said. "And sometimes, I may say—sometimes and under some circumstances—a distinctly dangerous word."

"No doubt," I said, "but I stand by my belief. If you were an honest man I would not be here. And a man who is not honest is a thief, according to his necessity and opportunity. Not all thieves are pickpockets or porch-climbers."

"To be sure," he said, suppressing the anger which had started at the word, "there are gentry and vulgarians among—among—"

"Thieves," I suggested.

"I don't like the word," he said, knocking the ashes off his cigar. "But I will say that among the class you have in mind, as well as among others."

"And your assistants, who received me last night, belong to the class of vulgar thieves!" I queried.

"Undoubtedly. I don't use the word, as a rule. It offends more than one sensitive acquaintance of mine. But those fellows are, by no stretch of courtesy, anything but vulgar thieves. I must apologize for having forced such low company upon you."

"Don't mention it," I said, sarcastically.

"You will see no more of them," he said. "I have need of them and many others. I am, if my modesty will permit me to say it, something of a magnate in my line. I have need of your services, as well as of the services of those very different persons. You will perceive the high compliment I pay you in the estimation I place upon your moral qualities. If I should want—just supposing, of course—a citizen knocked down, a safe broken or a house burned, I would have only to say the word and those fellows would undertake it for a compensation which you would be bound to confess very reasonable. They will even, at my instigation, kidnap and bring to me an honest and virtuous young man whom I desire to see. In your case I have to take all precautions to prevent your excessive virtue from getting the best of your proper sense of self-interest."

"What do you want of me?" I asked, bluntly.

"There is a safe in your office of which you have the combination," he said. "Now, now," he added, waving his hand in a deprecating manner, "don't attempt any lies. I know and denial will do no good. I want the combination of that safe."

"That safe," I said, "contains not one cent of money at any time."

"I know that," he answered. "And if there were, it would not be touched. You can make an inventory every day, so long as you remain in the office, and nothing will be missing. Nevertheless, I desire and intend to have the combination to that safe."

"You will not get it from me."

"You say that I will not. I say that I will. Give me the combination to-night and you can be at your desk in the morning a thousand dollars richer than you are now. Keep silent three months and another thousand dollars will be yours."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then your employers probably will be making inquiries as to what has become of you."

"What you ask," I said, excitedly, "is dishonorable, and I will never do it."

"Take your time," said he. "There is no hurry. Mr. Whitwood, I know, is in Europe, and the combination will not be changed nor the safe opened until he returns. Meantime, until you have acceded to my request, you will remain my guest."

"My determination is made," I said.

"I will unmake it when the time comes," he answered, in smooth, even tones. "Now, before bidding you good-night, I will tell you a few things. If you attempt to climb out of the window you will get a bullet through your leg and be carried back to this room for treatment. If you attempt to set your room on fire you will be detected instantly and some of those vulgar thieves we were talking about will give you their undivided attention while others are extinguishing the fire. We are not amateurs and not easily frustrated. Now, good-night!"

His towering bulk stood before the door for an instant, his dark face wreathed with a wicked, cynical smile. Then I was again alone.

I sat down and thought of the difficult and dangerous position in which I was placed. The safe, to which access was demanded by the criminal chief was one containing papers only, and those chiefly of a confidential nature, relating to the character and whereabouts of clients and persons with whom they were involved in business matters. Many papers were sealed and had remained thus for many years. Some of these the criminals, for reasons known to themselves, desired to inspect. Their purpose was evil. Somebody must suffer if they succeeded. I determined to be strong as I could and at least never willingly agree to the dishonor of breaking my trust, nor accept the Judas price. But my blood ran cold at the thought of the possibility of torture, which I knew would be unsparingly applied.

The fat woman brought my supper of toast and hot milk.

"How do you like your room?" she asked. "I fixed it up myself especially for you. Them pictures an' books an' the Bible was all up in the garret, where there's lots of other old stuff. The boss has had new pictures in all of his rooms. He's a real sport, he is. When you come

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(Continued on page 23)