

Locked In The Vault.

I.

DRAGGED FROM HIS PEACEFUL BED.

They had met by chance in a large hotel in Birmingham, Ala., and were telling stories, more or less true, to pass away the time before going to bed.

"One night in midsummer," began the pale, round-shouldered gentleman, who was understood to be a bank cashier, "being entirely alone in the house, my family having gone to the country I was awakened by someone at my bed-side, calling me by name.

"I was not at all startled at first; indeed, for the moment I could not fully determine where I was.

"The light of a dark lantern filling the room brought me suddenly to full senses.

"As soon as I could see clearly, I was considerably astonished, to say the least, to behold a large, red-bearded man standing close beside me, with his finger on his lips, while a little way off, on opposite sides of the dressing-table were seated two powerful-looking fellows—one holding the lantern, and both perfectly silent and motionless.

"The man nearest me now spoke again in a low, determined voice.

"Mr. Benyon, keep perfectly quiet if your life is worth anything to you. You must get up and dress yourself as quickly and noiselessly as possible, and come with us to the bank."

"To say that I was undisturbed by this novel condition of things would be to say what was untrue. I am constitutionally, an exceedingly timid man, and I actually trembled violently as I obeyed these orders. The only question for me to decide was whether the money at the bank was worth more than my life—for the hard, fierce bearing of my captors left no room for doubt, as to the sincerity of their threats.

"So, without the least sign of hesitation, I dressed myself quickly as directed, offered no resistance when they informed me gruffly that they must gag me and tie my hands behind my back, and, at their command, produced the bank keys, and walked out and took my seat in a cart.

"We drove quickly to the bank; the horse was fastened close by, and, after waiting carefully a few moments to make sure of meeting no wandering policeman, we walked to the bank, and with the aid of the keys I had brought, of course entered without difficulty.

"Your work is before you," uttered the tallest of the three, pointing significantly to the door of the large safe.

"They had freed my hands, and placed my work before me. I had been brought there to do what no other man in the whole world except myself could do—work the combination lock that secured the door of the vault. Not a difficult piece of work for me, certainly.

"I knew, as they also probably knew, that there was an unusually large amount of money in the bank that night—specie as well as notes. And yet the money was utterly beyond their reach should I refuse to open the vault. No wonder I stood an instant in indecision as I thought of it.

"It was only an instant, however. Then a long, keen, glittering knife was passed slowly before my eyes, and I decided. I yielded I confess entirely from fear. Had the stake been much larger, I should have yielded as quickly.

"I turned to the vault, and in sixty seconds more, the door stood wide open.

"The leader alone went in, the other two remaining with me.

"Swiftly as though quite familiar with such places and all their arrangements, he collected all that was worth taking away. Notes were brought out to the amount of several thousand pounds, and carefully bestowed upon his own person or those of his associates. Then came the specie, enough to make it necessary for one man to steal cautiously several times to the cart in order to get it all safely loaded.

"All this being at last accomplished, it seemed to me that the job was about finished. Little did I know that the black-hearted villains had me in their power.

"I suppose you will leave me here?" I said.

"Yes that is our intention, and to make sure that you will not get away and give the alarm we have concluded to lock you up in the vault."

II.

A PRISON OF IRON.

"For a moment I stood stupefied, scarcely comprehending his meaning.

"Lock me in the vault—I, the only man on earth that knew the combination! That would be an unpleasant joke, indeed.

"Even before the villains should be out of hearing with their ill-gotten booty I should begin to grow sick and faint from breathing the musty air of my living tomb. How long would it be before I should suffocate to death? A half-hour, or an hour?

"I looked up at my captor. His lips were firm and set—thin, cruel lips that meant what they said. Ah, yes; if I doubted that, I had only to look into the cold, pitiless eyes above them.

"I swore to him that if he would leave me there, bound securely as he liked, I would not stir till morning even if I could. I pledged him my honor, that if he pleased I would never breathe a word of the whole transaction. I assured him that to be shut up there was certain death—death in a long, lingering agony.

"Alas! I spoke to a heart of stone.

"I turned to his companions. They only looked on as stolid and indifferent as though they had been deaf mutes.

"Come, sir," said the leader once more; "we must be going, and can listen to no more of this. Will you walk into the vault, or must we force you?"

"Again I flung myself down before him and fairly grovelled at his feet.

"In the very midst of my entreaty, at a sign from the leader, I was roughly seized, and, in spite of my struggles and cries, quickly thrust into the vault, and the door closed with a bang.

"I rose from the place where I had fallen almost immediately, and threw myself against the iron door. It was as firm as a rock. I was locked in the vault, and I knew that it was absolutely impossible that I could ever come forth alive.

"You will readily guess that there is not much more of the story to tell. I have only to describe to you the awful suffering that was mine during the brief half-hour that elapsed ere I began to gasp for breath, and then through fearful agony passed to a state of unconsciousness.

"There was, then, nothing now for me but to die. Philosophically I came to that conclusion at last. Already the air I breathed was becoming foul. I knew that I could not inhale it and keep my senses more than fifteen minutes longer.

"So I sat down, and leaning my head on my hands fell into a kind of stupor. For at least ten minutes I seemed to myself like one dozing or as a man who has fallen in the snow and whose senses refuse to keep active.

"At last I suddenly aroused myself and stood up. I was breathing in short, quick gasps, and felt a terrible pain in my chest. Then my brain seemed all at once to burst into flame, my fancy grew excited, I reeled as I walked and fell headlong to the floor.

"Then I experienced still greater difficulty in breathing, a still heavier weight crushing my breast, there was a still brighter light before my closed eyes—in my insane agony for an instant I fancied it the light of lanterns, and that help had come. Then I raised myself with sudden energy to my elbow for one instant, then sunk back unconscious."

The cashier paused, and looked round as if he had reached the end of his story. His auditors looked at him, still breathless with interest, puzzled and unrelieved.

"Why," cried out the young fellow fresh from college, "that is not the end?"

"Yes," answered the cashier, "that is the end."

"But how did you get out?" inquired the tea merchant.

"I never got out," answered the cashier, with a queer smile.

"Then it was a dream after all?" put in the detective.

"No, it was not a dream."

"Then what on earth was it?" impatiently demanded the old sea captain.

"Why, it was only a story. When I got to the point where I fell down unconscious in the vault, I found that my im-