

An Unposted Letter

Newton MacTavish

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Outside, a hammer pounded mockingly; the gallows were under construction. Through the iron bars of the prison window shone a few straggling shafts of sunlight. My client rested on his elbows, his chin in his hands. The light glistened on his matted hair. He heard the hammering outside.

"I guess I may's well write a line to Bill," he said, not raising his head. "Kin you get a pencil and paper?"
I got them, and then waited until he had written:

"Dear Bill,—By the sound of things, I reckon I've got to swing this trip. I've had a hope all along that they might git scent on the right track; but I see that Six-Eye'll be 'bliged to kick the bucket, with head up—the galleys is goin' up mighty fast.

"I say, Bill, there ain't no good in burglarin'. I swore once I'd quit it, and wish I had. But a feller can't allus do just as he fancies; I guess he can't allus do it, kin he, Bill? You never knew how I got into this scrape, did you?"

"One day I was standin' around, just standin' around, nothin' doin', when I saw a pair of runaway horses a-comin' down the street like mad. I jumped out and caught the nigh one by the bridle. I hauled 'em up mighty sudden, but somethin' swung me round, and I struck my head agin the neck-yoke, kersmash.

"When I come to, I was sittin' back in the carriage with the sweetest faced girl bendin' over me, and wipin' my face with cool water. She asked where she would drive me home; and, do you know, Bill, for the first time, I was ashamed to say where. But I told her, and, so help me, she came clear down in there with me, and made Emily put me to bed. She left money, and every day till I got well she come out and sat and read the Bible and all them things. Do you know, Bill, it wasn't long afore things seemed different. I couldn't look at her pure, sweet face and plan a job. The last day she came I made up my mind I'd try somethin' else—quit burglarin'.

"I started out to get work. One man asked me what I'd served my time at. I said I'd served most of it in jail, and then he wouldn't have anythin' to do with me. A chap gave me a couple of days breakin' stones in a cellar. He said I did it so good he guessed I must have been in jail. After that I couldn't get nothin' to do, because no one wouldn't have nothin' to do with a jail-bird, and I had made up my mind to tell the truth.

"At last Emily began to kick and little Bob to cry for grub. I got sick of huntin' for work, and it seemed as if everybody was pushin' me back to my old job. I got disgusted. I had to do somethin', so I sat down and planned to do a big house in the suburbs. I'd sized it up before.

"The moon was high that night, so I waited till it went down, long after midnight. I found the back door already open, so it was a snap to git in.

"I went upstairs and picked on a side room near the front. I eased the door and looked in. A candle flickered low, and flames danced from a few coals in the fireplace.

"I entered noiselessly.

"A high-backed chair was in front of the hearth. I sneaked up and looked over the top. A young girl, all dressed in white, with low neck and bare arms, laid there asleep. Her hair hung over her shoulders; she looked like as if she'd come home from a dance, and just threw herself there tired out.

"Just as I was goin' to turn away, the flames in the fireplace flickered, and I caught the glow of rubies at the girl's throat. How they shone and gleamed and shot fire from their blood-red depths! The candle burned low and sputtered; but the coals on the hearth flickered, the rubies glowed, and the girl breathed soft in her sleep.

"'It's an easy trick,' I said to myself, and I leaned over the back of the chair, my breath fanning the light hair that fell over marble shoulders. I took out my knife and reached over. Just then the fire burned up a bit. As I leaned over I saw her sweet, girlish face, and, so h'lp me, Bill, it was her, her whose face I couldn't look into and plan a job.

"Hardly knowing it, I bared my head, and stood there knife in hand, the blood rushin' to my face, and my feelin's someway seemin' to go agin me.

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"I looked at her, and gradually closed my knife and straightened up from that sneakin' shape a feller gets into. I remembered a verse that she used to read to me, 'Ye shall not go forth empty-handed,' so I said to myself I'd try again. But just as I was turning to go, I heard a shot in the next room; then a heavy thud. I stood stock-still for a jiffy, and then ran out in time to see someone dart down the stairs. At the bottom I heard a stumble. I hurried along the hall and ran straight into the arms of the butler.

"I guess someone else was doin' that job that night. But they had me slicker'n a whistle. 'Twas no use; everythin' went agin me. I had on my big revolver, the mate to the one you got. As it happened, one chamber was empty, and the ball they took from the old man's head was the same size. I had a bad record; it was all up with me. The only thing they brought up in court to the contrary was the top of an ear they found in the hall, where someone must have hit agin somethin' sharp. But they wouldn't listen to my lawyer.

"Give up burglarin', Bill; see what I've come to. But I hope you'll do a turn for Emily if ever she's in need, and don't learn little Bob filchin'. Do this for an old pal's sake, Bill."

The doomed man stopped writing, as the last shaft of sunlight passed beyond the iron bars of the prison window. Outside the hammering had ceased; the scaffold was finished.

"You'll find Emily, my wife, in the back room of the basement at 126, River Street," said my client, handing me the letter. "She'll tell you where to find Bill."

I took the letter, but did not then know its contents. I started, but he called me back.

"You have a flower in your button-hole," he said. "I'd like to wrap it up and send it to Emily."

Next day, after the sentence of the law had been executed, I went to find Emily. I descended the musty old staircase at 126, River Street, where all was filth and squalor. At the back room I stopped and rapped. A towzy head was thrust out of the next door.

"They're gone," it said.

"Where?"

"Don't know. The woman went with some man."

"Did you know him?"

"I saw him here before sometimes, but the top of his ear wasn't cut off then. They called him Bill—sort of pal."

"And where's the little boy?"

"He's gone to the Shelter."

I went out into the pure air, and, standing on the kerbstone, read the letter:

". . . The only thing they brought up in court to the contrary was the top of an ear...."

When I had finished, I remembered the flower in my hand. I didn't throw it away; I took it to my office and have it there still, wrapped in the paper as he gave it to me.