

NO EASY MARK

(By Maria Dana.)

"Get some money, anywhere, anyhow." "And then?" "Then make a story of your experiences."

The managing editor of the Mercury regarded his nephew with an indulgent smile. "Perhaps I had better go over it again," he said.

He was just from college, and totally without journalistic experience. The task before him seemed impossible of achievement.

However, when presently the confusion of his thoughts passed, he perceived that his first duty was simple enough—to call on the persons named in his list, and to this he straightway devoted himself.

With one exception he found each of the persons named in his list, and each one responded to his appeal with a generous subscription.

It was about four o'clock when he had completed the calls required by the list, and he set forth at once to carry out an idea that had come to him.

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The man shifted his glance as Stanley looked up, and allowed the young man to study him at leisure.

Stanley's impression was one of strong distrust. The man's appearance was by no means prepossessing.

Secretly, beneath the table, he shifted his roll of bills, which was next the man, to the left. As he did so, however, he smiled at himself.

"You won't often see any one drinking water in a place like this," Stanley agreed.

"I suppose you are just slumming," he suggested a moment later.

Stanley hesitated a second. Should he deceive the man, or should he tell him the truth?

He decided that a half-truth would best serve his purpose.

No confidence man would dream of victimizing a newspaper reporter.

"I'm a reporter on the Mercury. I'm over here on a story for the paper."

The stranger's manner changed instantly. Hitherto curious, it now became genial.

"I have finished my glass of beer." "Why, yes," Stanley said, reluctantly, and the two rose and passed out of the concert hall.

At the first corner, the stranger turned from the avenue toward the river, and walked rapidly through the evil-smelling, squalid street until the next avenue was but a few rods distant.

On the first landing they passed a burly man with lowering, fierce face, roughly clad, who bestowed on Stanley a glance that recalled all his worst fears for his personal safety.

He was unarmed, and he knew that he could hope for no help were he able to make an outcry, for in such a neighborhood interference against crimes of violence must be too dangerous, did any even wish to offer it.

He opened the door and stepped into the room.

Through an open door at the end opposite the window was a glimpse of another room, evidently a bedroom, equally bare and clean.

Stanley seated himself in a chair near the window, whence he could watch his companion and the door, so that he might be on his guard against any attack.

As evidently, too, he rather underestimated the shrewdness of his companion, for he offered no explanation or excuse for the incongruity of his act and his surroundings as he produced a fountain-pen from his pocket and proceeded to fill out a check.

When he had made the corresponding entries on the stub the man blotting it and the check carefully with the blotter that went with the book, folded the check neatly, rose, and gave it to the reporter, who thrust it into his breast-pocket without unfolding it.

"You may quote me, if you please," the man said slowly, "as approving most thoroughly of the free-ice distribution conducted by the Mercury. I shall take pleasure in giving you a book."

If he had but a weapon! Stay, he had his jack-knife, a large one; it might serve to some purpose in a hand-to-hand struggle.

Stanley stood aghast at the unexpectedness of the catastrophe. He was amazed that the deed had been done without his knowing it.

He moved swiftly to the table. The keys dangled from the lock, but it was not fastened, and it yielded to his quick pull.

All the contents lay revealed at the first glance. There were some sheets of paper, envelopes and postage-stamps. There was no revolver.

He sprang to the gas-jet, turned off the light, and then jumped to the door. Slowly, with greatest caution, he turned the knob to the limit, then swiftly threw the door wide open.

Stanley uttered a yell and hurled himself with all his strength on the two men who stood in the passage just before him.

Although it was late, he decided to go to the office to see if there were any letters for him, and also, if the truth must be known, in the hope that he might find some one to whom he could confide his startling adventure.

"Well, what luck did you have?" the editor asked kindly.

"Why, very good," Stanley answered.

Then he reflected that, after all, this was his uncle as well as his editor. Why should he not tell him the tale of the night?

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1906

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