

How Hefty Burke Got Even

Richard Harding Davis

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Hefty Burke was once clubbed by a policeman named McCluire, who excused the clubbing to His Honour by swearing that Hefty had been drunk and disorderly, which was not true. Hefty got away from the Island by swimming the East River, and swore to get even with the policeman. This story tells how he got even.

Mr. Carstairs was an artist who had made his first great success by painting figures and landscapes in Brittany. He had a studio at Fifty–eighth Street and Sixth Avenue, and was engaged on an historical subject in which there were three figures. One was a knight in full armour, and the other was a Moor, and the third was the figure of a woman. The suit of armour had been purchased by Mr. Carstairs in Paris, and was believed to have been worn by a brave nobleman, one of whose extravagant descendants had sold everything belonging to his family in order to get money with which to play baccarat. Carstairs was at the sale, and paid a large price for the suit of armour which the Marquis de Neuville had worn, and set it up in a corner of his studio. It was in eight or a dozen pieces, and quite heavy, but was wonderfully carved and inlaid with silver, and there were dents on it that showed where a Saracen's scimitar had been dulled and many a brave knight's spear had struck. Mr. Carstairs had paid so much for it that he thought he ought to make better use of it, if possible, than simply to keep it dusted and show it off to his friends. So he began his historical picture, and engaged Hefty Burke to pose as the knight and wear the armour. Hefty's features were not exactly the sort of features you would imagine a Marquis de Neuville would have; but as his visor was down in the picture, it did not make much material difference: and as his figure was superb, he answered very well. Hefty drove an ice–waggon during business hours, and, as a personal favour to Mr. Carstairs, agreed to pose for him, for a consideration, two afternoons of each week, and to sleep in the studio at night, for it was filled with valuable things.

The armour was a never–ending source of amazement and bewilderment to Hefty. He could not understand why a man would wear such a suit, and especially when he went out to fight. It was the last thing in the world he would individually have selected in which to make war.

"Ef I was goin' to scrap wid anybody," he said to Mr. Carstairs, "I'd as lief tie meself up wid dumb–bells as take to carry all this stuff on me. A man wid a baseball bat and swimmin' tights on could dance all round youse and knock spots out of one of these things. The other lad wouldn't be in it. Why, before he could lift his legs or get his hands up you cud hit him on his helmet, and he wouldn't know what killed him. They must hev sat down to fight in them days."

Mr. Carstairs painted on in silence and smiled grimly.

"I'd like to have seen a go with the parties fixed out in a pair of these things," continued Hefty. "I'd bet on the lad that got in the first whack. He wouldn't have to do nothing but shove the other one over on his back and fall on him. Why, I guess this weighs half a ton if it weighs an ounce!"

For all his contempt Hefty had a secret admiration for the ancient marquis who had worn this suit, and had been strong enough to carry its weight and demolish his enemies besides. The marks on the armour interested him greatly, and he was very much impressed one day when he found what he declared to be blood–stains on the lining of the helmet.

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"I guess the old feller that wore this was a sport, eh?" he said proudly, shaking the pieces on his arms until they rattled. "I guess he done 'em up pretty well for all these handicaps. I'll bet when he got to falling around on 'em and butting 'em with this fire helmet he made 'em purty tired. Don't youse think so?"

Young Carstairs said he didn't doubt it for a moment.

The Small Hours Social Club was to give a prize masquerade ball at the Palace Garden on New Year's Night, and Hefty had decided to go. Every gentleman dancer was to get a white silk badge with a gold tassel, and every committee-man received a blue badge with "Committee" written across it in brass letters. It cost three dollars to be a committee-man, but only one dollar "for self and lady." There were three prizes one of a silver water-pitcher for the "handsomest-costumed lady dancer," an accordion for the "best-dressed gent," and a cake for the most original idea in costume, whether worn by "gent or lady." Hefty, as well as many others, made up his mind to get the accordion, if it cost him as much as seven dollars, which was half of his week's wages. It wasn't the prize he wanted so much, but he thought of the impression it would make on Miss Casey, whose father was the well-known janitor of that name. They had been engaged for some time, but the engagement hung fire, and Hefty thought that a becoming and appropriate costume might hasten matters a little. He was undecided as to whether he should go as an Indian or as a courtier of the time of Charles II. Auchmuty Stein, of the Bowery, who supplies costumes and wigs at reasonable rates, was of the opinion that a neat sailor suit of light blue silk and decorated with white anchors was about the "prettiest thing in the shop, and sheap at fife dollars"; but Hefty said he never saw a sailor in silk yet, and he didn't think they ever wore it. He couldn't see how they could keep the tar and salt water from ruining it.

The Charles II. Court suit was very handsome, and consisted of red cotton tights, blue velveteen doublet, and a blue cloak lined with pale pink silk. A yellow wig went with this, and a jewelled sword which would not come out of the scabbard. It could be had for seven dollars a night. Hefty was still in doubt about it, and was much perplexed. Auchmuty Stein told him Charlie Macklin, the Third Avenue ticket-chopper, was after the same suit, and that he had better take it while he could get it. But Hefty said he'd think about it. The next day was his day for posing, and as he stood arrayed in the Marquis de Neuville's suit of mail he chanced to see himself in one of the long mirrors, and was for the first time so struck with the ferocity of his appearance that he determined to see if old man Stein had not a suit of imitation armour which would not be so heavy and would look as well. But the more Hefty thought of it, the more he believed that only the real suit would do. Its associations, its blood-stains, and the real silver tracings haunted him, and he half decided to ask Mr. Carstairs to lend it to him.

But then he remembered overhearing Carstairs tell a brother artist that he had paid two thousand francs for it, and though he did not know how much a franc might be, two thousand of anything was too much to wear around at a masquerade ball. But the thing haunted him. He was sure if Miss Casey saw him in that suit she would never look at Charlie Macklin again.

"They wouldn't be in the same town with me," said Hefty. "And I'd get two of the prizes, sure."

He was in great perplexity, when good luck or bad luck settled it for him.

"Burke," said Mr. Carstairs, "Mrs. Carstairs and I are going out of town for New Year's Day, and will be gone until Sunday. Take a turn through the rooms each night, will you? as well as the studio, and see that everything is all right." That clinched the matter for Hefty. He determined to go as far as the Palace Garden as the Marquis de Neuville, and say nothing whatever to Mr. Carstairs about it.

Stuff M'Govern, who drove a night-hawk, and who was a particular admirer of Hefty's, even though as a cabman he was in a higher social scale than the driver of an ice-cart, agreed to carry Hefty and his half-ton of armour to the Garden, and call for him when the ball was over.

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"Holee smoke!" gasped Mr. M'Govern, as Hefty stumbled heavily across the pavement with an overcoat over his armour and his helmet under his arm. "Do you expect to do much dancing in that sheet-iron?"

"It's the looks of the thing I'm gambling on," said Hefty. "I look like a locomotive when I get this stove-pipe on me head."

Hefty put on his helmet in the cab and pulled down the visor, and when he alighted the crowd around the door was too greatly awed to jeer, but stood silent with breathless admiration. He had great difficulty in mounting the somewhat steep flight of stairs which led to the dancing-room, and considered gloomily that in the event of a fire he would have a very small chance of getting out alive. He made so much noise coming up that the committee-men thought some one was rolling some one else down the stairs, and came out to see the fight. They observed Hefty's approach with whispered awe and amusement.

"Wot are you?" asked the man at the door. "Youse needn't give your real name," he explained politely. "But you've got to give something if youse are trying for a prize, see?"

"I'm the Black Knight," said Hefty in a hoarse voice, "the Marquis de Newveal; and when it comes to scrappin' wid der perlice, I'm de best in der business."

This last statement was entirely impromptu, and inspired by the presence of Policeman M'Cluire, who, with several others, had been detailed to keep order. M'Cluire took this challenge calmly, and looked down and smiled at Hefty's feet.

"He looks like a stove on two legs," he said to the crowd. The crowd, as a matter of policy, laughed.

"You'll look like a fool standing on his head in a snow-bank if you talk impudent to me," said Hefty epigrammatically, from behind the barrier of his iron mask. What might have happened next did not happen, because at that moment the music sounded for the grand march, and Hefty and the policeman were swept apart by the crowd of Indians, Mexicans, courtiers, negro minstrels, and clowns. Hefty stamped across the waxed floor about as lightly as a safe could do it if a safe could walk. He found Miss Casey after the march and disclosed his identity. She promised not to tell, and was plainly delighted and flattered at being seen with the distinct sensation of the ball. "Say, Hefty," she said, "they just ain't in it with you. You'll take the two prizes sure. How do I look?"

"Out o' sight," said Hefty. "Never saw you lookin' better."

"That's good," said Miss Casey simply, and with a sigh of satisfaction.

Hefty was undoubtedly a great success. The men came around him and pawed him, and felt the dents in the armour, and tried the weight of it by holding up one of his arms, and handled him generally as though he were a freak in a museum. "Let 'em alone," said Hefty to Miss Casey; "I'm not saying a word. Let the judges get on to the sensation I'm a-makin', and I'll walk off with the prizes. The crowd is wid me sure."

At midnight the judges pounded on a table for order, and announced that after much debate they gave the first prize to Miss Lizzie Cannon, of Hester Street, for "having the most handsomest costume on the floor, that of Columbia." The fact that Mr. "Buck" Masters, who was one of the judges, and who was engaged to Miss Cannon, had said that he would pound things out of the other judges if they gave the prize elsewhere was not known, but the decision met with as general satisfaction as could well be expected.

"The second prize," said the judges, "goes to the gent calling himself the Black Knight him in the iron leggings and the other prize for the most original costume goes to him too." Half the crowd cheered at this and only one man hissed. Hefty, filled with joy and with the anticipation of the elegance the ice-pitcher would lend

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to his flat when he married Miss Casey, and how conveniently he could fill it, turned on this gentleman and told him that only geese hissed.

The gentleman, who had spent much time on his costume, and who had been assured by each judge on each occasion that evening when he had treated him to beer that he would get the prize, told Hefty to go lie down. It has never been explained just what horrible insult lies back of this advice, but it is a very dangerous thing to tell a gentleman to do. Hefty lifted one foot heavily and bore down on the disappointed masker like an ironclad in a heavy sea. But before he could reach him, Policeman M'Cluire, mindful of the insult put upon him by this stranger, sprang between them and said, "Here now, no scrapping here; get out of this," and shoved Hefty back with his hand. Hefty uttered a mighty howl of wrath and long-cherished anger, and lurched forward, but before he could reach his old-time enemy three policemen had him around the arms and by the leg, and he was as effectually stopped as though he had been chained to the floor.

"Let go o' me!" said Hefty wildly. "You're smotherin' me. Give me a fair chance at him."

But they would not give him any sort of a chance. They rushed him down the steep stairs, and while M'Cluire ran ahead two more pushed back the crowd that had surged uncertainly forward to the rescue. If Hefty had declared his identity the police would have had a very sad time of it; but that he must not get Mr. Carstairs' two-thousand-franc suit into trouble was all that filled Hefty's mind, and all that he wanted was to escape. Three policemen walked with him down the street. They said they knew where he lived, and that they were only going to take him home. They said this because they were afraid the crowd would interfere if it imagined Hefty was being led to the precinct station-house.

But Hefty knew where he was going as soon as he turned the next corner and was started off in the direction of the station-house. There was still quite a small crowd at his heels, and Stuff M'Govern was driving along at the side anxious to help, but fearful to do anything, as Hefty had told him not to let any one know who his fare had been and that his incognito must be preserved.

The blood rushed to Hefty's head like hot liquor. To be arrested for nothing, and by that thing M'Cluire, and to have the noble coat-of-mail of the Marquis de Neuville locked up in a dirty cell and probably ruined, and to lose his position with Carstairs, who had always treated him so well, it was terrible! It could not be! He looked through his visor; to the right and to the left a policeman walked on each side of him with his hand on his iron sleeve, and M'Cluire marched proudly before. The dim lamps of M'Govern's night-hawk shone at the side of the procession and showed the crowd trailing on behind. Suddenly Hefty threw up his visor. "Stuff," he cried, "are youse with me?"

He did not wait for any answer, but swung back his two iron arms and then brought them forward with a sweep on to the back of the necks of the two policemen. They went down and forward as if a lamp-post had fallen on them, but were up again in a second. But before they could rise Hefty set his teeth, and with a gurgle of joy butted his iron helmet into M'Cluire's back and sent him flying forward into a snow-bank. Then he threw himself on him and buried him under three hundred pounds of iron and flesh and blood, and beat him with his mailed hand over the head and choked the snow and ice down into his throat and nostrils.

"You'll club me again, will you?" he cried. "You'll send me to to the Island?" The two policemen were pounding him with their night-sticks as effectually as though they were rapping on a doorstep; and the crowd, seeing this, fell on them from behind, led by Stuff M'Govern with his whip, and rolled them in the snow and tried to tear off their coat-tails, which means money out of the policeman's own pocket for repairs, and hurts more than broken ribs, as the Police Benefit Society pays for them.

"Now then, boys, get me into a cab," cried Hefty. They lifted him in, and obligingly blew out the lights so that the police could not see its number, and Stuff drove Hefty proudly home.

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"I guess I'm even with that cop now," said Hefty, as he stood at the door of the studio building perspiring and happy; "but if them cops ever find out who the Black Knight was, I'll go away for six months on the Island. I guess," he added thoughtfully, "I'll have to give them two prizes up."