

**ONLY A ROSE.**

A BURGALAR'S STORY BY WALTER LEARNED

"As some of the actors in the following scene are still living, neither the true locations nor the names are given lost some should be pained by the recital," I copied that from the beginning of the story I read once. It seems to be about the right sort of thing for me to begin with, as some of the actors in my story might be pained if the true names was to be given, myself among 'em.

At the time I speak of I was working with one of the whitest men that was ever in my profession. Him and me was partners for about six years, and I'm proud to say that never was a word between us. A sudden change from an active to a sedentary was too much for his sensitive system and he died some years ago.

Me and him used to travel round a good deal a-looking up jobs, and a pleasanter and heartier fellow I never expect to meet again. Such a favourite he was with children. A night-watcher on this street, and if you're a-singing without any orders I'm a-going to run you in."

So saying Jim took the young fellow off. "Nest, wasn't it? I was a feeling pretty good at the way he'd got me out of it. But I'd heard steps a-stirring up stairs and I thought I'd better cut as soon as I could. I poured out a snifter of the three-star, and was just a-going to drink it, when I heard a step in the hall and the door close by me was opened as ever you see.

"Harry!" I heard her say. I mumbled something. "It was lovely, dear, so sweet. But you must go and hurry. Papa is coming down the stairs." She reached her hand through the door. There was something in her fingers. I took it. At that minute the light streamed in from the front-room, I saw my green baize bag, too far off to get it, and a man coming forward to the dining-room, and then I jumped through the window, out on to the lawn and ran. When I got well into the street I stopped and looked at what she'd give me. It was a white rose, and by the way, that was all I got for my night's work.

The house wasn't far back from the street, but back of the house was a lawn, and a verandah ran round the corner of the house. The dining-room was a back room, opening out of the sitting room. Now you wouldn't want a better thing than that, would you? Simple and easy as could be, and Jim and me had arranged about melting down the bottle when—but I anticipate as the story tells us.

I don't make any difference how careful you be, or how well all your plans are laid. Sometimes they'll go wrong. But I'll be a-going to discourage when everything's fixed as far as you can fix it to bring up against something you couldn't help. It takes the pluck right out of a man. We had arranged that I was to get in and Jim was to keep watch. Jim usually took the outside work. It requires a different sort of talent. A man may be good at inside business and yet fall utterly as an outside, and vice versa. If I had time I should like to point out the lines of difference.

Of course there wasn't any difficulty about getting in. Gentlemen in my profession all know that it's perfectly simple to get into any house as far as that goes. I stepped up on the back verandah. Lovely night; was just a small slice of moon, rather too much ready to meet the moon as it stood on the verandah for a minute. Then I put a long thin blade up between the windows and opened 'em and stepped into the dining-room. Pretty little room it was—hardwood floor, side-board and corner cupboard, pictures on the walls, and on one side the closest I was a-looking for. I stepped to the side-board a minute to take a nip, seeing a bottle of three-star brandy there, and then I stepped over and opened the closet with my skeleton key. Pretty lot of stuff was when I turned my dark lantern on it. Nothing tremendous, but a nice respectable lot of silver that was a credit to the family.

I had a green baize bag to pack it in, and I had it all in, up to the spoons, when I struck in the spoon-holder a small, very thin, old-fashioned silver spoon, and the bowl was all marked with little teeth. I looked at it for a minute. "Here," says I, "is a spoon what has come down, and Jim, my grandfather down the kids has chewed it." It seemed a pity to take it, and as it wasn't heavy, being pretty well worn down, I was that tender-hearted that I put it back on the shelf again. This little bit of thoughtfulness on my part gave me a tender glow, and I laid down the bag and went over to the side-board to sample the three-star brandy again, when I heard a step outside. I shut off my gim and stopped just where I was. I thought maybe Jim had piped something, and came up to give me the tip. Then I heard some body cough kinder light, and I heard two or three notes on a guitar. Blowed if I wasn't mad. I crept to the window and peeped out. There he was—cussed fool—standing there in the grass with his guitar over his shoulder and a strummin' away like mad. Pretty soon he began to sing—some rotten nonsense about his being a gondolier, about if we only took for Heaven's sake as we only take as we did for woman's we'd all be angels, and a-ending with "Hush—hush—hush," very soft and delicate. I'd a hushed him if I could get a rap at him. Liable to wake up the whole house. I heard somebody stirring up stairs when he commenced the second song—worse than the other—something about her being made of athena, and giving him back his heart, and a lot of nonsense at the end. I'd like to have had a crack at him. There I was. I didn't go out the front way, and I couldn't go out of the back way, while he was standing there, and I didn't know how soon the family might come down and ask him in to take some refreshments.

Nice place for me, wasn't it? With all the silver in my green baize bag. It seemed as if there was more than four hundred verses to his song, and I was that excited and nervous about it that I should have had to have thrown the soup ladle at his head in another minute, when I heard another step on the grass. I was a-pondering whether I could stand a duet or not, when, by George, I see it was Jim. Oh, he was a fly boy, Jim was. He'd got onto the

serenade, and he knew what a blamed nuisance it would be to me. I got close to the window where I could hear and see everything. The young fellow was just beginning another verse when Jim tapped him on the shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" says Jim very gruff.

"A serenading," says the young fellow.

"What's that?" says Jim.

"Why it's—it's—oh, it's singing, you know," says the young fellow.

"Who got you to do it?" says Jim.

"Nobody," says the young fellow.

"Are you a-singing here without permission aint you got no license?" says Jim.

"Why," says the young fellow, "I tell you I'm a serenading."

until they shrieked harshly, and the wolves roared again with horror. They snatched at the edge of the clearing, with tails between their legs, looking after the singular being whom they desired, but feared to attack. Their savage instinct was instantly renewed, however, and again, yelling, they gave chase, their black shadows hurrying like phantoms over the snow. Dick still continued to strike his fiddle, but even this would not have saved him, had he not reached the hut just as the whole pack was at his heels. In the rush, he slammed the rickety door behind him, clambered up through a hole in the roof, and perched on the gable, with the frail tenement literally shaking beneath his weight. The door of the cabin did not for a moment withstand the attack of the wolves, which immediately thronged to the interior. They were now wild with rage. They leaped up, they gnashed their teeth, they closed their jaws with that sharp snap, so horrible to the ears of the fiddler, as he almost fell from his perch in despair; but he remembered the effect of his violin. He had not yet drawn the bow from its case, but now did so, and struck it shrieking across the strings, forced all the while to keep his legs kicking high in the air to avoid the trap-like fangs that were only a few inches below.

In an instant the yells ceased, and the negro went on, drawing forth the most wild, hysterical and grating sounds from his friendly violin.

This barbarous noise, however, had no other effect upon the creatures than to astonish them. Even wolves cannot be charmed by bad music. When the first surprise was over they renewed their attack. Presently a great gaunt head lit by two eyes like globes of green fire, was thrust up through the roof!

"Who's dar?" shrieked the negro, mad with horror. An instinct saved him. Just as there seemed no thread of fate to hold him from being dragged down and made the prey of these enormous brutes, he once more snote his bow upon the fiddle and began with desperate energy to play "Yankee Doodle." The loud inspiring notes caused instant silence among the hungry roost below. The eyes of the brutes was no unmeaning fable. Dick won a kindred triumph. He was astonished at the effect of his music. Around him was the most attentive audience that ever listened to his fiddling. But whenever there was the slightest pause the wolves sprang forward and commenced their howl again.

The black was forced to labour away, flinging his feet into the air, redoubling his vigour, and filling the clearing with the extraordinary wailing moan. A feeling of professional pride gradually stole over him in spite of his alarm. Now and then a thought of the wedding, and of the warm lights, of the sweetened whiskey, of the whirling dances, of the homage and admiration of the coloured people came regretfully into his mind; but he knew that he was safe so long as he continued to play; so he went, from Yankee Doodle to Hail Columbia, searching his memory for every lively strain to charm away the ferocity of the strange auditors that conched around.

The pleasure and peril, as well as patience, came to an end. It was a cold night. Dick had walked far and fasted long; his arms were weary of their exercise, he began to feel benumbed, hungry, exhausted. Nothing, however, could be done but play on, for every pause these fearful growls began again. There was no satisfying that hungry troop of connoisseurs, forgetting as they sat, with lolling tongues and perched ears, through several hours of the wildest night that Dick had ever known. The moon sank low in the west. A deeper shadow crept from under the arches of the forest. The stars seemed paler, the trees bare and gaunter, and the troop of wolves to multiply instead of diminishing.

At the wedding feast the people became alarmed. Dick was the soul of punctuality. What could have happened? That was the question for his safety and desire for his fiddling impelled them to see him. So with lanterns and clubs they went out through the plantation to look for him, and when they found him he was still perched on the roof of the old hut, waving upon his fiddle, running over all his tunes again, but ready to drop with weariness and cold. The wolves were driven off, and they reluctantly quitted the spot. Their feet had been seen lingering on the skirts of the woods, and as the rescuers passed on with their old friend, a howl, rising at intervals, and an occasional rustling among the bushes, showed that the pack was still in wait, and determined but useless pursuit.

It was long past midnight when Dick retired with his fiddle. All that could be done was to go on all next day, instead of breaking up in the morning. The first blazed high, and the light blazed in ruddy streams across the floor. The corn cakes were hot and the sweet whiskey was abundant, so Dick was cheerful after his adventures, and for many, many hours he went on playing to a happy crowd of revellers whose ears of merriment, which, to save his life he had been playing all night to a pack of wolves.

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