

"Yes, madam, and sorry I am to hear it, for I've heard of your husband's"—

"Agnes," moaned the captive, "find my pistol—quick—and shoot the fellow. Put it close to his arm and fire, then break the other in the same way—that will make the devil loose his hold. I hear men running—they are coming this way."

"Help! Murder! Help!" roared Zenas, who also heard quick footsteps on a sidewalk not far away. Then he said, quickly: "Madam, before you can find that pistol I can kill this man with my hands at his throat. I've had to fight savage animals with my hands."

"God have mercy!" exclaimed the woman, again dropping on her knees beside the two men. "Listen to me, man! As God lives, my husband is innocent of the charges against him—I know he is—I know all the facts. He's the victim of a conspiracy that must be exposed before long. He has risked everything to-night for the sake of seeing his wife—his wife, do you hear me? Imagine yourself in his place—for your wife's sake—for the one person alive who trusts you"—

"It's no use, Agnes," groaned the man. "The fellow's a brute. Those men are almost here. I'm too weak to run far if I try—I'm gone."

"Oh, God!" the woman moaned. "Has Heaven no mercy for the innocent!"

Zenas looked into the face before him—a woman's upturned face, full of agony, the moon shining so full upon it that it's every line was visible. Then he said, softly and quickly:

"Yes, madam, Heaven has mercy, as man will show you." He relaxed his hold and thrust a hand into his pocket, continuing to talk fast—

"Mr. Maytham, you say you're too weak to run far, you won't be safe in your own house—hurry into mine—here's the key to the back door—go upstairs as softly and as far as you can—there's nobody on the top floor, and there's light enough in the halls for you to see your way. Don't make a noise, or you'll rouse my family. Now's your chance—knock me aside and hurry across the fence—quick. Go softly—on your toes—keep in the shadow."

Away sped Maytham, and Zenas continued, as two men came hurrying into the garden:

"Remember, madam—I was a burglar—he ran across my backyard—he hurt me badly—you're trying to restore me—make them help you—don't let them take me into my house till I'm restored"—

Then, for the men were almost upon them, the good little man played hypocrite with consummate ability. He begged the men not to leave him, bade them see how terribly injured he was, sent Mrs. Maytham into the house for water and stimulants, and told the story of the attempted burglary at great length, until one of them said:

"Well, I s'pose 'taint no use to try to find the feller now. He's got too much start. It's only by chance we followed him, anyway. I thort I heard a ladder bein' taken from a house next me. 'Thieves,' says I to myself. I peeked out of winders one side an' another; then I woke brother Jim, an' him an' me went out kinder keeful like. We could see in the moonlight where the ladder had been dragged along in the dust of the road. Comin' round a bend we thort we heard it hit somethin'—ladders allus makes a noise, an' it's a kind o' noise you can hear a good way in a still night like this. We began to run then, an' when we heard the hollerin' we know'd where to come."

"So good of you," whispered Mrs. Maytham.

"Ever so much obliged," said Zenas. Then, realizing for the first time that Mrs. Maytham was not in daylight attire, he whispered something to the men, who abruptly turned and said "Good-night" and went away.

"Mr. Bortley," said the woman, seizing her neighbor's hands, "you are a noble man."

"Madam," said the little man, who, in spite of a broken nose and closed eye, now felt himself the equal of any one alive, "you are a true woman. Try to feel easy about your husband. He will be safer in my house than in his own until we see how the authorities regard the burglar story. They can't suspect me—with this face."

Then he turned quickly and entered his house. Softly he went up the stairs and searched the top floor, light in hand, until he found the fugitive, to whom he whispered:

"Take the room with the bed in it. Turn the key, so none of my children happen in on you in the morning. I'll arrange for your wife to come in—I'll get my wife and the youngsters off home after breakfast, and we haven't any servants to poke around. Good-night."

Then the little man proceeded to bury himself in his own reflections and a wet towel with a lump of ice in it. With a clearer head than he ever had taken to his desk in the city he nevertheless had many conflicting emotions. Within a single hour—a mere quarter of an hour, indeed—he had been guilty of cowardice, suspicion, heartlessness and several other unpardonable sins; he also had indulged in violence, dissimulation and a threat to commit murder, or at least manslaughter. He had imagined himself dying of fright; he had fought a larger man without the slightest sensation of fear. He, a member of the church, was even now hiding a fugitive from justice; he, a married man, had stood some moments in the presence of another man's wife who was in light evening attire before he was conscious of the delicacy of the situation. He had sprung to the rescue because the intended victim—as he supposed, was a woman; yet that very same woman had called his incomparable family a "gang."

(To be continued.)

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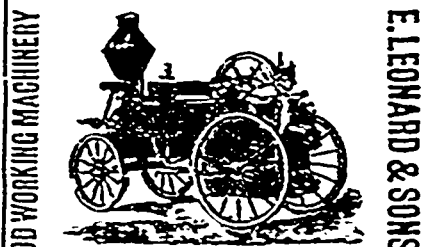
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