

Robert Hardy's Seven Days.

Continued from Third Page.

with his dreams of the accident. Mrs. Hardy woke and begged her husband to lie down and get a little rest. He did so, but was aroused about 10 o'clock by the doctor coming in. He had just finished a visit near by. He saw the light and was anxious, as the case was an extraordinary one, to come in. He examined Clara's face very keenly and then sat down by the bed for an instant. After giving certain medicines he found that he was in need of another article, which was at his house.

"I will go and get it, doctor. It's not far, and I think a little fresh air will do me good and help me to remain awake better," said Robert.

He went down stairs, and the doctor followed him as he went out into the hall and hung on his overcoat. Mr. Hardy turned before he opened the door.

"Doctor, tell me the truth about my girl? What is her condition?"

"It is serious, but more than that I cannot say. There is a possibility that by means of a slight operation the disastrous consequences of the shock to her eyes may be averted, and it is possible that the other results which I hinted may be altogether different. It is not in medical power to decide with certainty."

So Mr. Hardy went out into the night with a glimmer of hope in his breast. It was snowing again, and a strong wind was blowing, so he buttoned his big coat close up, drew his hat down over his brows and, leaning forward, walked as rapidly as he could against the wind in the direction of the doctor's house. The streets were almost deserted. The lights at the corners flickered and showed pale through the lamps.

As he turned down a narrow street, intending to make a short cut across a park that lay near the doctor's, he was suddenly seized by three or four young men, and one of them said in a tone which betrayed a drunken debauch: "Hold up your hands and deliver! You've got plenty of chink, and we haven't! So no squalling, or we'll shoot you for it!"

Mr. Hardy was taken completely by surprise. But he was a vigorous, athletic man, and his first impulse was to shake himself loose, to knock down two of his assailants next to him and make a run for it. His next glance, however, showed him the nature of the group of young men. They were not professional robbers, but young men about town who had been drinking late and were evidently out on a lark and were holding him up just for fun.

Mr. Hardy guessed exactly right. What could he do? Two of the young men were known to him, the sons of the Bramleys, who were well to do people in Barton. Mr. Hardy's next impulse was to discover himself to them and beg them to quit such dangerous fooling and go home. The three other young men were in shadow, and he could not tell them. All this passed through his thought with a flash. But before he had time to do anything a police officer sprang out of a doorway near by, and the group of young men, dropping their hold of Mr. Hardy, fled in different directions.

The officer made pursuit and after a short run captured one of the young men, whom, after vigorous resistance, he dragged back to where Mr. Hardy stood, exclaiming:

"Here's one of the rascals, sir. I heard 'em when they held you up. We've been looking for this gang some time now. Just identify this one if he is the one that just now grabbed you, sir."

Under the light of the lamp the policeman dragged the form of his victim and roughly struck up his hat. At that instant Mr. Hardy looked into his face and cried out:

"George! Is it you?" And the son replied as he started back:

"Father!"

The two looked at each other in silence, while the snow fell in whirling flakes about them.

And this was the end of Robert Hardy's third day.

CHAPTER IX.

Mr. Hardy looked at his son sternly, standing at the little distance off he had recoiled after that first recognition of the boy. It would be difficult to describe his emotions. He had never been an affectionate father to his boys. He had generally given them money when they asked for it and had not questioned them about its use.

He was not familiar with his older son's habits and only within the last few days had he known that he was what the age popularly designates as "fast." He had never made a companion of his son. He had not grown up with him, so that now as he faced him under the strange circumstances that had brought them together he was actually at a loss to know what to do or say.

The thought that his son was guilty of a crime which might put him behind prison bars did not yet occur to his mind. He was only conscious of a great longing to get back home and there have a thorough talk with his boy in the hope of winning him to better things. But he must say something to George.

The police officer stared in wonder after the first startled cry of "Father!" on the part of the young man, but he did not loosen his hold on him. He took an extra twist in the coat collar of his captive and looked sharply at Mr. Hardy as much as to say, "He may be your son, but he's my victim, and I mean to keep a good clutch on him."

George was the first to speak:

"Father, you know I wouldn't do such a thing really. We were only out for a little fun. We didn't know you, of course. We didn't mean any real harm. We were only fooling."

"It was dangerous fooling," replied his father.

He still stood apart from the boy and spoke quietly, but his face was pale, and his heart was wrung with torture for his firstborn.

Ah, how careless of him he had been! How little companionship the two had had! How very little help the boy had received from the man!

Now, believing that only four more days lay before him to use to the glory of God, Robert Hardy felt the sting of that bitterest of all bitter feelings, useless regret, the regret that does not carry with it any hope of redeeming a selfish past.

After his father had spoken George suddenly remained silent. Mr. Hardy bowed his head and seemed thinking. The officer, who had been waiting for another move on the part of the older man, said:

"Well, we must be moving on. It's warmer in the lockup than out here. So come along, young fellow, and do your talking tomorrow morning with the rest of the drunks and disorderlies."

"Stop!" cried Robert Hardy. "This is my son! Do you understand? What are you going to do?"

"Well, governor, that's a pretty question at this time of day. Do! I'm going to jug him for assault with intent to commit highway robbery. It's an affair for the 'pen,' I can tell you."

"But you heard him say it was all a joke."

"A pretty joke to try to hold a man up on the highway and demand his money! Oh, no! That's carrying a joke too far. I'm bound to obey orders. We've been after this gang of young chaps for a month now."

"But, officer, you don't understand! This is my son!"

"Well, what of that? Don't we jug sons every day for some devilry or other? Do you suppose you are the only father whose son is going to the devil?"

"O God, no!" cried Mr. Hardy, with sudden passion. "But this is my older boy. It would kill his mother to have him arrested and put in jail for trying to rob his own father. Yet he was once innocent—What am I saying? He might be now if I had done my duty."

Mr. Hardy confronted the officer with a certain sorrowful dignity which even that hardened defender of the law understood.

"Officer, let the boy go. I will answer for it if any blame falls on you for it."

"Stop!" cried Robert Hardy. "This is my son!"

He was not at fault in this matter. He was not the one who assaulted me. He did not touch me. You could not get a particle of testimony against him. And, besides that, it is necessary that he return with me. This is a case for the law of God. This belongs to a higher court."

The officer hesitated; Mr. Hardy stepped nearer his son.

"George," he said as if forgetting for a moment that the officer was present, "did you know that Clara and Bess and Will were in the accident last night?"

George turned pale and tremblingly replied: "No, father. Were they hurt? Was Bess?"

The boy seemed moved as his father had not yet seen him.

"No; they were not—that is, Bess was not hurt at all. But Will was severely bruised, and Clara still lies in a state of stupor or unconsciousness, and we do not know what the end will be. I was on my way just now to get some needed articles from the doctor's house. You must come back with me. The law has no hold on you."

"Maybe the law hasn't any hold on him, but Michael Finnerty has. I don't just like the idea, mister man, of letting the boy go yet," replied the stubborn and unusually dutiful officer.

Mr. Hardy began to appeal to the man's love of his own children. It did not seem to move him in the least until he mentioned the fact that it was cruelty to keep the suffering girl at home waiting for her father's return.

Finnerty finally loosened his hold on George and said slowly and painfully: "And if I lose me job I'll be knowing who was to blame for it. I always told Michael Finnerty that he was too soft hearted to go on the force!"

"You won't suffer, officer. Many thanks! Come, George."

And father and son moved off together, while the defender of the law stood irresolute, watching them disappear through the storm and muttering to himself: "I'm a soft hearted fool. I ought to 'a' been born a female hospital nurse, I had."

George that walk home, after Mr. Hardy was the first to speak:

Continued on Seventh Page.

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