

A SHADOWY DEBT, A LAWYER'S RESOLVE.

THE PRICE OF BLOOD



HOWARD PYLE

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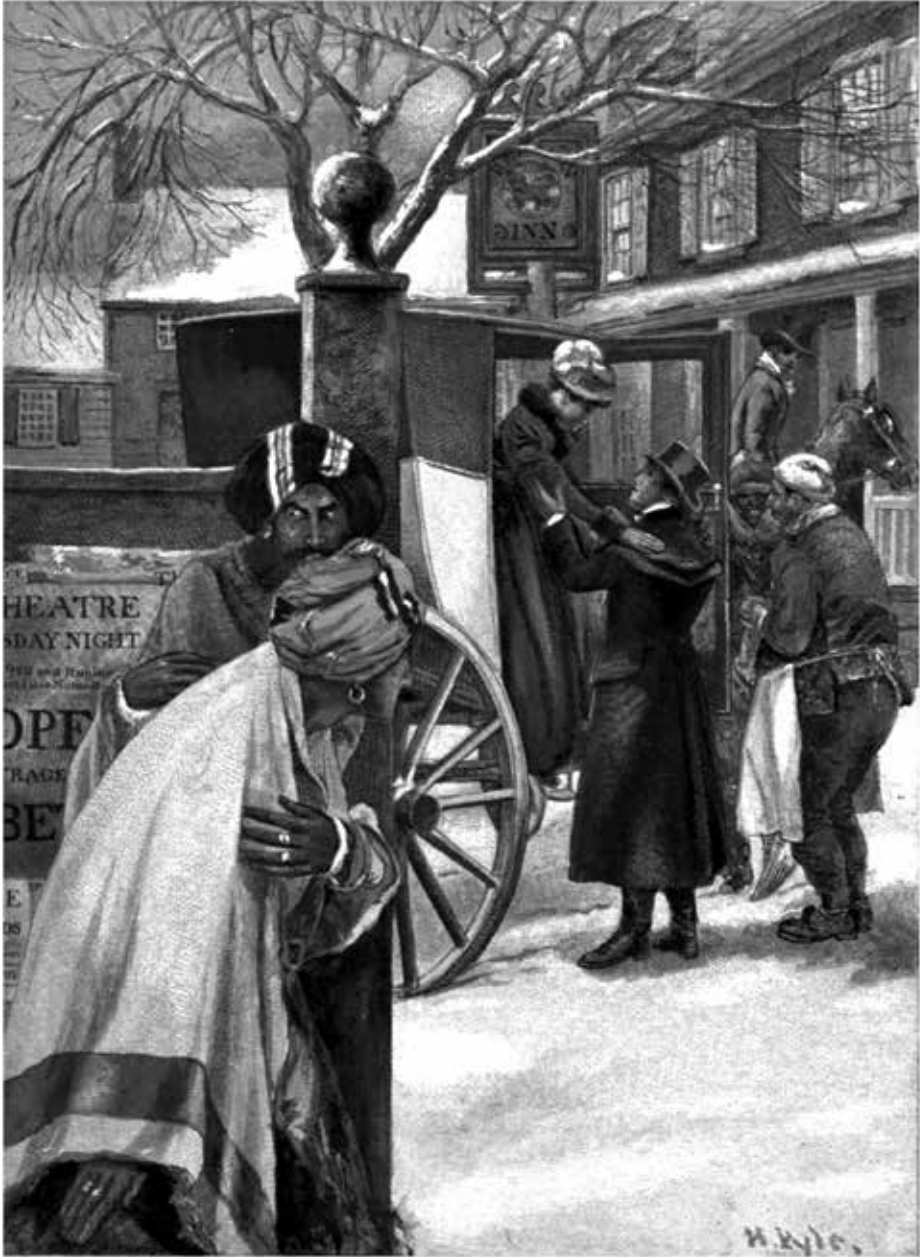
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by

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Upon the last stage of their journey they stopped for dinner at a tavern.

Contents

1. The *Extraordinary* and *Initial* CLIENT of a *Young* LAWYER without *Previous* PRACTICE. . . 9
2. The *Remarkable* BEHAVIOR of the LAWYER'S *Second* CLIENT..... 31
3. The *Horrific* EPISODE in the COURSE of which the LAWYER obtained a *Third* CLIENT. 45
4. In which is related the *Remarkable* REQUEST of the LAWYER'S *Fourth* CLIENT..... 61
5. The CONCLUSION of the STORY of the *young* LAWYER and his *Four* CLIENTS..... 75

HERE FOLLOWS THE
INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION



IN the year 1807 New York was grown to be a city of no small pretension to an extremely cosmopolitan cast of society. Being a seaport of considerable importance and of great conveniency to foreign immigration, it had even before this become a favorite haven for itinerant visitors from European countries, who for reasons best known to themselves did not find it to fit their inclinations to remain at home. These people, being received into the society of the most exclusive and particular fashion of the town, soon lent to the community a tone characteristic of the manners and customs of European centres of civilization.

Could the reader have been introduced into our American city at this period of its history, he might easily have flattered himself that he was in London or Paris. Or could he have stood upon Courtlandt Street corner, and have beheld young gentlemen of style dressed in the latest English mode or the young ladies gay with red hats and

red shawls worn *à la Française* passing in review upon their evening promenade, he might have believed himself to have been transported into a community composed of both those European cities. Madame Bouchard, the mantua-maker upon Courtlandt Street, vied in public favor with Mrs. Toole, the English woman, whose shop upon Broadway had for so long been the particular emporium of fashionable feminine adornment. Fashionable bucks, who could afford to do so, drank nothing but Imperial champagne at Dodge's; and young ladies who aspired to the highest flash of ton made it a point to converse in French from the boxes of the theatres between the acts of Mr. Cooper's performances. Monsieur Duport taught dancing to young people of quality at twenty-five dollars a quarter, and the French waltz and the English contradance divided the favor of the most *recherché* assemblies.

So much as this has been told with a certain particularity that the author may better invite the confidence of the discerning reader; for otherwise it might cause him some misgivings to accept with entire assurity the fact that a deposed East India Rajah should secretly have maintained his court in an otherwise unoccupied house on Broadway, and it might shock his sense of the credible to accept the statement that an Oriental Potentate should have been able successfully to pursue his vengeance against the authors

of his undoing in so unexpected a situation as the town of New York afforded.

It is with so much a preface as this that the author invites his reader to embark with him upon the following narrative, which, though it may at times appear a little strange and out of the ordinary course of events, may yet lead the thoughtful mind to consider how easy it is for the innocent to become entangled in a fate which in no wise concerns him, and for the discreet to become enveloped in a network of circumstances which he himself has had no part in framing.

Accordingly, while the frivolous may easily read this serious story for the sake of entertainment, the sober and more sedate reader will doubtless carry away with him the moral of the discourse which the author would earnestly point out for his consideration.

HERE FOLLOWS THE
FIRST CHAPTER

CHAPTER ONE

The *Extraordinary* and *Initial* CLIENT
of a *Young* LAWYER without *Previous*
PRACTICE.



HERE was at this period in the town of New York a number of young gentlemen possessed of very lively spirits and pretty ingenious tastes for folly. These gay rattlers about the town had gathered themselves together into a society known as the “Bluebird Club,” in which they pledged themselves not only to eat a supper of oysters and to drink as considerable a quantity of rum punch as possible, but subsequently to perform all manner of extraordinary acts of folly. This assemblage of rakes, though it possessed no fixed place of meeting, usually resorted to an oyster-house of no good repute situate upon Front Street, maintained by a negro crimp by name Bram Gunn, whither it gathered once a month during the period that oysters were in season.

Because of many questions of police jurisprudence that had arisen, it was deemed necessary by the members of the Bluebird Club to conceal their individual identities as far as possible from the recognition of those who might otherwise know them. Accordingly, it was customary for those who attended the assemblies of the club to assume for the occasion some such masquerade or disguise as the rag-fairs of the junk-shops or the disused wardrobes of the theatres might afford them.

The organizer of this society and its leading spirit, at the time of which we speak, was a young gentleman by name Nathaniel Griscombe. He was nominally an attorney-at-law; but, though fairly entitled by admission to practise his profession at the bar of justice, he had so far had such small encouragement therein that he had as yet found nothing whatever to do but sit at his office window and amuse himself with his own thoughts and speculations, with such an occasional entertainment as might be offered by the transit across that frame of vision of one or more of those females of lighter tastes and inclinations who by the men of the town were denominated "does." He was regarded by those who knew him as possessed of a superior wit, and he was noted as a professional fulminator of what was then popularly known as "whim-whams." It was also reputed that he could consume more spirituous

liquors, without a perceptible effect upon his equilibrium, than any man of his age about the town.

Such extravagances as he indulged in entirely hid from the view of his acquaintances and of the town the fact that he was a young gentleman of no uncommon parts. Indeed, had fortune offered him opportunities in proportion to his abilities instead of neglecting him so entirely, he might have been earning the applause of those in his profession who possessed the respect of the community instead of evaporating his time with such entirely shallow companions as those young bucks and rattlers with whom he elected to consort. Having, however, a prodigious amount of idle time upon his hands, and being of a disposition that would desire the applause even of the vain and foolish rather than no applause at all, he yielded himself with only an occasional qualm of conscience to the indulgence of such follies and escapades as afforded excitement and interest for the moment to his extremely volatile spirits and active temperament.

Upon a particular night this young gentleman wended his way to a meeting of the Bluebird Club, arm in arm with three fellow-members. Each was clad in a most extravagant and ridiculous masquerade. One was adorned with a long night-gown covered over with yellow moons, a mask with a prodigious nose and spectacles, and a wig

of cotton-wool. Another wore the black costume of an astrologer, his face blackened, and a tall steeple-crowned hat made of black paste-board upon his head. Our young gentleman of the law had clad himself in the loose cotton blouse and drawers of a clown. Upon his head he wore an extraordinary cocked hat with a rosette and ribbons of green, yellow, and red; and, to further conceal his identity, he had chalked his face, and had painted red circles in vermilion around his eyes and mouth. In these costumes our three wild bucks made their way to the meeting-place of the Bluebird Club, shouting, singing, and by their pungent jests exciting alternate emotions of amusement and irritation in all those whom they passed. Arriving at the meeting-place of their society, they found gathered an unusually large assembly, consisting of four or five and twenty other young gentlemen, all like themselves bent upon the execution of whims and follies, and all alike disguised in extravagant and outrageous costumes.

With many absurd ceremonies, which were supposed to be of a secret nature, and a multitude of performances which rather befitted a cage of monkeys than a gathering of rational human beings, but which so well sufficed to tickle their sense of wit that continued roars and peals of laughter greeted each performance, the initiatory formalities were concluded; and a supper of stewed oysters,

cucumber pickles, water biscuit, and rum punch, was attacked with a heartiness of appetite which did credit alike to the easy consciences and the hearty stomachs of those who partook thereof. Nor did the mirth of the club at all diminish with the progress of the repast. Rather did their sense of the ludicrous become more keen and volatile as each new glass of rum punch was consumed. A look, a word, a grimace, was enough to cast the whole assembly into convulsions of laughter, from which some could hardly recover before spasms of cachinnations would seize upon them again.

The extravagance and uproar had become deafening, when at their height the door of the room in which the assembly sat at their obstreperous repast was suddenly flung open, and a portentously tall and mysterious figure, clad entirely in black, entered the apartment, and stood regarding the furious scene of folly in masquerade, if not with amazement, at least with a perfectly silent observation. The figure that thus so suddenly appeared was wrapped in a long rich cloak of a dark and heavy material, the face being entirely hidden by a mask hung with long black silk fringe. This apparition stood for a considerable time unobserved by our young rackets, who were too far engrossed in their own follies to take notice of anything else; but presently one, and then

another, and then all of the individual members became aware of his presence. This acknowledgment of the advent of the stranger was indicated by a redoubled outburst of uproar, composed of shouts, whistles, and cat-calls; and, supposing nothing else than that the new-comer was one of their members, they began freely to bestow upon him such part of the evening's entertainment as had not been consumed in a shower of cucumber pickles and water biscuit that fairly rained upon him like a storm of hail.

Any one less determined upon a purpose than the stranger could hardly have stood his ground. As it was, he made no pretence of defending himself from the attack, but submitted to the assault of the Blue-bird Club with so much dignity of demeanor that, what with the richness of his attire, so different from their tinsel foppery, and what with the silence of his observation,—his eyeballs now closing into darkness and now shining whitely beneath the ebony shadow of his mask,—it began to dawn upon the brains even of our half-tipsy buffoons that here was something of a different purpose from their intemperate madness and frenzy of folly.

By little and little the uproar in the room diminished, until at last all fell fairly silent, and sat returning the gaze of the visitor, if not with a growing respect, at

least with an increasing curiosity as to the purpose of the presence that had thus unexpectedly introduced itself upon their absurd and senseless performances. Whereupon, being able now to make himself heard, the stranger in a commanding voice demanded to know which of the company present was the attorney-at-law, Nathaniel Griscombe.

It may be imagined that our young lawyer was somewhat surprised and sobered by this inquiry. Rising from his seat, he replied to the challenge that he was the individual whom the other named; and then, suspecting that it might be the intention of the stranger to put a hoax upon him, he added that, if the visitor was up to any whim-whams or bit of hoax, he, Nathaniel Griscombe, was a rattler himself, and knew perfectly well exactly what o'clock it was.

The stranger, without any immediate reply, regarded our young gentleman for a considerable time in silence. But, if he experienced any emotion of surprise or amusement at the sight of his white and bepainted face and the extraordinary attire that the youthful attorney presented to him, he made no betrayal of his sentiment. "Sir," said he, with perfect seriousness, "so far from jesting or desiring to jest, I assure you that I at this moment am more serious than I suppose you have ever been in all of your

life. I have been looking for you everywhere, and have gone from place to place, misdirected by every one from whom I requested knowledge. I have stood at the door for a considerable time, knocking; but, finding myself not heard because of the noise you have been making, and not choosing to wait all night for permission to enter, I came in without being bidden, to find you, at last, in this company of apes and buffoons. My purpose in coming here, I must inform you, is of so serious a nature that, were it governed by other circumstances, I would at once withdraw and leave you in peace to the continuation of your folly. But you will perhaps be surprised when I assure you that it is with the utmost satisfaction I discover you in such a place as this, and so surrounded and engaged as you are.”

At these words, spoken with perfect sobriety and every appearance of candor, our young gentleman presented, it must be confessed, a rather silly face. “Upon my word,” he said with as easy a laugh as he could assume for the occasion, “I am very well pleased that my present surroundings afford you satisfaction. I can only say, however, that I am glad you are not likely to come to me as a client; for your respect for my parts could hardly be augmented by finding me so engaged.”

“As to that,” returned the stranger, with unrelaxed

sobriety, “you will no doubt be additionally surprised to learn that I do indeed come to you as a client to his attorney.”

“Then, indeed, sir,” cried our young gentleman, who began again sagely to suspect that a hoax was being put upon him, “you have my word of honor that I am at a loss to guess why you are satisfied to find me indulging in such folly and intemperance as that which you discovered when you favored us with this unexpected visit.”

“As to that,” said the stranger, “I can easily enlighten you. The nature of the business in which I would employ you is of such a sort as to demand the attention of one not only possessed of spirit and courage and an entire command of unoccupied time, but also of one possessed of other and very different qualifications. To this end I have made diligent inquiries; and I have conceived the opinion that you are a man not only possessed of considerable parts, but of an honesty sufficient to carry you through so delicate and dangerous a commission as that with which I have to intrust you.”

At these words, our young gentleman knew not what face to assume; nor could he yet tell whether to regard the whole affair as a hoax or as the beginning of a more serious adventure. “Upon my word, sir,” he cried, “you pique my curiosity. But, if I am to believe what you tell me,

I must be better assured of your truth. I am, as you may well believe, too knowing a bird to be caught by chaff.”

“Indeed,” said the other, “you yourself can alone prove the sincerity of my words; nor would it in the least remove the doubts that you entertain of my sincerity, should I inform you that the business upon which you will be employed concerns the possible murder of my own self. If, however, you are the man of mettle I suppose you to be, you have only to accompany me in the conveyance that awaits below, and you can then and there satisfy yourself as to whether I have spoken with veracity or with dis-ingenuousness.”

By this time, as may be believed, the assembly of young bucks had fallen entirely silent; nor could our young attorney compose himself to any frame of mind to digest the credibility of that which he heard. “I protest,” he cried at last, “the more you tell me, the more my belief is increased that you have a purpose to make me the victim of a jest. Nevertheless, if what you have just said is offered as a challenge, you shall find me your man; for I declare that I am not afraid to accompany you or any other man, wherever you may choose to conduct.”

Thereupon, bidding his companions to await his return, he arose, and, removing his cocked hat with its parti-colored ribbons from its peg upon the wall where it hung,



“BIDDING HIS COMPANIONS TO AWAIT
HIS RETURN... HE FOLLOWED
HIS INTERLOCUTOR”