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PROFESSIONAL BRETHREN

BY GEORGE E. WALSH

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CHAPTER III.

THAT night I spent on the place of Charles Goddard and made myself as familiar with his family history as systematic pumping of the coachman would permit.

"An easy man he is to get along with," my informant volunteered. "There ain't the likes of him anywhere else in the country. An' the sweet missus is just as good. She's an angel, my wife says, if there ever was one."

"You mean the lady he's engaged to," I replied, "the one who lives over in the mansion that was robbed the other night?"

"Exactly! Miss Belle Stetson, the only lady that's worthy such a man as my master."

"How long have they been engaged and when are they to be married?"

"Now ye're goin' too fast. I didn't say they were engaged, did I? And if they ain't engaged I couldn't say when they're goin' to be married, could I? Some say they're engaged, an' others say they ain't. How do I know who's right?"

The man was only waiting to reveal more of the relationship between the two young people, and I catered to his natural weakness by encouraging him to proceed.

"Ye must be a stranger around these parts indeed if ye don't know what ye ask me," he continued, with a shrug of the shoulder in reply to my questions.

"I wouldn't be a-tellin' it to every one, but seein' ye're goin' to be one of the family I don't mind speakin' plain-like to ye."

He puffed noisily upon his black pipe, sending the smoke upward in dense clouds. His name was John, and he claimed to be an Irish American; but, while he had lost much of his brogue, he still retained all the loquacity of his first ancestors.

"Mr. Goddard comes from one of the oldest families of this country, an' old Dr. Stetson—God bless him, he was a good man in his day—wasn't a bit behind the Goddards. I've often heard the old folks arguin' about their ancestors. The doctor always said he came over in the Mayflower. I don't know much about the Mayflower, except what I've heard the old doctor say, but she must have been a pretty fine ship. She brought the doctor over—no, the doctor's grandfather or great-grandfather. I don't just remember which—an' he always said that was enough glory for any man. But old Mr. Goddard would rile the doctor by sayin' that he thought bein' a gentleman of France under King Louis was a greater honor an' that his ancestors descended direct from kings an' emperors. They couldn't agree noway, an' they just made up long enough to pick a new quarrel. I've heard tell how they'd talk peaceful-like about the politics of the country till they got to goin' about ancestors, an' then in five minutes they'd be shakin' their sticks in each other's faces an' callin' one another liars.

"But this didn't seem to make no difference with their children. They jest played together like brothers an' sisters. When they was no bigger'n up to my knee they'd talk about lovin' one another an' about gettin' married. The old doctor and Mr. Goddard laughed at this an' forgot to quarrel sometimes about their ancestors jest to see the little ones makin' love.

"They seemed to be born fur each other, an' everybody said they'd get married some day. But when Mr. Goddard died somebody said his son had inherited his disease an' that he wasn't long fur this world. Nobody seemed to know jest what the disease was, but they said it was incurable an' something not to be spoken lightly of.

"But about that disease of Mr. Charles Goddard I ain't so sure. Old Dr. Stetson was quite riled about it, an' he said he wouldn't let his daughter marry any man that had it in his system. Mr. Charles got angry an' went away. He was gone for five years, an' folks hereabouts said the match was broken off. It did look that way fur a time.

"But when the doctor died Mr. Charles turned up ag'in an' lived in the old house jest as if nothin' had ever happened. He made up with the doctor's daughter, an' they've been comin' an' goin' together ever since. There was hopes for a time that they'd make a match after all. But there ain't no tellin' jest what may happen. He never seemed to be quite the same after comin' home. He was pale an' quiet-like, jest as if that disease was a-developin' an' takin' hold of him.

"He brought a doctor back with him to look after his health. He'd met the man somewhere when he was travelin'—in Paris, I think—an' this fellow jest watches Mr. Charles all the time. He lives over there in that old brown house. It's haunted, people round here say, an' spirits come an' go every night. But young Dr. Squires don't mind that. He laughs at spirits an' says he ain't afraid of 'em. Besides, he likes such a place, fur then people won't be botherin' him in his stud-

les. He don't like to have folks runnin' after him. He's been studyin' Mr. Charles' disease an' is writin' a book that will astonish the world. Then he always said he was poor an' couldn't afford to rent a good house. He got that house fur nothin', an' I guess Mr. Charles pays him well enough to live without starvin'.

"I ain't makin' no criticism of Dr. Squires, fur he's a smart man an' does Mr. Charles plenty of good, but he shouldn't have gone on so with Miss Stetson. He's good lookin', an' he ain't good lookin'. He's too dark an' furrin lookin' to suit my tastes, but he makes an impression on the ladies. I suppose they likes a man that don't look like other men."

"I ain't certain but Miss Stetson likes him better now than she does Mr. Charles. He's always so polite an' attentive to her, an' he's got an air of mystery 'bout him that seems to charm her. Mr. Charles ain't blind to things either. He knows which way the wind is a-blowin', but he don't do nothin'.

"If he'd go in an' try to get her, I think he'd win. But he don't, an' the doctor does. Mr. Charles seems to be standin' aside while this furrin friend of his gets the girl an' all her money. Mebbe it's because of that old disease. He's waitin' fur the doctor to cure him of it afore he asks her to marry him."

"But there ain't no harm of expressin' an opinion between us. Dr. Squires won't cure him until he's married Miss Stetson, an' then it will be too late."

With this wise conclusion my new friend the coachman finished his story and puffed away full ten minutes in agitated silence.

CHAPTER IV.

MY new master was indulgent to a degree, and my duties were not at all irksome. I showed some ignorance in grooming the horses, but John took pleasure in exhibiting his superior knowledge by showing me just what to do. I must have been an apt pupil, for he nodded approval every time I attempted to do the work according to his directions. But I was not cut out for menial labor. It was the anticipation of finding out more about Charles Goddard, my new master and companion in crime, that had first tempted me to accept such a position as groom.

I soon found out, however, that he had skillfully banished me from his presence. He never appeared around the barn, and so far as seeing him was concerned I might as well have been a hundred miles away. He went out riding every day, but John hitched up the horses and drove up to the front of the house, where shrubbery and trees hid them from view.

I stayed in my place five days without catching a glimpse of my master or of Miss Stetson, and I was on the verge of throwing up the position in disgust when events took a different turn. On the morning of the sixth day, Mr. Goddard appeared at the stable door where I was grooming his best trotter and took me by surprise.

"William, are you accustomed to driving?" he asked me before I had a chance to greet him with a good morning.

It was the first time we had met alone since that eventful night when we had robbed the Stetson mansion, and I was a little concerned to see if he would show any sign of recognition. His parting injunction had been that we should not know each other again unless we met under conditions similar to our first encounter. A glance at his face showed that he was still determined upon pursuing the same course even when we were alone.

I would not be outdone in keeping an honorable agreement, and I answered him accordingly.

"Yes, sir; I have driven good horses a little."

"Well, John is going to take the gray stallion to the city, and I want you to hitch up the team and drive me over to Miss Stetson's at 10 o'clock sharp."

"Yes, sir, I'll be there on time."

He hesitated a moment, looking straight at my clothes. I divined his meaning.

"I can put on John's clothes," I said.

"We're about the same size, and they will fit."

"All right. That will solve the problem. I will depend on you to be there in time."

He walked hurriedly out of the barn, seeking the dust from his neatly fitting trousers with a riding whip. His figure was almost as perfect as the setting of his face, and I unintentionally fell to admiring it. He was every inch a gentleman, and the mystery of his strange double life was intensified. What reason had he to rob a house in the dead of night and that house belonging to a woman he loved?

Then it occurred to me that he had been searching for some papers or articles that concerned his welfare and that the robbery of the silverware was only an incidental feature of the night's work. The goods were probably taken out to cover up his tracks, to give the impression that some ordinary burglar had done the work. Satisfied with this solution of the mystery, I determined to stay in my position as groom for some time longer, hoping that events might reveal more to me and give me a chance in time of assisting Mr. Goddard in his trouble, for the truth was I had taken a strong liking to him and wished to be near him.

Promptly at 10 o'clock I rattled up to the house with the team and waited for my master (I did not consider it lowering to call him that), who soon appeared on the piazza dressed with immaculate taste. His face was a trifle paler than I had ever seen it before, but otherwise he was unchanged.

I liked the new duties assigned to me and looked forward with considerable interest to the outcome of the ride. I would at least have an opportunity to study the two together.

He dismounted at the front door of the Stetson house and lightly ran up the steps, taking two at a time. He was gone about fifteen minutes, during which time I studied the house and the various windows which opened upon rooms in which I must have been.

Miss Stetson appeared more beautiful than ever that morning, confirming my first impression. She noticed me with a slight inclination of the head. Then the two took their seats, and I drove them down the old country road in the opposite direction from the city.

For a time they remained silent, but after we had covered a mile they began to converse in monosyllables. This in time yielded to more animated conversation, conducted in an undertone that made hearing very difficult. I have always prided myself upon my good hearing, and it is due to the acuteness of this sense that I caught any of the conversation. As they became wrapped up in their talk they unconsciously raised their voices a trifle. As near as I could hear the important part of their conversation was as follows:

"I wish Dr. Squires would leave that old haunted house," Miss Stetson was saying. "It makes me feel cold and funny every time I pass it, and what must it be to live in it all the time!"

"Probably very disagreeable, especially to one of your temperament," Mr. Goddard replied quietly.

"Or to one of your nature," she answered, with a rising intonation of her voice.

"But Dr. Squires does not seem to mind it," he added, unmoved. "I have offered to let him have a room in my house, but he prefers to stay where he is. He says he cannot pursue his investigations so well anywhere else."

"What are his studies and investigations? He is so mysterious about them that my curiosity is excited."

"Ask him, and he will probably tell you."

"I have, but he always puts me off—tells me to wait until some day when he is ready to announce his discovery to the world. Then he will tell me the first one."

"A great honor to you, I am sure, but I should demand to be let into the secret now."

There was a little irony in his voice which no one could mistake.

"Why do you not aspire to the same honor?" she asked in sharp, piqued tones. "I understand that you are just as ignorant of his secrets as I am."

"Yes, I am. I know nothing about his studies. He never lets me go beyond his office, which is on the ground floor in front, but then there is no spe-

cial reason why he should take me into his secrets."

"Isn't he a friend of yours, and didn't you bring him here?"

"I brought him here, but not as a friend. I understood that he was skilled in certain lines, and I brought him here as a medical adviser. I am responsible for nothing more than that."

"You talk very differently from what you did six months ago. There was nothing too good for you to say about him."

"I'm saying nothing against him now. I merely disclaim responsibility for him except as a medical adviser."

"I do not think he needs you as a sponsor for his character," was the sharp rejoinder.

"Probably not."

The quietness of the reply added fuel to the fire, and the silence which followed was no indication of their feelings. I dropped the whip purposely on the seat back of me, and in turning to pick it up I caught a momentary glimpse of their faces. They were both pale, and they were gazing intently at the scenery on opposite sides of the carriage.

During the rest of the ride very little conversation was carried on between them, and I had ample time to think and reflect. The result of my cogitations was that I determined to pay Dr. Squires a visit and see what I could discover of his secret studies and investigations. Following the natural bent of my mind, I of course decided to make the visit in the dead of night and unannounced. Something more than ghosts and spirits would be required to keep me off the premises where there was any chance of making a good haul or of discovering any secrets that might be turned to good account later.

CHAPTER V.

IT was nearly a week after this ride before I could decide upon a night favorable for a visit to Dr. Squires. It is a poor burglar who fails to make careful preparations before attempting to enter a house, and long experience in my business has made me extremely cautious. I never undertake a job without due consideration of all details. A sneak thief may go around from house to house in an aimless sort of manner and enter the first one that is not properly barred, but not so with a professional.

John always sent me off to exercise the horses on the few days when Mr. Goddard did not use them, and I employed these spare moments to acquaint myself with the surrounding country. I passed Dr. Squires' house several times in the course of the next few days, examining the premises with a critical eye.

I found that the house was located some distance back from the main highway and that it was nearly concealed from view by shade and fruit trees. A small grove of woods backed up to it on one side and an open pasture field bordered it on two other sides. The easiest and safest approach to it, I conceived, was from the wood side.

The house itself was an old fashioned flat roofed mansion sadly in need of paint and general repairs. It was gloomy enough to drive almost anybody away from it after dusk, and I did not wonder that strange stories of ghosts and spirits had been gossiped around by the country people. If I had been a superstitious person, I should have selected the house as the last one to rob. It was probably this idea that had influenced the doctor in taking it for his workshop. He was pretty safe in assuming that nobody would disturb him in that lonely retreat.

I obtained leave to go to the city on Friday afternoon, and I told John not to worry if I did not appear until the following morning. I had friends in the city who might detain me over night.

About 4 o'clock I left the barn and started presumably to walk to the city. John offered to drive me half way down if I would wait until after supper, but the afternoon was so fine I preferred the walk.

Two miles down the road I found that I was perfectly concealed from view of every house, and I quietly slipped over the fence into the woods. This piece of woods I knew backed up to Dr. Squires' house. I concealed the bundle, which I pretended that I wanted to take to the city with me, taking enough tools from it first to answer all my present purposes.

As I approached the edge of the woods I moved with great caution. I did not know how many servants the doctor had, although John had assured me that he had only one, a copper colored Indian who was more foreign looking than his master. This servant never associated with anybody else and was either deaf and dumb or unable to speak English.

He was a sort of faithful watchdog. I judged, whom the doctor had befriended and who would in consequence give up his life for him if necessary. I had met such zealous manservants before, and my experience had always been that they are exceedingly troublesome. I therefore used extra precaution.

While yet some distance from the house I climbed up into the leafy branches of one of the large trees and, pulling the foliage to one side, scanned the house intently through a pair of strong fieldglasses. By their aid I could note everything that was going on outside the house and could almost see objects inside the windows.

The only advantage I obtained from this was a clearer idea of the most vulnerable points of the house and also the way to escape from the premises in the event of an alarm. I saw the servant go about his duties, and later I secured my first glimpse of the doctor. He was a dark bearded, thickset, well

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proportioned man, and one who would prove a bold and powerful antagonist. More than this I could not say until I found myself at closer quarters with him.

I remained in my treetop position until well after dark, watching everything that occurred around the house. Then I descended to the ground, ate a few pieces of cold meat and bread, drank a little wine and threw myself on the dry leaves to sleep. There was no danger of being discovered in the woods, and I needed the rest and sleep to prepare me for the night's work.

It was shortly after midnight when I opened my eyes again. Habit had made it a second nature with me to awaken at this hour, and I had no fear of oversleeping myself when I first closed my eyes. I crawled through the underbrush toward the fence which divided the doctor's land from the grove, and then waited and listened. The house was perfectly dark, and everything was calm and peaceful.

I had thought of dogs, but had failed to see any around in the afternoon through my glasses. However, to make sure of it I imitated the cry and snarl of a cat—a noise that always brings watchdogs away from their post of duty. If the dogs were inside the house, I would find that out later. But I really saw no reason why dogs should be kept on the place.

Satisfied that the coast was clear, I made my way toward the house, keeping well in the shadow of the trees. Then I made a close examination of the windows and doors. They were locked with old fashioned catches and re-enforced with nails. I selected the doctor's study as the place least likely to be occupied.

With a diamond cutter I took a piece of the glass pane out, making an opening large enough to insert the hand. I worked so carefully that the diamond point scarcely made any of the grating noise so common when one operates with cheap cutters. This one had been made specially for me, and it was perfect in every detail.

As I took the piece of glass out and deposited it on the floor of the piazza I listened intently for a few moments to see if my operations had disturbed anybody. Then I applied my ear to the hole in the pane to catch the breathing of any watchdog.

Nothing could be heard of an alarming character, and so I proceeded to unfasten the window and to open it.

Now, if I had been in the city or the house had been a modern one, I should never have thought of opening that window without searching for a burglar alarm, but out in the country, miles away from any assistance and in such an antique house, I did not see the value of a burglar alarm and consequently never once gave it consideration.

I discovered my mistake in an instant, however. I had not raised the window half an inch when there were a ringing of bells and an electric buzzing all through the house that made me turn pale. An amateur might have thought that all the ghosts and spirits of the dead had suddenly come to life again, but I was too familiar with that sound to be deceived.

I was off the piazza in half a minute. Quick as I was, however, a flash of light in the windows of the house beat me. The alarm had lighted every electric light in the rooms, and the old mansion was in a brilliant blaze.

Even at this critical moment, when all my faculties should have been alert, I made another mistake. Instead of seeking safety in the woods as fast as my legs would carry me I waited to see further developments. Would the doctor and his servant come out and search for me? I laughed softly to myself at the idea. Certainly they could not expect assistance from another house inside of half an hour. Then what was the burglar alarm for? To frighten robbers away; that was all, I concluded.

But I changed my mind a moment later when I heard the quick patter of steps that I knew did not belong to human beings. Two black objects came rushing down the lawn from the barn, and in the semidarkness I made out two enormous Dane hounds. The object of the burglar alarm flashed across my mind in an instant.

The electric wire that had started the bells to ringing had also released the watchdogs, and they were now upon me.

As if by instinct they rushed upon the piazza, catching the scent almost immediately. But in that instant I had turned and fled toward the woods, my only place of safety. Could I reach the woods and climb a tree before they caught up to me?

This question flashed through my mind, but I could not answer it. I already heard their feet behind me, striking the ground with heavy patters as they loped rapidly across the intervening space.

The blood seemed to rush to my head, and for an instant I thought of death. I had never been cornered quite so completely before. I gathered up my strength for a final effort and cleared the fence with a bound, but as I leaped upward the foremost Dane made a tremendous lunge and cleared the top of the fence in fine style.

We both landed on the other side



I was grooming his best trotter.

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