

The Other One.

BY A. H. GIBSON.



NEVER recall it without shuddering, though it happened over thirty years ago.

I was then a young man, occupying a position of trust in the banking firm of Dillard & Hatch. One day I was sent to carry five thousand dollars in gold to Caleb Parton, a very eccentric man living in an isolated house in a wild, hilly part of West Virginia.

Parton was the bank's heaviest depositor, and his wealth was said to aggregate a half million. The day before, his servant, a large negro, had appeared at the bank with a message requesting Dillard to send him eight thousand dollars in gold. He arranged that I was to be the one to carry the amount to him, and further suggested that I should make the trip in a wagon, so that I could take back a cask of rare old wine, which he begged to be permitted to present to the firm.

It was a hard journey over rough, stony roads, which were seldom traveled, except by the plodding mountain folk of that region; and not until two hours after sunset did I reach the queer stone dwelling where Caleb Parton lived a hermit-like existence, shut away from all the world. The place was a lonely one, in the heart of an uninhabited, hilly tract of country covered with extensive forests.

I was impressed with the deepest sense of this loneliness, as I drew rein before the solitary stone house. Hitching the horse to a tree, I was guided up the indistinct path by a meager, yellowish light that struggled through the panes of an upstairs window.

Although I knocked loudly at the door, it was fully ten minutes before I heard any sound within. Then, half cautiously, the thick oaken door opened, and a dark-faced, wiry man, somewhere between fifty and sixty, looked out at me.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Hope, of the firm of Dillard & Hatch," I returned.

"Ah! It's you, come at last, is it?" he said, holding the lighted candle so as to get a better view of my face. "Well, come in, Mr. Hope."

He led the way up a flight of stairs and through a hall into a wide room, lighted by a brass lamp. The furniture was scant, but of a heavy, antique pattern. A faded Brussels carpet covered the floor, and in one corner stood a desk with a small iron safe near by. A narrow table in the center of the room held a decanter and glasses with the remnants of a lunch.

Motioning me to a chair, my strange host took the sacks of gold, which I carried in a stout bag, and threw them against the safe. The clang of the falling coins sounded dismally through the silent apartment.

"What a curse love and gold can be to a man!"

He spoke bitterly. I had never met Caleb Parton before, and as he uttered these words I looked at him carefully. His face was of a dark olive tint, while his deep-set eyes were small and intensely black. They were full of magnetism and subtle cunning.

He became conscious of my scrutiny, frowned a little, then turned toward the door.

"If you'll excuse me, Mr. Hope," he said, "I'll bring you up some refreshments. You must be tired and hungry after your long ride."

In a short time he returned, bringing a tray on which was a choice repast, with a bowl of strong coffee.

"You see I'm my own servant, Mr. Hope," he said, putting the tray on the table. "My man, Joe, is off to a camp-meeting and won't be back before daylight."

As I ate the lunch which Caleb Parton had brought me, he emptied the gold from the sacks upon the floor and counted it over carefully.

"Correct!" I heard him chuckle to himself, as he flung the refilled sacks into the safe.

After I had finished my lunch, Parton exhibited two fine pipes and invited me to join him in a smoke.

“Excuse my oversight. There’s not a drop of wine left in this decanter,” he said, after examining it.

“No matter,” I returned. “I never drink wine.”

“Tut, tut, man! you miss half your life. Now, I have a very choice collection of wines. Come, I’ll give you a peep at my vaults.”

He arose as he spoke and took up a candle. I had no interest whatever in wines, but I accompanied him.

Descending to the lower hallway, we passed through a long, dreary room, then down narrow stone steps into a capacious cellar, walled on every side with heavy masonry.

The place was damp and musty. Dust and cobwebs covered the casks and bottles that littered the whole end of the cellar. My host did not halt till we reached a heavy iron door fastened with a large, rusty padlock. I noticed a demoniacal expression on Parton’s face, as he held the light close enough to the lock to examine it.

“No, it’s never been meddled with,” he remarked with a chuckle. “Ten years is a very long time for a man to live on wine — but he was very fond of wine — very — ha, ha!”

I looked at Parton in amazement, much puzzled as to the import of his strange words and manner.

He turned to me with a quick gesture.

“A thousand pardons!” he said. “You think my actions strange. But — shall I? —” a wild flash in his eyes. “Yes, Mr. Hope, you shall have the story. I must tell it to some one. It’s too good to keep. Ha, ha!”

“Take a seat,” he continued, pushing a cask towards me, upon which I dropped, not certain that I was not in the presence of a madman.

Taking up a bottle, he brushed the cobwebs from it, then, breaking off the neck, passed it to me, saying:

“Take a pull. It’s damp in this cellar, and this will take the chill out of your blood. This is an excellent wine — it was a favorite brand with Judson Pickford. Yes, sir; and Judson was a competent judge. Ha, ha!”

His laugh made me shiver. It sounded like the exultation of a fiend. But I declined the wine, and Parton himself drained the bottle.

“You’ve never heard of Judson Pickford?” he asked.

“No.”

“Of course not. That was before you came, and it isn’t likely that excellent Messrs. Dillard & Hatch would mention him to you. But they could tell you a great deal about Judson if they were so disposed.”

“Judson Pickford was a strange, dark man. I met him first in society in Baltimore. And, strange to say, many declared that there was a strong resemblance between Pickford and Parton. Be that as it may, fate decreed that we should both love the same girl, — beautiful, winsome Mabel Raymond. I loved her from the hour we first met, and I’ve no doubt my rival’s passion was as intense as my own. I was a rich wine merchant, and Pickford a wealthy, brilliant stock-broker. Both of us vowed to win Miss Raymond, but from the first I saw that she favored Pickford’s suit. This made me hate my rival with deepest hatred. After they were married I went about for months like one stupefied. In losing the only woman I loved I lost all interest in life. I drank heavily, but the more I drank the more I felt myself urged on to revenge. Then I began to lay plans for Pickford’s ruin.

“When he and his wife were in Europe I saw an excellent chance to mature my scheme for his destruction. I first converted all my property into cash. Then I came to this secluded place and had this house built, where I might live apart from the world I hated. Afterward I went to Dillard & Hatch, and placed five hundred thousand dollars in their bank. I knew Dillard to be a noted schemer, so I took him into my confidence, and got his promise to help me. Hatch, being a weak man, was not hard to rope into the plot. No need for me to go into details of the steps by which Dillard and I artfully spread a net for our unsuspecting victim. It is enough to say that soon after Pickford’s return from abroad he was a ruined man. Penniless though he was, he didn’t lose heart. He moved into plainer quarters and took up the practise of law, a profession which he had followed before he became a stock-broker. But my vengeance was not yet satisfied. Mind you, though, I took pains never to let him suspect I was even most remotely connected with the cause of his ruin.

“Just when Pickford was having his hardest struggle I went to him with an offer to start him in business. He gratefully accepted my offer. I sent him alone to New York with a large sum of money. Then, disguising myself, I followed him. In the city I removed my disguise and sought out Pickford, telling him I had changed my plans for him. I directed him to come here the next night, but to tell no one of our business. He kept the appointment. We met at the station, six miles below the hills, and walked here to this house. It was a dark night. No one saw us. He was fond of wine, so after I had urged many a glass upon him I conducted him to this vault. In his drunken condition I had no trouble to get him to enter it. Then I shut and locked that iron door upon him. He had only a cask of wine to keep him company. That was ten years ago, and that door has never been opened since.”

A low laugh from the narrator ended his grewsome tale, while a gleam of fiendish triumph flitted across his swarthy face.

A cold chill crept up my spine, and I arose involuntarily.

Was there truth in his awful narration, or was it merely the ravings of a maniac?

“A wholesome tale to go to bed on, eh, Mr. Hope? Ha, ha!” he laughed, as he arose and led the way upstairs.

When I was alone in the room where I was to spend the night, I decided that the wine which Parton had drunk was responsible for the horrible story to which I had listened.

Next morning, while I was despatching an early breakfast, Negro Joe and Parton carried out a cask of wine, which they placed in my wagon.

Just before starting, my strange host handed me a sealed letter, saying:

“Give this to Dillard, and tell him I hope he’ll find the wine superb. Good-by, Mr. Hope,” and he waved me off.

When I reached the bank I gave the letter to Mr. Dillard. As he read it his face turned a sickly hue and his mouth twitched nervously. Recovering himself, however, he ordered Hatch and me to open the cask which Parton had sent him.

We obeyed at once. As the top of the cask was broken open, we started back in horror.

There, preserved in wine, was a *human head*,—the head and face of Caleb Parton, the recluse millionaire!

Then Dillard explained that his letter was from Judson Pickford, who, with the help of Negro Joe, who hated his harsh master, Caleb Parton, had effected his escape from the vault. But a month later, his wife having died, Pickford had returned one dark night and killed the man who had so cruelly ruined him. The head of his enemy had been put in a cask of wine to send to the banker, who had aided in accomplishing his financial ruin. With peculiar cunning, he had appropriated not only the name and looks of Parton, but his property and bank account as well. In carrying out this deception, he had a faithful ally in Negro Joe.

It was Pickford himself who had related the dark story to me. It seemed almost incredible. A visit to the lonely stone house with two officers discovered a headless body in the vault. But Pickford and his ally had disappeared.

