

To Kill a Man

Jack London

Though dim night-lights burned, she moved familiarly through the big rooms and wide halls, seeking vainly the half-finished book of verse she had mislaid and only now remembered. When she turned on the lights in the drawing-room, she disclosed herself clad in a sweeping negligee gown of soft rose-colored stuff, throat and shoulders smothered in lace. Her rings were still on her fingers, her massed yellow hair had not yet been taken down. She was delicately, gracefully beautiful, with slender, oval face, red lips, a faint color in the cheeks, and blue eyes of the chameleon sort that at will stare wide with the innocence of childhood, go hard and gray and brilliantly cold, or flame up in hot wilfulness and mastery.

She turned the lights off and passed out and down the hall toward the morning room. At the entrance she paused and listened. From farther on had come, not a noise, but an impression of movement. She could have sworn she had not heard anything, yet something had been different. The atmosphere of night quietude had been disturbed. She wondered what servant could be prowling about. Not the butler, who was notorious for retiring early save on special occasion. Nor could it be her maid, whom she had permitted to go that evening.

Passing on to the dining-room, she found the door closed. Why she opened it and went on in, she did not know, except for the feeling that the disturbing factor, whatever it might be, was there. The room was in darkness, and she felt her way to the button and pressed. As the blaze of light flashed on, she stepped back and cried out. It was a mere "Oh!" and it was not loud.

Facing her, alongside the button, flat against the wall, was a man. In his hand, pointed toward her, was a revolver. She noticed, even in the shock of seeing him, that the weapon was black and exceedingly long-barreled. She knew black and exceedingly long it for what it was, a Colt's. He was a medium-sized man, roughly clad, brown-eyed, and swarthy with sunburn. He seemed very cool. There was no wobble to the revolver and it was directed toward her stomach, not from an outstretched arm, but from the hip, against which the forearm rested.

"Oh," she said. "I beg your pardon. You startled me. What do you want?"

"I reckon I want to get out," he answered, with a humorous twitch to the lips. "I've kind of lost my way in this here shebang, and if you'll kindly show me the door I'll cause no trouble and sure vamoose."

"But what are you doing here?" she demanded, her voice touched with the sharpness of one used to authority.

“Plain robbing, Miss, that’s all. I came snooping around to see what I could gather up. I thought you wan’t to home, seein’ as I saw you pull out with your old man in an auto. I reckon that must a ben your pa, and you’re Miss Setliffe.”

Mrs. Setliffe saw his mistake, appreciated the naive compliment, and decided not to undecieve him.

“How do you know I am Miss Setliffe?” she asked.

“This is old Setliffe’s house, ain’t it?”

She nodded.

“I didn’t know he had a daughter, but I reckon you must be her. And now, if it ain’t botherin’ you too much, I’d sure be obliged if you’d show me the way out.”

“But why should I? You are a robber, a burglar.”

“If I wan’t an ornery shorthorn at the business, I’d be accumulatin’ them rings on your fingers instead of being polite,” he retorted.

“I come to make a raise outa old Setliffe, and not to be robbing women-folks. If you get outa the way, I reckon I can find my own way out.”

Mrs. Setliffe was a keen woman, and she felt that from such a man there was little to fear. That he was not a typical criminal, she was certain. From his speech she knew he was not of the cities, and she seemed to sense the wider, homelier air of large spaces.

“Suppose I screamed?” she queried curiously. “Suppose I made an outcry for help? You couldn’t shoot me?... a woman?”

She noted the fleeting bafflement in his brown eyes. He answered slowly and thoughtfully, as if working out a difficult problem. “I reckon, then, I’d have to choke you and maul you some bad.”

“A woman?”

“I’d sure have to,” he answered, and she saw his mouth set grimly.

“You’re only a soft woman, but you see, Miss, I can’t afford to go to jail. No, Miss, I sure can’t. There’s a friend of mine waitin’ for me out West. He’s in a hole, and I’ve got to help him out.” The mouth shaped even more grimly. “I guess I could choke you without hurting

you much to speak of.”

Her eyes took on a baby stare of innocent incredulity as she watched him.

“I never met a burglar before,” she assured him, “and I can’t begin to tell you how interested I am.”

“I’m not a burglar, Miss. Not a real one,” he hastened to add as she looked her amused unbelief. “It looks like it, me being here in your house. But it’s the first time I ever tackled such a job. I needed the money bad. Besides, I kind of look on it like collecting what’s coming to me.”

“I don’t understand,” she smiled encouragingly. “You came here to rob, and to rob is to take what is not yours.”

“Yes, and no, in this here particular case. But I reckon I’d better be going now.”

He started for the door of the dining-room, but she interposed, and a very beautiful obstacle she made of herself. His left hand went out as if to grip her, then hesitated. He was patently awed by her soft womanhood.

“There!” she cried triumphantly. “I knew you wouldn’t.”

The man was embarrassed.

“I ain’t never manhandled a woman yet,” he explained, “and it don’t come easy. But I sure will, if you set to screaming.”

“Won’t you stay a few minutes and talk?” she urged. “I’m so interested. I should like to hear you explain how burglary is collecting what is coming to you.”

He looked at her admiringly.

“I always thought women-folks were scart of robbers,” he confessed. “But you don’t seem none.”

She laughed gaily.

“There are robbers and robbers, you know. I am not afraid of you, because I am confident you are not the sort of creature that would harm a woman. Come, talk with me a while. Nobody will disturb us. I am all alone. My—father caught the night train to New York. The servants are all asleep. I should like to give you something to eat—women always prepare

midnight suppers for the burglars they catch, at least they do in the magazine stories. But I don't know where to find the food. Perhaps you will have something to drink?"

He hesitated, and did not reply; but she could see the admiration for her growing in his eyes.

"You're not afraid?" she queried. "I won't poison you, I promise. I'll drink with you to show you it is all right."

"You sure are a surprise package of all right," he declared, for the first time lowering the weapon and letting it hang at his side. "No one don't need to tell me ever again that women-folks in cities is afraid. You ain't much—just a little soft pretty thing. But you've sure got the spunk. And you're trustful on top of it. There ain't many women, or men either, who'd treat a man with a gun the way you're treating me."

She smiled her pleasure in the compliment, and her face, was very earnest as she said:

"That is because I like your appearance. You are too decent-looking a man to be a robber. You oughtn't to do such things. If you are in bad luck you should go to work. Come, put away that nasty revolver and let us talk it over. The thing for you to do is to work."

"Not in this burg," he commented bitterly. "I've walked two inches off the bottom of my legs trying to find a job. Honest, I was a fine large man once... before I started looking for a job."

The merry laughter with which she greeted his sally obviously pleased him, and she was quick to note and take advantage of it. She moved directly away from the door and toward the sideboard.

"Come, you must tell me all about it while I get that drink for you. What will it be? Whisky?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, as he followed her, though he still carried the big revolver at his side, and though he glanced reluctantly at the unguarded open door.

She filled a glass for him at the sideboard.

"I promised to drink with you," she said hesitatingly. "But I don't like whisky. I... I prefer sherry."

She lifted the sherry bottle tentatively for his consent.

“Sure,” he answered, with a nod. “Whisky’s a man’s drink. I never like to see women at it. Wine’s more their stuff.”

She raised her glass to his, her eyes meltingly sympathetic.

“Here’s to finding you a good position—”

But she broke off at sight of the expression of surprised disgust on his face. The glass, barely touched, was removed from his wry lips.

“What is the matter!” she asked anxiously. “Don’t you like it? Have I made a mistake?”

“It’s sure funny whisky. Tastes like it got burned and smoked in the making.”

“Oh! How silly of me! I gave you Scotch. Of course you are accustomed to rye. Let me change it.”

She was almost solicitously maternal, as she replaced the glass with another and sought and found the proper bottle.

“Better?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. No smoke in it. It’s sure the real good stuff. I ain’t had a drink in a week. Kind of slick, that; oily, you know; not made in a chemical factory.”

“You are a drinking man?” It was half a question, half a challenge.

“No, ma’am, not to speak of. I *have* rared up and ripsnorted at spells, but most unfrequent. But there is times when a good stiff jolt lands on the right spot kerchunk, and this is sure one of them. And now, thanking you for your kindness, ma’am, I’ll just be a pulling along.”

But Mrs. Setliffe did not want to lose her burglar. She was too poised a woman to possess much romance, but there was a thrill about the present situation that delighted her. Besides, she knew there was no danger. The man, despite his jaw and the steady brown eyes, was eminently tractable. Also, farther back in her consciousness glimmered the thought of an audience of admiring friends. It was too bad not to have that audience.

“You haven’t explained how burglary, in your case, is merely collecting what is your own,” she said. “Come, sit down, and tell me about it here at the table.”

She maneuvered for her own seat, and placed him across the corner from her. His alertness had not deserted him, as she noted, and his eyes roved sharply about, returning always with

smoldering admiration to hers, but never resting long. And she noted likewise that while she spoke he was intent on listening for other sounds than those of her voice. Nor had he relinquished the revolver, which lay at the corner of the table between them, the butt close to his right hand.

But he was in a new habitat which he did not know. This man from the West, cunning in woodcraft and plainscraft, with eyes and ears open, tense and suspicious, did not know that under the table, close to her foot, was the push button of an electric bell. He had never heard of such a contrivance, and his keenness and wariness went for naught.

“It’s like this, Miss,” he began, in response to her urging. “Old Setliffe done me up in a little deal once. It was raw, but it worked. Anything will work full and legal when it’s got few hundred million behind it. I’m not squealin’, and I ain’t taking a slam at your pa. He don’t know me from Adam, and I reckon he don’t know he done me outa anything. He’s too big, thinking and dealing in millions, to ever hear of a small potato like me. He’s an operator. He’s got all kinds of experts thinking and planning and working for him, some of them, I hear, getting more cash salary than the President of the United States. I’m only one of thousands that have been done up by your pa, that’s all.

“You see, ma’am, I had a little hole in the ground—a dinky, hydraulic, one-horse outfit of a mine. And when the Setliffe crowd shook down Idaho, and reorganized the smelter trust, and roped in the rest of the landscape, and put through the big hydraulic scheme at Twin Pines, why I sure got squeezed. I never had a run for my money. I was scratched off the card before the first heat. And so, to-night, being broke and my friend needing me bad, I just dropped around to make a raise outa your pa. Seeing as I needed it, it kinda was coming to me.”

“Granting all that you say is so,” she said, “nevertheless it does not make house-breaking any the less house-breaking. You couldn’t make such a defense in a court of law.”

“I know that,” he confessed meekly. “What’s right ain’t always legal. And that’s why I am so uncomfortable a-settin’ here and talking with you. Not that I ain’t enjoying your company—I sure do enjoy it—but I just can’t afford to be caught. I know what they’d do to me in this here city. There was a young fellow that got fifty years only last week for holding a man up on the street for two dollars and eighty-five cents. I read about it in the paper. When times is hard and they ain’t no work, men get desperate. And then the other men who’ve got something to be robbed of get desperate, too, and they just sure soak it to the other fellows. If I got caught, I reckon I wouldn’t get a mite less than ten years. That’s why I’m hankering to be on my way.”

“No; wait.” She lifted a detaining hand, at the same time removing her foot from the bell, which she had been pressing intermittently. “You haven’t told me your name yet.”

He hesitated.

“Call me Dave.”

“Then... Dave,” she laughed with pretty confusion. “Something must be done for you. You are a young man, and you are just at the beginning of a bad start. If you begin by attempting to collect what you think is coming to you, later on you will be collecting what you are perfectly sure isn’t coming to you. And you know what the end will be. Instead of this, we must find something honorable for you to do.”

“I need the money, and I need it now,” he replied doggedly. “It’s not for myself, but for that friend I told you about. He’s in a peck of trouble, and he’s got to get his lift now or not at all.”

“I can find you a position,” she said quickly. “And—yes, the very thing!—I’ll lend you the money you want to send to your friend. This you can pay back out of your salary.”

“About three hundred would do,” he said slowly. “Three hundred would pull him through. I’d work my fingers off for a year for that, and my keep, and a few cents to buy Bull Durham with.”

“Ah! You smoke! I never thought of it.”

Her hand went out over the revolver toward his hand, as she pointed to the tell-tale yellow stain on his fingers. At the same time her eyes measured the nearness of her own hand and of his to the weapon. She ached to grip it in one swift movement. She was sure she could do it, and yet she was not sure; and so it was that she refrained as she withdrew her hand.

“Won’t you smoke?” she invited.

“I’m ’most dying to.”

“Then do so. I don’t mind. I really like it—cigarettes, I mean.”

With his left hand he dipped into his side pocket, brought out a loose wheat-straw paper and shifted it to his right hand close by the revolver. Again he dipped, transferring to the paper a pinch of brown, flaky tobacco. Then he proceeded, both hands just over the revolver, to roll the cigarette.

“From the way you hover close to that nasty weapon, you seem to be afraid of me,” she challenged.

“Not exactly afraid of you, ma’am, but, under the circumstances, just a mite timid.”

“But I’ve not been afraid of you.”

“You’ve got nothing to lose.”

“My life,” she retorted.

“That’s right,” he acknowledged promptly, “and you ain’t been scairt of me. Mebbe I am over anxious.”

“I wouldn’t cause you any harm.”

Even as she spoke, her slipper felt for the bell and pressed it. At the same time her eyes were earnest with a plea of honesty.

“You are a judge of men. I know it. And of women. Surely, when I am trying to persuade you from a criminal life and to get you honest work to do....?”

He was immediately contrite.

“I sure beg your pardon, ma’am,” he said. “I reckon my nervousness ain’t complimentary.”

As he spoke, he drew his right hand from the table, and after lighting the cigarette, dropped it by his side.

“Thank you for your confidence,” she breathed softly, resolutely keeping her eyes from measuring the distance to the revolver, and keeping her foot pressed firmly on the bell.

“About that three hundred,” he began. “I can telegraph it West to-night. And I’ll agree to work a year for it and my keep.”

“You will earn more than that. I can promise seventy-five dollars a month at the least. Do you know horses?”

His face lighted up and his eyes sparkled.

“Then go to work for me—or for my father, rather, though I engage all the servants. I need a second coachman—”

“And wear a uniform?” he interrupted sharply, the sneer of the free-born West in his voice

and on his lips.

She smiled tolerantly.

“Evidently that won’t do. Let me think. Yes. Can you break and handle colts?”

He nodded.

“We have a stock farm, and there’s room for just such a man as you. Will you take it?”

“Will I, ma’am?” His voice was rich with gratitude and enthusiasm. “Show me to it. I’ll dig right in to-morrow. And I can sure promise you one thing, ma’am. You’ll never be sorry for lending Hughie Luke a hand in his trouble—”

“I thought you said to call you Dave,” she chided forgivingly.

“I did, ma’am. I did. And I sure beg your pardon. It was just plain bluff. My real name is Hughie Luke. And if you’ll give me the address of that stock farm of yours, and the railroad fare, I head for it first thing in the morning.”

Throughout the conversation she had never relaxed her attempts on the bell. She had pressed it in every alarming way—three shorts and a long, two and a long, and five. She had tried long series of shorts, and, once, she had held the button down for a solid three minutes. And she had been divided between oburgation of the stupid, heavy-sleeping butler and doubt if the bell were in order.

“I am so glad,” she said; “so glad that you are willing. There won’t be much to arrange. But you will first have to trust me while I go upstairs for my purse.”

She saw the doubt flicker momentarily in his eyes, and added hastily, “But you see I am trusting you with the three hundred dollars.”

“I believe you, ma’am,” he came back gallantly. “Though I just can’t help this nervousness.”

“Shall I go and get it?”

But before she could receive consent, a slight muffled jar from the distance came to her ear. She knew it for the swing-door of the butler’s pantry. But so slight was it—more a faint vibration than a sound—that she would not have heard had not her ears been keyed and listening for it. Yet the man had heard. He was startled in his composed way.

“What was that?” he demanded.

For answer, her left hand flashed out to the revolver and brought it back. She had had the start of him, and she needed it, for the next instant his hand leaped up from his side, clutching emptiness where the revolver had been.

“Sit down!” she commanded sharply, in a voice new to him. “Don’t move. Keep your hands on the table.”

She had taken a lesson from him. Instead of holding the heavy weapon extended, the butt of it and her forearm rested on the table, the muzzle pointed, not at his head, but his chest. And he, looking coolly and obeying her commands, knew there was no chance of the kick-up of the recoil producing a miss. Also, he saw that the revolver did not wobble, nor the hand shake, and he was thoroughly conversant with the size of hole the soft-nosed bullets could make. He had eyes, not for her, but for the hammer, which had risen under the pressure of her forefinger on the trigger.

“I reckon I’d best warn you that that there trigger-pull is filed dreadful fine. Don’t press too hard, or I’ll have a hole in me the size of a walnut.”

She slacked the hammer partly down.

“That’s better,” he commented. “You’d best put it down all the way. You see how easy it works. If you want to, a quick light pull will jiffy her up and back and make a pretty mess all over your nice floor.”

A door opened behind him, and he heard somebody enter the room. But he did not turn his head. He was looking at her, and he found it the face of another woman—hard, cold, pitiless yet brilliant in its beauty. The eyes, too, were hard, though blazing with a cold light.

“Thomas,” she commanded, “go to the telephone and call the police. Why were you so long in answering?”

“I came as soon as I heard the bell, madam,” was the answer.

The robber never took his eyes from hers, nor did she from his, but at mention of the bell she noticed that his eyes were puzzled for the moment.

“Beg your pardon,” said the butler from behind, “but wouldn’t it be better for me to get a weapon and arouse the servants?”

“No; ring for the police. I can hold this man. Go and do it—quickly.”

The butler slipped out of the room, and the man and the woman sat on, gazing into each other's eyes. To her it was an experience keen with enjoyment, and in her mind was the gossip of her crowd, and she saw notes in the society weeklies of the beautiful young Mrs. Setliffe capturing an armed robber single-handed. It would create a sensation, she was sure.

"When you get that sentence you mentioned," she said coldly, "you will have time to meditate upon what a fool you have been, taking other persons' property and threatening women with revolvers. You will have time to learn your lesson thoroughly. Now tell the truth. You haven't any friend in trouble. All that you told me was lies."

He did not reply. Though his eyes were upon her, they seemed blank. In truth, for the instant she was veiled to him, and what he saw was the wide sunwashed spaces of the West, where men and women were bigger than the rotten denizens, as he had encountered them, of the thrice rotten cities of the East.

"Go on. Why don't you speak? Why don't you lie some more? Why don't you beg to be let off?"

"I might," he answered, licking his dry lips. "I might ask to be let off if..."

"If what?" she demanded peremptorily, as he paused.

"I was trying to think of a word you reminded me of. As I was saying, I might if you was a decent woman."

Her face paled.

"Be careful," she warned.

"You don't dast kill me," he sneered. "The world's a pretty low down place to have a thing like you prowling around in it, but it ain't so plumb low down, I reckon, as to let you put a hole in me. You're sure bad, but the trouble with you is that you're weak in your badness. It ain't much to kill a man, but you ain't got it in you. There's where you lose out."

"Be careful of what you say," she repeated. "Or else, I warn you, it will go hard with you. It can be seen to whether your sentence is light or heavy."

"Something's the matter with God," he remarked irrelevantly, "to be letting you around loose. It's clean beyond me what he's up to, playing such-like tricks on poor humanity. Now if I was God—"

His further opinion was interrupted by the entrance of the butler.

“Something is wrong with the telephone, madam,” he announced. “The wires are crossed or something, because I can’t get Central.”

“Go and call one of the servants,” she ordered. “Send him out for an officer, and then return here.”

Again the pair was left alone.

“Will you kindly answer one question, ma’am?” the man said. “That servant fellow said something about a bell. I watched you like a cat, and you sure rung no bell.”

“It was under the table, you poor fool. I pressed it with my foot.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I reckoned I’d seen your kind before, and now I sure know I have. I spoke to you true and trusting, and all the time you was lying like hell to me.”

She laughed mockingly.

“Go on. Say what you wish. It is very interesting.”

“You made eyes at me, looking soft and kind, playing up all the time the fact that you wore skirts instead of pants—and all the time with your foot on the bell under the table. Well, there’s some consolation. I’d sooner be poor Hughie Luke, doing his ten years, than be in your skin. Ma’am, hell is full of women like you.”

There was silence for a space, in which the man, never taking his eyes from her, studying her, was making up his mind.

“Go on,” she urged. “Say something.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll say something. I’ll sure say something. Do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to get right up from this chair and walk out that door. I’d take the gun from you, only you might turn foolish and let it go off. You can have the gun. It’s a good one. As I was saying, I am going right out that door. And you ain’t going to pull that gun off either. It takes guts to shoot a man, and you sure ain’t got them. Now get ready and see if you can pull that trigger. I ain’t going to harm you. I’m going out that door, and I’m starting.”

Keeping his eyes fixed on her, he pushed back the chair and slowly stood erect. The hammer rose halfway. She watched it. So did he.

“Pull harder,” he advised. “It ain’t half up yet. Go on and pull it and kill a man. That’s what I said, kill a man, spatter his brains out on the floor, or slap a hole into him the size of your fist. That’s what killing a man means.”

The hammer lowered jerkily but gently. The man turned his back and walked slowly to the door. She swung the revolver around so that it bore on his back. Twice again the hammer came up halfway and was reluctantly eased down.

At the door the man turned for a moment before passing on. A sneer was on his lips. He spoke to her in a low voice, almost drawling, but in it was the quintessence of all loathing, as he called her a name unspeakable and vile.

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