# The Shocks of Doom

O. Henry

Here is an aristocracy of the public parks and even of the vagabonds who use them for their private apartments. Vallance felt rather than knew this, but when he stepped down out of his world into chaos his feet brought him directly to Madison Square.

Raw and astringent as a schoolgirl — of the old order — young May breathed austerely among the budding trees. Vallance buttoned his coat, lighted his last cigarette and took his seat upon a bench. For three minutes be mildly regretted the last hundred of his last thousand that it had cost him when the bicycle cop put an end to his last automobile ride. Then he felt in every pocket and found not a single penny. He had given up his apartment that morning. His furniture had gone toward certain debts. His clothes, save what were upon him, had descended to his man-servant for back wages. As he sat there was not in the whole city for him a bed or a broiled lobster or a street-car fare or a carnation for buttonhole unless be should obtain them by spong-on his friends or by false pretenses. Therefore lie had chosen the park.

And all this was because an uncle had disinherited him, and cut down his allowance from liberality to nothing. And all that was because his nephew had disobeyed him concerning a certain girl, who comes not into this story — therefore, all readers who brush their hair toward its roots may be warned to read no further. There was another nephew, of a different branch, who had once been the prospective heir and favorite. Being without grace or hope, he had long ago disappeared in the mire. Now drag-nets were out for him; he was to be rehabilitated and restored. And so Vallance fell grandly as Lucifer to the lowest pit, joining the tattered ghosts in the little park.

Sitting there, he leaned far back on the hard bench and laughed a jet of cigarette smoke up to the lowest tree branches. The sudden severing of all his life’s ties had brought him a free, thrilling, almost joyous elation. He felt precisely the sensation of the aero-naut when he cuts loose his parachute and lets his balloon drift away.

The hour was nearly ten. Not many loungers were on the benches. The park-dweller, though a stubborn fighter against autumnal coolness, is slow to attack the advance line of spring’s chilly cohorts.

Then arose one from a seat near the leaping fountain, and came and sat himself at Vallance’s side. He was either young or old; cheap lodging-houses had flavored him mustily; razors and combs had passed him by; in him drink had been bottled and sealed in the devil’s bond. He begged a match, which is the form of introduction among park benchers, and then he began to talk.

“You’re not one of the regulars,” he said to Vallance. “I know tailored clothes when I see ‘em. You just stopped for a moment on your way through the park. Don’t mind my talking to you for a while? I’ve got to be with somebody. I’m afraid — I’m afraid. I’ve told two or three of those bummers over about it. They think I’m crazy. Say — let tell you — all I’ve had to eat to-day was a couple pretzels and an apple. To-morrow I’ll stand in to inherit three millions; and that restaurant you ee over there with the autos around it will be too for me to eat in. Don’t believe it, do you?

“Without the slightest trouble,” said Vallance, with a laugh. “I lunched there yesterday. To-night I couldn’t buy a five-cent cup of coffee.”

“You don’t look like one of us. Well, I guess those things happen. I used to be a high-flyer myself years ago. What knocked you out of the game?”

“I — oh, I lost my job,” said Vallance.

“It’s undiluted Hades, this city,” went on the other. “One day you’re eating from china; the next you are eating in China — a chop-suey joint. I’ve had more than my share of hard luck. For five years I’ve been little better than a panhandler. I was raised up to live expensively and do nothing. Say — I don’t mind telling you — I’ve got to talk to somebody, you see, because I’m afraid — I’m afraid. My name’s Ide. You wouldn’t think that old Paulding, one of the millionaires on Riverside Drive, was my uncle, would you? Well, he is. I lived in his house once, and had all the money I wanted. Say, haven’t you got the price of a couple of drinks about you — er — what’s your name”

“Dawson,” said Vallance. “No; I’m sorry to say that I’m all in, financially.”

“I’ve been living for a week in a coal cellar on Division Street,” went on Ide, “with a crook they called ‘Blinky’ Morris. I didn’t have anywhere else to go. While I was out to-day a chap with some pa-pers in his pocket was there, asking for me. I didn’t know but what he was a fly cop, so I didn’t go around again till after dark. There was a letter there be had left for me. Say — Dawson, it was from a big downtown lawyer, Mead. I’ve seen his sign on Ann Street. Paulding wants me to play the prodigal nephew — wants me to come back and be his heir again and blow in his money. I’m to call at the lawyer’s office at ten to-morrow and step into my old shoes again — heir to three million, Dawson, and $10,000 a year pocket money. And — I’m afraid — I’m afraid”

The vagrant leaped to his feet and raised both trembling arms above his bead. He caught his breath and moaned hysterically.

Vallance seized his arm and forced him back to the bench.

“Be quiet!” he commanded, with something like disgust in his tones. “One would think you had lost a fortune, instead of being about to acquire one. Of what are you afraid?”

Ide cowered and shivered on the bench. He clung to Vallance’s sleeve, and even in the dim glow of the Broadway lights the latest disinherited one could see drops on the other’s brow wrung out by some strange terror.

“Why, I’m afraid something will happen to me be-fore morning. I don’t know what — something to keep me from coming into that money. I’m afraid a tree will fall on me — I’m afraid a cab will run over me, or a stone drop on me from a housetop, or something. I never was afraid before. I’ve sat in this park a hundred nights as calm as a graven image without knowing where my breakfast was to come from. But now it’s different. I love money, Daw-son - I’m happy as a god when it’s trickling through my fingers, and people are bowing to me, with the music and the flowers and fine clothes all around. As long as I knew I was out of the game I didn’t mind. I was even happy sitting here ragged and hungry, listening to the fountain jump and watching the carriages go up the avenue. But it’s in reach of my hand again now — almost — and I can’t stand it to wait twelve hours, Dawson — I can’t stand it. There are fifty things that could happen to me — I could go blind — I might be attacked with heart disease — the world might come to an end before I could — ”

Ide sprang to his feet again, with a shriek. Peo-ple stirred on the benches and began to look. Vallance took his arm.

“Come and walk,” he said, soothingly. “And try to calm yourself. There is no need to become excited or alarmed. Nothing is going to happen to you. One night is like another.”

“That’s right,” said Ide. “Stay with me, Daw-son — that’s a good fellow. Walk around with me awhile. I never went to pieces like this before, and I’ve had a good many hard knocks. Do you think you could hustle something in the way of a little lunch, old man? I’m afraid my nerve’s too far gone to try any panhandling”

Vallance led his companion up almost deserted Fifth Avenue, and then westward along the Thirties toward Broadway. “Wait here a few minutes,” he said, leaving Ide in a quiet and shadowed spot. He entered a familiar hotel, and strolled toward the bar quite in his old assured way.

“There’s a poor devil outside, Jimmy,” he said to the bartender, “who says he’s hungry and looks it. You know what they do when you give them money. Fix up a sandwich or two for him; and I’ll see that he doesn’t throw it away.”

“Certainly, Mr. Vallance,” said the bartender. “They ain’t all fakes. Don’t like to see anybody go hungry.”

Ide folded a liberal supply of the free lunch into a napkin. Vallance went with it and joined his companion. Ide pounced upon the food ravenously. “I haven’t had any free lunch as good as this in a year,” be said. “Aren’t you going to eat any, Dawson?

“I’m not hungry - thanks,” said Vallance.

“We’ll go back to the Square,” said Ide. “The cops won’t bother us there. I’ll roll up the rest of this ham and stuff for our breakfast. I won’t eat any more; I’m afraid I’ll get sick. Suppose I’d die of cramps or something to-night, and never get to touch that money again! It’s eleven hours yet till time to see that lawyer. You won’t leave me, will you, Dawson? I’m afraid something might happen. You haven’t any place to go, have you?”

“No,” said Vallance, “nowhere to-night. I’ll have a bench with you.”

“You take it cool,” said Ide, “if you’ve told it to me straight. I should think a man put on the bum from a good job just in one day would be tearing his hair.”

“I believe I’ve already remarked,” said Vallance, laughing, “that I would have thought that a man who was expecting to come into a fortune on the next day would be feeling pretty easy and quiet.”

“It’s funny business,” philosophized Ide, “about the way people take things, anyhow. Here’s your bench, Dawson, right next to mine. The light don’t shine in your eyes here. Say, Dawson, I’ll get the old man to give you a letter to somebody about a job when I get back home. You’ve helped me a lot to-night. I don’t believe I could have gone through the night if I hadn’t struck you.”

“Thank you,” said Vallance. “Do you lie down or sit up on these when you sleep?

For hours Vallance gazed almost without winking at the stars through the branches of the trees and listened to the sharp slapping of horses’ hoofs on the sea of asphalt to the south His mind was active, but his feelings were dormant. Every emotion seemed to have been eradicated. Ide felt no regrets, no fears, no pain or discomfort. Even when be thought of the girl, it was as of an inhabitant of one of those remote stars at which be gazed. He remembered the absurd antics of his companion and laughed softly, yet without a feeling of mirth. Soon the daily army of milk wagons made of the city a roaring drum to which they marched. Vallance fell asleep on his comfortless bench.

At ten o’clock on the next day the two stood at the door of Lawyer Mead’s office in Ann Street.

Ide’s nerves fluttered worse than ever when the hour approached; and Vallance could not decide to leave him a possible prey to the dangers he dreaded.

When they entered the office, Lawyer Mead looked at them wonderingly. He and Vallance were old friends. After his greeting, he turned to Ide, who stood with white face and trembling limbs before the expected crisis.

“I sent a second letter to your address last night, Mr. Ide,” he said. “I learned this morning that you were not there to receive it. It will inform you that Mr. Paulding has reconsidered his offer to take you back into favor. He has decided not to do so, and desires you to understand that no change will be made in the relations existing between you and him.”

Ide’s trembling suddenly ceased. The color came back to his face, and be straightened his back. His jaw went forward half an inch, and a gleam came into his eye. He pushed back his battered bat with one hand, and extended the other, with levelled fingers, toward the lawyer. He took a long breath and then laughed sardonically.

“Tell old Paulding he may go to the devil,” he said, loudly and clearly, and turned and walked out of the office with a firm and lively step.

Lawyer Mead turned on his heel to Vallance and smiled.

“I am glad you came in,” he said, genially. “Your uncle wants you to return home at once. He is reconciled to the situation that led to his hasty action, and desires to say that all will be as —”

“Hey, Adams!” cried Lawyer Mead, breaking his sentence, and calling to his clerk. “Bring a glass of water Mr. Vallance has fainted.”