

The Death Disk

By Mark Twain

Colonel Mayfair was the youngest officer of his rank in the armies of the Commonwealth, he being but thirty years old. But young as he was he was a veteran soldier, for he had begun his military life at seventeen. He had fought in many battles and had won his high place in the admiration of men, step by step, by valor in the field. But he was in deep trouble now; a shadow had fallen upon his fortune.

"Dry away the tears and let us seem happy, darling, for Abbey's sake."

A curly headed little figure in nightclothes glided in at the door, ran to her father and was fervently kissed once, twice, three times.

"Why, Papa, you mustn't kiss me like that. You'll rumple my hair."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. What must I do for Abbey to grant me her forgiveness?"

"Ah . . . tell me a story: a dreadful story, for nurse says people don't always have happy times. Is that true, Papa? She said so!"

"It . . . is true dear. Troubles do come to all I'm afraid."

"Then tell me about them Papa. Tell it about us! Make us quiver and shake! Hold my hand, Mama, and snuggle close to me lest I believe it!"

"Well, now . . . once there were three colonels and . . ."

"Just like you Papa? Oh, I know I'll love this story!"

"Yes, Abbey, just like me. And in the heat of a battle they committed a breach of discipline."

"Is that . . . breach . . . something to eat?"

"No dear, quite another matter. They didn't follow orders completely. They were to pretend an attack so that the commonwealth would have time to retreat. Instead, they attacked, and defeated the enemy, much to the Lord General's dismay. Lord Cromwell ordered them to London to stand trial for their lives."

"The great General Cromwell, Papa? I've seen him --- he smiled at me when he rode past our house on his big white horse! I'm not afraid of him!"

"The Lord General allowed the colonels to return to their families for a brief visit before their execution."

Suddenly footsteps were heard outside the window. Both parents sat up with a start!

"Papa, is this a true story?"

"Yes dear, . . . it . . . "

"Oh, good! But Mama, you mustn't cry. It will all turn out all right. You'll see. Go on Papa."

"First they took them to the tower for trial. The military court found them all guilty and condemned them to be shot."

"Killed Papa? Oh how terrible! Papa, would they let me kiss them farewell?"

"One of them would my darling . . . "

"I know you would do what they did, so it can't be wrong!"

"Yes, dear. In fact, the court felt that they had done their duty and should be pardoned. The Lord General disagreed, but consented for them to cast lots. However, the men felt very strongly about the sin of suicide, and would not agree. Thus, all three men faced death together."

A stern knock came to the front door. "Open! Open in the Lord General's name."

"Soldiers! Oh, I love the soldiers! Let me let them in!"

The file marched in and straightened; its officer saluted. One long embrace of mother and child, then, the order : "To the tower! Forward!"

The next morning, Abbey's mother was confined to bed, overcome with grief. Abbey was soon bundled up in winter wrap and sent outside to play.

At the tower, the Lord General still struggled with the decision.

"We have urged them to reconsider. We have implored them my Lord, but they persist! They will not cast lots!"

"They shall not all die! The lots shall be cast for them! Go! Bring me the first child that passes by the tower."

The officer was hardly out the tower door when he returned leading Abbey by the hand. Seeing the Lord General, that formidable personage, at the mention of whose name the principalities and power of the earth trembled . . . Abbey climbed up into his lap, and smiled!

"I know you sir. You are the Lord General. I've seen you. Everyone was afraid, but I wasn't . . . because you smiled at me. You remember, don't you? I was wearing my red frock and . . . "

"Why you dear little thing. I ought to be ashamed, but you know . . . "

"I was standing by the house, . . . my house you know, and . . . Why you don't remember do you? Well --- I remember you!"

"Now I AM ashamed; but I will never forget you again my dear. You remind me so much of my own little girl."

"Did you love her very much?"

“Ah yes, my dear. Her request was my command; and thus it shall be yours. What you command I must obey!”

Abbey clapped her hands with delight!

“Soldiers! I hear soldiers! . . . Ahem! Abbey wants to see them!”

“And so you shall, my dear, for I have a commission for you!”

The head of the Nation handed Abbey three small disks of sealing wax; two white, and one a ruddy red, for this one’s mission was to deliver death, to the colonel who should receive it.

“Oh, what a lovely red one! Are they for me?”

“No dear, they are for others. Officer, lift the curtain. See those three men standing there, facing the wall? Each man is to receive a disk from you.”

Abbey approached the prisoners with caution. Then her face lighted merrily.

“Why, one of them is Papa! He shall have the prettiest one!”

She tripped gaily forward, and dropped the disks into the open hands, then peered around her father’s arm and lifted her laughing face.

“Look, Papa! Look what you’ve got! I gave it to you!”

He glanced down at the fatal gift, then sunk to his knees and gathered his innocent little executioner to his breast. -----Soldiers, officers, and the Lord General all stood paralyzed. Their hearts, their eyes filled, and they wept unashamed. Then, the officer of the court broke the silence.

“It grieves me sir, but my duty commands.”

“Commands what?”

“I . . . I must . . . take him away, child.”

“Take him away? No . . . my mama needs him. I came to take my Papa home!”

Abbey broke away from her father’s embrace, and ran to the Lord General.

“Stop them sir! May Mama is sick and needs my Papa. I told that soldier, but he wouldn’t listen to me. -----I command you sir! You told me to command you and you must obey!”

“Ah, God help me!”

A tender light dawned in the rugged old face, and the Lord General laid his hand on the small tyrants’ head.

“Yes. God be thanked, for saving accident of that unthinking promise! Officer, obey her command! She speaks by my mouth! The prisoner . . . is pardoned!

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