

# Accessory After the Fact.

By HOWARD FIELDING.

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## CHAPTER III.—THE MAN WHO SOLD HIMSELF.

The man-hunter is not confined to the domain of romance. Under the mask of calmness which my adversary wore I could detect the eagerness and passion of pursuit. He had begun the chase perhaps with the cold sense of duty, or under the spur of the large reward upon the heel of his necessity. But once upon the scent a new ardor possessed him. He had pressed on without rest; so much I could read in his lean face and at that moment when the first flush of triumph was on him, I must win him to dishonor. For I had resolved to bribe him if it were possible; if not, I might do worse. Physically he was not my equal, though large of frame and tall. Squaring his shoulders, he stepped forward and I saw that I was in a bad way. He was too deeply agitated to speak. I could only take his hand, while tears rolled down my cheeks.

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I ran with him to the window. He pushed it open cautiously and stepped out. The rough stones gave him foot hold; he made his way rapidly downward and sidelong.

After one moment's pause at the window to feel the cool air on my face, I hurried to the door, drew the bolt, and put my trembling hand upon the knob. The door was opened by pressure from without. I nearly died of relief at sight of Dane, alone.

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"No, thirty. I'll take no less. You have as much there. Speak quick before I am an honest man again."

"Done! Here is the money."

I counted it out to him with trembling hands. He put it into his pocket. His face became ghastly pale and his lips quivered.

"I had never seen a man sell himself before. The bargaining had been expected from what I would have expected; but then the man was clearly exceptional. The quick change in his mental attitude and the readiness of decision on so grave a topic were doubtless part of his nature, and suited to his profession. Yet I would have expected a man with so resolute a face to make a longer fight against corruption.

"Now to destroy them!" I replied. "We must have the hottest fire that the stove can stand."

"But we can wait?"

His voice trembled. The courage had gone out of him; it had fled with his honor as I marked even in that moment of excitement.

"Some one might come," he went on huskily. "Remember I am deeper in it now than you are. Neither of us must be found here with this stuff in sight. Certainly not I. If Dane should come—"

"Of course if only Dana comes we are safe. We must risk the others. It's better than carrying the bundle through the streets."

While speaking I was piling the fuel of which, fortunately, there was a good supply—into the stove. A moment and the flame leaped up. The draught was magnificent. In ten minutes the stove was ready for Kohfeld's coat. The blood-stained garment, torn into shreds and smoldered and fought the flame, but vainly. The buttons were of wood, covered with cloth. There was nothing that could not be reduced to ashes. Indeed, I marvelled that it had not been destroyed long before. But blood gullies muffled the fire.

The shoe with its blood stain was worse fuel than the coat, but by the time it reached the fire there was such a heat as no leather could resist. That witness of the crime passed into ashes. There was little else but the bonds. I was about to put them into the fire, but first I noticed the edges which had been deftly cleaned of blood, though not without leaving a trace of the murderer's work.

"Stop!" cried the detective. "We must not burn those. They should be returned to Miss Kohfeld. They are rightfully hers."

"True; I will attend to that. Or, on second thought, it is better you should do it. That will seem natural; and if you are true to your bargain to me, you will invent a story which will help clear Dane."

"He will not be convicted," was the reply. "I know the evidence. Without my testimony regarding the finding of these things here, he will escape."

"As that testimony you have sold to me?"

"He bowed.

"Now for the knife," said I. "Would it not be well to wrench off the handle, which is of wood, and burn it?"

"A good idea."

I drew the knife from under his coat. I split the handle with a blow, and it fell from the blade.

At that moment we heard a sound at the door. The handle was softly turned. Then came the shock of a strong shoulder against the wood, and I heard a low voice.

"The police are upon us!" I whispered.

I gathered up the pieces of the broken haft with a sweep of my hand, and in a flash had fitted them together, to see if I had all. A piece was missing. It would be equal to all the other evidence!

I dropped upon the floor. The perspiration fell from my forehead like rain. The room, under the influence of that roaring fire, was like an oven; and excitement blazed in me as hotly.

I heard the door strain, under steady and strong pressure. I turned to my companion. Despite the heat his face was like white paper.

"Is there any way out of here?" I whispered.

"The window!" he replied. "You must stay here, otherwise we shall both be followed and overtaken. Remember I have still the knife blade to dispose of."

"I was myself by this time.

"Dear old boy," I said, "this night has saved you. I have bought your life and I have burned the evidences of your transgression."

His face paled and then flashed scarlet. He staggered back.

At that moment there was a rap at the door. Before I could stay him, Dane opened it. His action seemed purely mechanical; he was like an image endowed with motion.

A uniformed officer of police entered.

"We've got him!" he cried.

And in that instant it flashed across me that the fragments of the knife handle were still where they had fallen! Dane was lost unless I could destroy them.

I sprang forward, but the officer advancing, interposed his bulky body, and I dared not force my way by him. I waited, grief-stricken, for the arrival of the men to whom he had addressed his cry of triumph. No one came. There was no sound of men in the corridor.

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The officer waved his hand in the direction of the street.

"He seemed to have had a bad fall," he continued. "I should say he must have tried to climb down from a window. I shouldn't be surprised if he was done for."

"I'll be with you in a minute," said Dane.

The officer went out. Dane turned to me.

"Now, in the name of heaven tell me what you've done," he cried.

I stammered out my story.

He seized me by the shoulder and held me face to face with him.

"Wake up!" he exclaimed. "Get your wits together. You've had this thing by the wrong end. I'm a detective. I've been watching this man called Erwin for days and days."

"He was suspected of Kohfeld's murder, but he was only a name at first. No one knew who he was or where he had gone. I traced him to this place, and got this room because it was next to his. He knew that he was shadowed, but at first he could not tell by whom. I kept him so worried that he could not destroy those evidences of his crime which were now ashes, thanks to you."

"Laboriously I gathered them. The coat I found hidden in the cellar of this building. The shoe was there also, though not in the same hiding place. But the bonds I could not find. I decided that he would have to find them for me. Many a night I tracked that man, and one of the best shadows on the headquarters staff tracked us both."

The figure I had seen to follow Dane was explained.

"We thought he would surely lead us to the bonds," he continued, "but we were always disappointed. At last I found them. They were in the custody of a person with whom Erwin communicated secretly. In the course of his night walks that confederate is now under arrest. I got the bonds and was bringing them back with me this evening when I encountered you in the hall."

"Meanwhile Erwin eluded the shadow and got back to Chrysalis. He came to this room. It was his only chance—to find the accumulated evidences and destroy it. It was mere chance that kept me away so long. I was trying to make connections with the shadow. It is possible that Erwin counted on that."

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"You know the rest. Erwin must have been dazed when you appeared. It's lucky for you that he was. But his shrewdness, which is more than mortal, enabled him to take advantage of your error in supposing him to be a detective. He left this room with \$200 and the bonds; and if he'd got away heaven only knows when we'd have caught him. You'd have been an accessory after the fact—indeed you are one now, but I guess we can get you out of it all right. You may have to do a little lying to get your money back; for instance you might say he found you here, and bought your life, and robbed you. We'll see about that."

"Now a word more to put you about the case; I was put on it because I knew Kohfeld. I had dealings with the old villain to my cost. Indeed, I owed him a good deal of money—which, by the way, I shall have to pay mighty soon; he made his way rapidly downward and sidelong."

"Erwin, by the way, is a very high-class crook. I feel considerable satisfaction in beating him. About the time when you first found me here the case was looking all wrong and I was very blue, as you doubtless noticed. That accounts for some peculiarities of my manner which helped to mislead you. Well, I forgive you; yes, and thank you, too, most heartily. To pass now from myself to the other person who has been under suspicion I will tell you that Erwin had had dealings with Kohfeld and the old 'fence' had advanced him money. He was forcing payment by means of documentary evidence of Erwin's many crimes; and he lost his life and the documents 'at the same time.'"

"Why didn't Erwin burn these things in his room?" I asked.

"He hadn't any stove," replied Dane. "There's only a grate. It was safer to hide them. Come, let's go and see him."

"We were too late; Erwin had been removed to a hospital. He died within a few days."

I was never forced to tell the story which Dane had suggested. He secured my money for me and hushed up the whole affair.

Dane and I are closer friends than ever. I know he thinks less than nothing of my intellectual capacity, at least as applied to matters in his chosen field, but that need not affect his regard for me. Was not our old friend Wamba rewarded for his devotion? And he was a fool by right of descent, being the son of Wittless, who was the son of Weatherbrain, who was the son of an alderman.

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"We thought he would surely lead us to the bonds," he continued, "but we were always disappointed. At last I found them. They were in the custody of a person with whom Erwin communicated secretly. In the course of his night walks that confederate is now under arrest. I got the bonds and was bringing them back with me this evening when I encountered you in the hall."

"Meanwhile Erwin eluded the shadow and got back to Chrysalis. He came to this room. It was his only chance—to find the accumulated evidences and destroy it. It was mere chance that kept me away so long. I was trying to make connections with the shadow. It is possible that Erwin counted on that."

"I was myself by this time.

"Dear old boy," I said, "this night has saved you. I have bought your life and I have burned the evidences of your transgression."

His face paled and then flashed scarlet. He staggered back.

At that moment there was a rap at the door. Before I could stay him, Dane opened it. His action seemed purely mechanical; he was like an image endowed with motion.

A uniformed officer of police entered.

"We've got him!" he cried.

And in that instant it flashed across me that the fragments of the knife handle were still where they had fallen! Dane was lost unless I could destroy them.

I sprang forward, but the officer advancing, interposed his bulky body, and I dared not force my way by him. I waited, grief-stricken, for the arrival of the men to whom he had addressed his cry of triumph. No one came. There was no sound of men in the corridor.

"So you've got him, eh?" he said. "Where is he?"

"In the janitor's room," replied the officer. "We found him crouching against the side wall of the building below here."

The officer waved his hand in the direction of the street.

"He seemed to have had a bad fall," he continued. "I should say he must have tried to climb down from a window. I shouldn't be surprised if he was done for."

"I'll be with you in a minute," said Dane.

The officer went out. Dane turned to me.

"Now, in the name of heaven tell me what you've done," he cried.

I stammered out my story.

He seized me by the shoulder and held me face to face with him.

"Wake up!" he exclaimed. "Get your wits together. You've had this thing by the wrong end. I'm a detective. I've been watching this man called Erwin for days and days."

"He was suspected of Kohfeld's murder, but he was only a name at first. No one knew who he was or where he had gone. I traced him to this place, and got this room because it was next to his. He knew that he was shadowed, but at first he could not tell by whom. I kept him so worried that he could not destroy those evidences of his crime which were now ashes, thanks to you."

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