

THE TRANSGRESSION

By Horace Hazeltine



He stood transfixed.

In the eyes of his community Cromwell was such a man as you are, or as I am, or as is that worthy neighbor of ours, whom we have known so long for a just and conscientious citizen.

Though the gestatory period had been prolonged the temptation had been born full grown and virile; yet of such strangely unaccustomed visage as to shock and frighten him.

Enveloped by the deep shadows of his little vine-gilt piazza, he sat alone. The warm midsummer night was still and breathless.

In appearance, as in character, he was the reverse of all ordinary conceptions of the outlaw. He was neither brawny nor agile.

Against the tide of adversity he had never made but feeble buffet. In a small town, bumbly people, he had found his profession of the law woefully unremunerative.

For the changed conditions to which his child's unrest was due Cromwell blamed Stephenson, who had flouted his wealth until comparisons had become humiliating.

Planning the Deed.

From behind him within the house the rasping whirr of a clock announcing its intention to tell the time broke harshly into the silence.

Another moment and he stepped from the piazza to the gravelled walk and thence to the lawn and moved away under the cedars.

There remained now only the rear to be inspected, but as he had determined on this as his point of en-

trance, and as he had yet to make certain preparations for his adventure, he excluded it from his preliminary survey.

Skulkingly, with unrelaxed caution, he had effected his return, and was climbing the gentle slope of his own weed grown lawn.

The tool house was at the back, on the edge of the garden, and thither he gropingly made his way, with the dog at his heels.

From a jumble of dusty sacking, old carpet and worn out clothes in one corner he extracted a suit of faded, frayed and stained overalls.

The Masked Man.

These preliminaries completed, Cromwell adjusted his mask, with something of a qualm. It seemed to him the very sign and symbol of the outlawry in which he was about to engage.

Stephenson, moreover, deserved a lesson. No man was justified in parading his riches before his back door habitually unlocked and his treasures unguarded.

"No one thinks of locking their doors down here," he had repeated again and again.

Cromwell had heard him use those very words, one evening, as, waiting in his garden beyond the privet hedge, he chatted with a guest from town.

Hastily, with a distinct effort of will, he took up his muffled lantern, opened the door just wide enough to permit the exit of his own body.

The Lively Imagination.

There was here a little grove of young plum trees, which formed a convenient shield for his approach to the back of the house.

On the edge of the grove he paused and ran his gaze up and down the high, gray wall of the steeping dwelling.

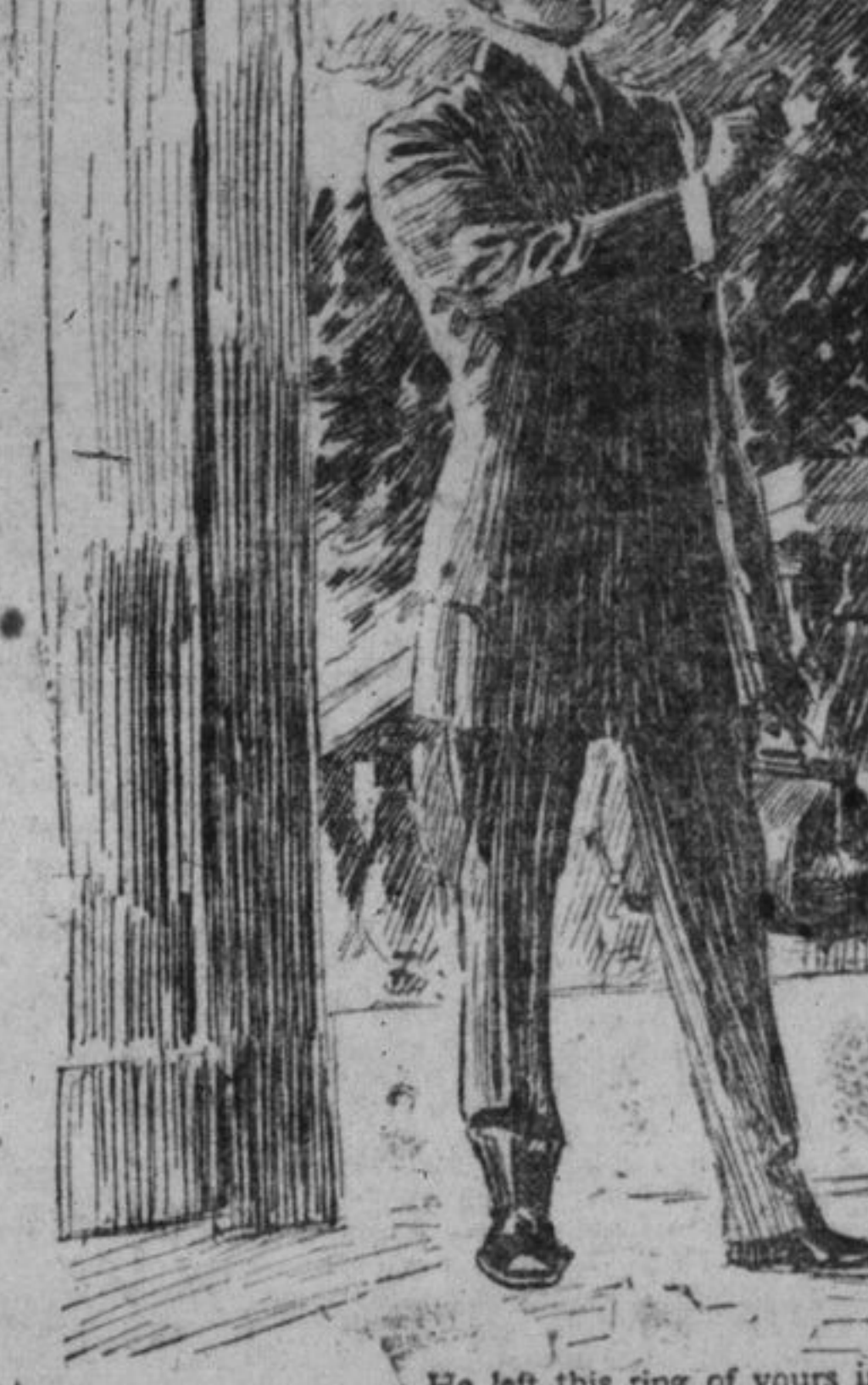
In his nervous trepidation he could fancy Stephenson, himself sleepless because of the heat, sitting beside this rear seaward window watching through the gloom.

He stood a long while looking up at that window. Once he thought he saw something white move there and drew back in excess of fear.

next door neighbor, had passed him by without so much as a nod, as though he were not worth his notice; the occasions, too, when his wife and daughter had been as rudely ignored by the feminine Stephensons.

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He left this ring of yours in my hand.



small order business by mixing poor soap with poor premiums to the gulling of poor people.

The arrangement of the lower floors was moderately familiar to him. Several times during the winter, while the mansion was untenanted, he had accepted the invitation of the caretaker to take a look through.

Having found the kitchen door not merely unlocked but wide open, he paused a moment to remove his shoes, and then, with the lantern flap lifted for an instant only to get his bearings, he passed from kitchen to butter's pantry.

How he found the door in the dark he never quite knew; how he cleared the dining table, how he gained the butter's pantry and the kitchen beyond. His wife returned away dazed, sickened, yet with the impulse of flight and the avid craving for safety.

Returned to order, really, only when he was out again under the starry sky in the still air of the summer night.

The Fight in the Dark.

With infinite caution he had proceeded thus far, measuring each step with hand extended against collision with furniture.

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wick flared acridly his nostrils. A lighted lamp had been permitted to die out unnoted.

Fearing to breathe, lest he betray himself, Cromwell strained his hearing for that which he dreaded; and went shiveringly cold at his reward.

In a creaked pane his impulse was for flight, but his faithless nerves denied him.

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by the scuffling, the overturned chair, the heavy fall of the master.

A Tormented Mind.

He expected to see lights, to hear cries of alarm; but the darkness and silence still prevailed, unperturbed and unalarmed.

He hastened forward, harassed, hysterically astir with impatience. Irritably he snatched off his mask, which must be disposed of, too.

Agitatedly he began to divest himself of his overalls. To be discovered so clad at such an hour would lend added weight to the other circumstances.

Discretion had been dissolvable, and obediently he dropped to his knees, determined to lose himself in the dark of the garden path by lying prone upon the sward.

At the same moment a man's figure emerged from the dimness of the lane, less than a dozen yards away, and a voice rang out in question.

"That you, Mr. Cromwell?"

"Yes," he answered. "What do you want?"

"Get a telegram for you," the voice flung back.

The Telegram.

Cromwell, partly reassured, joined the messenger in the lane.

"Telegram!" he exclaimed. "Telegram at this time of night?"

In his little, plainly furnished sitting room, alone now with his threatened assets, his jeopardized liberty, the opened telegram in his shaking fingers.

For the message which had so alarmed him had been a hand reaching out to lift him.

"They say you are his principal legate."

The Missing Ring.

And there his musing abruptly turned again; for, extending his little finger for reverential view of the gift, Cromwell saw that the ring which he had worn habitually for a score of years was gone.

He rose to his feet and began pacing the worn carpet.

The dawn, paling, gray his window panes, found him waiting yet, white eyed.

When the clock struck eight he went into the dining room and sat at table, but he did not eat.

He rose as one joyed over a suspense ended, passed along the narrow hall, turned the key and then the knob, and flung the door wide.

"I hope I haven't disturbed you, Mr. Cromwell," he began, "you'll pardon my calling at such an hour, but I'm off for town on the 8.20 train, and I wanted—indeed, I felt I must see you before I went. You see, I've never attempted to intrude upon you before.

That's my way. I realize my own shortcomings. I'm a self-made man, and—well, I know how it is with you old family people who count ancestry above vulgar money.

Mr. James Cromwell, wasn't it?"