

Fate???

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A few days ago I ran into an old friend of mine, whom we can call Judge Smith. I had not seen the Judge for several years, but it was apparent to me that in that time he had aged rapidly—almost too rapidly for a man of his good health. When I questioned him on this point, he invited me to lunch and during the meal told me a very interesting story.

The Judge began, "Do you remember several years ago when the case of Roger Williams came into my court?" I did very vaguely and said so. "The man was being tried for embezzlement," the Judge went on, "and when the jury found him guilty, I had no choice but to sentence him to jail for a period of ten years. He vowed then that he would get even with me, but I paid no attention to him, for being a judge, I have heard that boastful statement before.

"Williams was released at the end of seven years for good conduct; and a week after he was free, I received a letter from him. It said that he had not forgotten his promise and that he still intended to kill me but in such a way that my death would be attributed to natural causes. Naturally, I was a little worried; but when nothing happened for two weeks, I soon forgot the occasion.

"About one week later I received a small box with no return address; and being a curious sort of person, I quickly opened it. When I removed the lid, I gasped at the contents and threw the box from me. Inside the box I had glimpsed a deadly poisonous tarantula spider. The box landed near the hearth, and I looked in that direction expecting to see that ghastly thing creeping away. But as I watched, I saw that it was not moving. I went over for a closer look,

and then I saw that it was a toy, carved minutely in every detail. As I picked up the box again, I noticed a note under the lid; and removing it, I read, 'It's a cute little toy, isn't it?' There was no signature; but none was needed, for I knew that Williams had sent it.

"Naturally, I was a bit shaken up, but I was determined not to let that fiend know that he had given me a scare. It was ten days later as I was going to my office that the next 'accident' occurred. I was crossing the main thoroughfare when suddenly a car came careening down the street at a terrific speed, just missing me as I leaped for the curb. Recovering my composure, I went on to my office; but I couldn't keep my mind on my work because of worrying as to what that maniacal fool might try next. I was thoroughly convinced by now that Williams did mean to kill me, and I was baffled because I did not know from which direction the next attempt on my life might come.

"The next Sunday I decided that I had to get control of myself or lose my mind from worry. I thought to myself, where would be the safest place to hide? He wouldn't dare try to kill me if there were a lot of people around, so that, obviously, the thing for me to do was to determine where the biggest crowd would be and stay with it. The only place I knew that was good and crowded all the time was Coney Island, after some deliberation I called a cab and went there.

"It was a warm sunshiny day with just a touch of spring in the air. As I walked around through the milling crowds, I began to feel an ease of mind that I had not had since receiving Williams' letter. I almost

felt at peace with the world as if I had just awakened from a nightmare. After walking aimlessly around the park, I began to get hungry. I finally located a hot-dog stand just beneath the roller coaster. After much pushing I was able to get a seat.

"'What'll you have,' asked the waiter.

"'A cup of coffee, please.'

"'It sure is a nice day, ain't it?' he remarked as he set my coffee in front of me. To that I readily agreed, for I was beginning to feel more and more at ease. Suddenly as the roller coaster roared over our heads, an object hurtled through the roof of the stand and thudded to the ground next to my stool.

"'Those crazy kids,' shouted the man, 'they'll kill some one, one of these days!' I had already gotten to my feet, not seeing or caring where I was going, I fought my way through the crowd. I had to get away before it was too late! I ran and ran until on the outskirts of the park, I found an empty taxi.

"'Drive as fast as you can! I shouted, I don't care where, but drive, get me out of here! The driver looked a little perplexed, but started off in the direction of the city. As he drove along, I looked nervously out the rear window to see if I were being followed; but after a few minutes, it became apparent that I wasn't. I sank back into my seat and wiped the cold sweat from my forehead; but as I tried to light my cigarette, my hands shook uncontrollably.

"'By this time the taxi driver was becoming a little disturbed, and he looked into his rear view mirror at me.

"'Say is there anything I can do for ya? Chees! You look as if you seen a ghost or somethin',' he said. I tried to get hold of myself and answer.

"'No thank you, just take me to 1524 Riverside Drive.

"'When I finally reached home, I paid the driver and dashed madly into the house.

I ran into the den and fell on the couch still shaking nervously, and lit another cigarette. I wished I were dead—I was so frightened; and I was at my wit's end, for I knew that if much more of this kept up, I would go mad.

"That night I tried to go to sleep, but as soon as I closed my eyes I could see that rock hurtling at me, and William's face seemed to be sneering at me as he kept saying over and over again, 'I'll get even with you'—death from natural causes, death from natural causes. I sprang from the bed and went down stairs to the den where I poured myself a drink and then another, and another, and another and that was all I remembered until the next morning when I woke up in the den. At first, as I opened my eyes, I couldn't imagine where I was, but when I saw the half empty whiskey decanter, the whole thing came back to me.

"In desperation I decided to call Williams to see if I could buy him off, and as I reached for the 'phone, it suddenly rang. As if in answer to my thoughts, I heard Williams' voice.

"'Did you have a nice time out at Coney Island yesterday?' and then that harsh laughter. I decided in that split second that I would die rather than let him know how frightened I really was.

"'Williams, what do you want,' I asked.

"'I'm giving a little party tomorrow night, and I thought you might like to drop in,' he said, 'unless you're too scared.'

"'I'll be there, I said, and hung up. What have I done I said to myself. That is the last place I want to go, but it was too late then; and if I **didn't** go, the truth of how scared I really was would come out.

"The next evening as I arrived at Williams' house he answered the door himself, and with a sardonic smile said, 'Welcome, Judge. Come on in the study and have a drink with me.' He poured the two drinks and handed me one, I gulped it down, and

he watched me with a slight smile twitching his lips.

"That drink was poisoned you know, Judge, and you will be dead within an hour," he remarked calmly.

"You wouldn't dare poison me, I said, if you did, you'd hang for it, and you know it.

"You're right, Judge," Williams answered, toying with a small package, "but I did think of it, for this package contains arsenic poison."

"Williams, I asked, when are you going to stop this nonsense?"

"When you are dead, Judge," he answered coldly. Laying his glass down, he turned and left the room.

"The next morning as I picked up my paper, I saw the glaring headlines: 'FORMER CONVICT DIES OF POISONED DRINK; LOCAL JUDGE SOUGHT FOR QUESTIONING.' As I read on I saw this report: 'Roger Williams, former convict, died last night from arsenic poisoning.' Good Lord! So that was how he intended to kill me—by having me indicted for murder—his own murder; and with just the two

of us in the room, I didn't have a ghost of an alibi.

"Dashing from my home, I ran into the arms of two burly detectives who had been sent to arrest me. When we arrived down town, I went before the police captain and told him the whole story.

"You realize, of course, that you are building up an air-tight case against yourself, don't you? Williams was poisoned by a glass of whiskey that contained arsenic. Do you deny that he had a drink with you in the den and that you two were alone for fifteen minutes, and that this package of poison we found on the desk wasn't what you used for the murder?"

"No I said, I guess not, and then suddenly it struck me. Yes! I shouted, I do deny it! Williams didn't drink that glass of whiskey, I did.

"Well," said the Captain, "We'll soon know; here comes the coroner's report now." The captain looked at the report and glanced at me.

"Release that man; according to this report, Williams died of heart attack brought on by too much excitement."