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THE SHALLOWELL MYSTERY.

(From the Universe)

CHAPTER I.

A long, late, lounging breakfast. Arthur Ringston sits with the relics of the repast still before him; as he leans back in his easy chair it is evident that some entrancing subject occupies all his thoughts.

Now of all occupations thinking is one to which he is least addicted. He disapproves of it. It is in direct opposition to his system of living.

Yet this morning when George Davis, who has the next chambers in the Albany, looks him up, he scarcely notices him, but only notices him with a nod.

George, who is accustomed to make himself at home everywhere, helps himself to some Maraschino, before he takes in the phenomenon; when he does it renders him voluble immediately.

'Why, Ringston, what's the matter with you? Here I have been for nearly a minute and a half in the place, and you have not said a word.—Why, I am hanged if you don't actually look as if you were actually thinking about something.'

To the question Ringston returned no answer; on the observation he made no remark. Davis flung himself at full length on the sofa and took a book, determined to wait the result.

In about five minutes Ringston found his tongue.

'First of all, George,' he said, 'let me apologize for my silence, for I knew you were here, I did not speak to you. But if I had, it would have put me to great inconvenience; for not being used to thinking, if I had not finished while I was about it, it would have taken me an hour or more to get back to where I was when you came in, supposing I ever arrived there at all.'

'Sir,' said Davis, 'your explanation is most satisfactory, but for your own sake, I would not advise you to do it again, for it does not appear to agree with you. Is it permitted to ask at what conclusion you have arrived?'

'I am still in doubt,' replied Ringston, 'whether you should congratulate or condole with me. My cousin has just left me three thousand pounds.'

'Well, I will congratulate you first, and if you can show good cause, will try to condole with you afterwards.'

'Why, you see, it is an awkward sum. It is too much to spend in a week, and it is not enough to be of any particular use.'

'Of course you would not think of muddling it away in paying your debts; but it might be some good for staving of any that press.'

'No, Davis, no! I am not convinced that paying your creditors on account is a mistake.—It is every bit the same as letting dogs get a taste for blood. They'd always be wanting more. And as for paying one man, if you did not cast up to the lot,—why, it would be—what is it they call it in the newspapers—showing undue preference, is it not? I believe it is felony. No, no, George, whatever I do I will never be unjust.'

'Well, come and have a game of pyramids, and let's talk the thing over.'

'No, George Davis; not if I know it. It's my firm belief that in your theory, life is one pyramid, and other people's money the bricks that compose it, by winning which you are to rise to apex.'

'Well, I have not got even three bricks higher by you.'

'For the simple reason, my George, that it is many years since I have had any money to lose.'

'But what are you going to do with the money? You might get 'The Ruffler' for fifteen hundred, and he is well in for the coar-witch.'

'The Ruffler' will not suit my little book.—I arrived at a decision after you came in. This is what I am going to do. I shall go down to some nice watering-place within easy distance of a decent pack—enjoy myself quietly, and make the money go as far as it can for a twelvemonth—and then—'

'Well, what then?'

'I shall kill myself.'

'Oh, of course to the sound of slow music in the distance; burdy-gurdies and backpipes playing under windows, &c.'

'No; I mean what I say. Another year will be just enough of it.'

'Provided you don't flush an heiress in the meantime. What you have described would be a useful country for that kind of game; and if you make your three thousand pounds three thousand a year, you might have a chance.'

'No; that would be a sacrifice for which I could not screw up my courage. I would sooner go to Boulogne and vegetate on the interest of the three thousand. I don't know why it is, but

to me they always seem to take their complexion from their bank notes, and the shade of their hair from the color of their guineas.'

'Why, golden tresses are the correct thing.'

'Yes; but I am thinking of the red, red gold.'

Besides, they're too accurate an idea of their own money value impressed upon them from in fancy. No; I shall keep to my original plan; and twelve months from the day on which I arrive in my own new home, I shall depart this life. My mode of death will form an interesting subject of reflection during my leisure hours; for now I have begun to think I may as well go on.'

'Do you really expect me to believe this?'

'If you say you don't,—well, I won't call you out, because that might disarrange my plans; but I should prefer your dropping the subject.'

'And you won't play one pool?'

'Not this morning. I must see about carrying my arrangements into effect. Ta-ta.'

George Davis soon spread the news of Ringston's legacy, and his theory for its disposal far and wide; and consequently that gentleman was favored with a great many visits in the course of the morning. When he had quite a levee, he went over the whole affair for the public benefit.

Amongst the men who were present, some had come expecting to find him a little mad; others had made up their minds that he had been amusing himself at George's expense. But Ringston stated his intentions and his reasons for them in such a quite and business-like way, that many were shaken in their opinion.—Some of the younger men, indeed, at last felt perfectly confident that he would carry out what he had said to the letter. It should be mentioned that he prefaced his explanation by stating that Davis happened in just as he decided upon the course he was about to pursue, and that he had spoken to him about it on the spur of the moment; but considering it in the light of a confidential communication, he never imagined it would have gone any farther.

One man, indeed, ventured to say that he thought the joke had gone far enough; but he soon repeated his temerity.

'I am not in jest, sir,' said Ringston, in a voice which startled the room; 'and as this is a subject which I shall not discuss again, if any one will fully forces upon me a statement of their disbelief in my intentions, I shall consider that they wish to give me the lie.'

As Ringston had once thrown a man out of a first floor window, and there was still a latent possibility that he might be mad, this produced rather a hiatus in the conversation.

The difficulty was cleverly got over by a young gentleman who said:

'You have not told us yet, Ringston, what is to be the scene of your operations?'

'Well, I have not made up my mind, and shall be glad of any advice on the subject.'

'What do you say to Shallowell? Maberley's regiment is stationed there, and it is within easy reach of Glencroft's pack, and the South Clodshire as well.'

'By Jove, you don't say so. I have not seen Maberley since he returned to England, and it is a nice country, too. Shallowell it shall be. I will write to Maberley to-night. By-the-by, if any of you know anybody who could take the rooms off my hands, with furniture and everything as it stands, I should be glad.'

As the party gradually dispersed, young Ringston, who was just starting upon town, lingered on till the last, and as soon as they were alone commenced a negotiation. In ten minutes Ringston had disposed of all his goods and chattels, including some tolerable pictures, for two hundred and fifty pounds, and a hunter which had proved rather too much for Mr. Ringston, as on previous occasions, when there had been a difference of opinion between them with regard to the road which they should go, the horse had generally had the best of the argument.

CHAPTER II.

Miss Etheredge, the belle of Shallowell, stands at the window of the pump room. She is surrounded by a select band of male and female satellites.

'Who is that in such deep mourning walking with Captain Maberley?' she inquired of Dr. Doser, the most active of newsmongers and the most industrious of gossips.

The gentleman she indicates is a slight, elegant looking man, about the middle height. He is very pale, with a large black moustache. The rest of his face is closely shaven.

'You may look upon that gentleman as a phenomenon, Miss Etheredge,' replied the doctor: 'for in him you see a man in mourning for himself. That is Mr. Ringston, of whom no doubt you have heard.'

'But Mr. Ringston must be in mourning for his cousin, who has left him the fortune.'

'His cousin may form an excuse to put forward to the world, but I know from the best authority—and here the doctor shook his head mysteriously—that he will never return to an-

other garb. He wears it as a token of his own approaching end.'

And here the doctor repeated the story of Mr. Ringston's intentions, which had preceded him to Shallowell. As he concluded it Maberley and Ringston reposed on horseback: the captain in pink, his friend in his usual black. Ringston was riding a gigantic black horse, nearly seventeen hands, and evidently of immense power.

'The hounds meet at Laverock Close this morning; you should have gone to see them throw off, Miss Etheredge,' said young George Clatham.

'How is it that you are not there?' retorted the young lady, looking gracefully unconscious. Poor George blushed, but made no reply.

As soon as Ringston and Maberley reached the Close, the Captain, who was a great authority on horse-flesh, was carried off by a friend to give his opinion on a mare that Mivens, the livery stable keeper at Shallowell, had ridden over to sell.

Consequently, Ringston was left alone, and not being known, was a good deal stared at.—The most of the men present were members of the hunt, and turned out in the uniform, which was gorgeous in the extreme, so that Ringston's sables formed a striking contrast amid the mass of pink.

'That fellow must be an undertaker,' said Mr. Snaffleton.

'The brute he is riding does look as if he had just come out of a hearse,' said Bob Bitwell.

'Go and tell him, Charlie, it is no use in his coming here; he won't get any orders to-day. Nobody ever breaks their neck this hunt,' said Snaffleton.

'Go yourself,' said Charlie Chesterfield.

'Charlie's afraid,' said Bitwell.

'No, Charlie's not,' said that young gentleman; 'but I'll toss Bitwell whether he goes or I.'

'Come, now, that's only fair, cried two or three men.

Bitwell did not like it, but was ashamed to sink out of it. There was a general laugh when he lost the toss.

As he walked his horse towards Ringston, two or three ranged near enough to hear what he said.

Ringston had been standing with his back to the critics; it is probable that if he had seen his face the joke would not have been suggested. When he happened to turn, as Bitwell came up, that gentleman conceived an additional dislike to the duty he had to perform. However, he felt he was in for it, and plunged desperately 'in medias res.'

'I don't think you'll do much business to-day, sir.'

Ringston chose to suppose that he alluded to the prospect of sport, though he had caught a word here and there of the conversation, and suspected that a jest was intended. He replied accordingly—

'Not a bad scenting morning.'

'Oh, I did not mean with the fox, I meant with the funerals.'

'I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, sir, and I do not take orders for funerals; but, if you should follow me to-day, I think it is extremely likely that I may have to give one.'

These words Ringston uttered very slowly, and gave additional point to the last sentence by surveying Mr. Bitwell and his horse through his ebony encircled eye-glass.

That gentleman looked somewhat uncomfortable as he returned to his friends.

They found very soon after this, and got away directly. An open country and the pace tremendous. Twenty minutes' straight riding, and only one momentary check. Ringston only rides ten stone. Erebus is well up to fifteen. He has ridden more than one steeple chase, and been first to pass the post. The black coat takes its place in the first rank as a matter of course.—Bitwell, who does not forget the challenge, strives hard to keep ahead, but Erebus is too much for his chestnut across some ploughed land. Over the crest of the hill they go straight as a line, with a splendid view at the top of it. But as they begin to descend they see a great deal more than they like.

One long field, with a most unpromising bull-fence at the bottom, and beyond the hills falls away precipitously, like the side of a house.

The fox points straight ahead, and in a minute two or three hounds are seen rolling over and over in their course towards the bottom. The huntsman turns off to the right for the winding path which leads through the wood to the bottom. Ringston, who had taken the second, goes straight ahead, glancing once over his shoulder to look for Bitwell as he neared the fence.—Bitwell caught his glance, and kept his track.—Crash through the bullfence goes Erebus; but can he keep his footing on the other side; for a second it seems a certainty that he must fall on his head with a desperate effort, Ringston re-

covers him. Another stride and he slides on his haunches on the wet ground; and so on, slipping well back, by the most extraordinary luck they reached the bottom in safety. Then across the road over and over 'like a bird,' just in time for the hounds ran into him in the next field.

Bitwell got through the bullfence gallantly, but the chestnut rolled over the moment heighted on the descent, crushing his rider beneath him.

Bitwell was picked up about a third of the way down the hill, with two damaged ribs and a broken collar-bone. The chestnut rolled to the bottom and broke his back.

Behind Bitwell came Maberley and Snaffleton, but they wisely followed the example of the huntsman, and went round by the lane.

Snaffleton mentioned to the captain what had occurred before the race, and commended Ringston's desperate riding.

'Why, you see, if he breaks his neck now,' said Maberley, 'it will save him the trouble of killing himself at the end of the year, and would be more moral besides.'

Then followed the story.

Both Glencroft's hounds and the South Clodshire had some good runs during the next fortnight, at all of which Ringston was present, and rode in the same style. Fortunately he did not again tempt any one to follow him; and, thanks to his light weight, light hand, good seat, and the hone and blood of Erebus, he came to no harm.

By this time he had become an object of general interest in Shallowell; and though several people thought him mad, he had no relations who considered it would be a profitable speculation to put him in a lunatic asylum.

CHAPTER III.

Ringston soon became rather popular than not notwithstanding the mystery which surrounded him. Any allusion to it he always checked.—With the memory of Bitwell's fate fresh in their minds, and under the unpleasant light which glanced in Ringston's eyes when he was annoyed, there were few who would have liked to press the point. But the gossips made ample amends for their enforced silence in his presence by the circulation of the wildest circulations behind his back.

It was even suggested that he had sold himself to the Evil one, and that, like the guests at juvenile parties, he would be fetched when his time was up. But his rooms were pleasant ones to drop in at; and it is a matter of doubt whether if his Satanic Majesty had been present as a guest, he would have scared the inhabitants of Shallowell from a Champagne supper.

There was little play afterwards, which occasionally made the evening rather expensive, but then the loss was a chance and the supper a certainty.

Between the hours of eleven at night and three in the morning, any one who had the 'entree' to Ringston's rooms would generally find 'something going on,' unless there was any bachelor party brilliant enough to lure the lion from his den.

The balls, evening parties and other festivities for which Shallowell is so justly celebrated, he utterly eschewed, and thereby gave deadly offence to the majority of the fair sex in that fashionable watering (and winning) place. It was bad enough that he did not go himself, but it was far worse that he should keep away Gustavus and Adolphus, who, before his arrival, had been exemplary in their attendance.

Why is Frederick Dieu temps putting on his hat so quietly in the hall of Mrs. Fitzgram? It is only half-past one. The rush of 'Spirit of the Ball' pours into his ears, and he noiselessly turns the handle of the street door, but it has no power to recall him. Yet one short month ago he swore to Lucy Lightfoot that there was nothing in the world equal to that 'first after-supper gallop.' He made no exception then even in favor of lansquenets and champagne punch.

Then winter passed away and the season of pic-nics arrived; Ringston could never be entrapped into making one of a miscellaneous assembly.

A drag over to Westsea, and a cruise in Colonel Morley's yacht, suited him very well, but the peculiar advantage of dining or dancing on the grass he never could be brought to see.

But all through the summer season he devoted himself especially to the Shallowell cricket-club?

He got them into such an order, that they won every match they played that season, and 'the black bowler' became an object of superstitious terror to every eleven in the neighborhood. The most disagreeable thing in Ringston's bowling was, that he always walked up to the crease, and no one could ever tell till the ball was delivered whether it would be a slow twister or swift enough to cut the middle stump in half.

Thus with yachting and cricket, and the oc-

casional races in the neighborhood, the time passed away until November came again, and the allotted twelvemonth drew towards its close.

CHAPTER IV.

Maberley's regiment were the first dragoons who had ever been stationed at Shallowell and they had been 'feted' a great deal. They therefore considered it incumbent upon them to give a ball. Officer's balls are always a success. It is an understood thing that everything is to be praised and nothing is to be criticised.

Everybody comes prepared to enjoy himself, and the majority generally succeed. The number of determined to be agreeable hosts propitiates the fair sex, and all possible partners are always made available. It is true that some appear to take the character of steward, only to be able to introduce themselves to any pretty girl they don't know, but these are the exception who prove the rule.

Ringston had declined the invitation at first, but Maberley made it a personal matter that he should show himself.

The Shallowell Assembly Rooms are unusually crowded. That watering place can always show a fair amount of beauty; but to-night the racks of the belles are swelled by many drafts from the county families.

Laura Etheredge holds her own against all comers. She is undoubtedly the belle of the room. In a pause of a quadrille, her eyes fall upon a pale face which rests against a pillar opposite. We have said that Ringston was an elegant-looking man. His pose at this moment is graceful in the extreme, though evidently un-studied. Laura looks at him. She sees that he has evidently forgotten where he is, and takes advantage of his unconscious state to examine him critically. The breeze of the whirling dresses almost stirs his black curls; but he does not note the fair dancers as they pass.

There is something in an expression of utter abstraction which always excites curiosity. Where are the thoughts which are not with us? Laura had ridiculed a dozen times at least the Ringston story, and yet now that she gazes upon its hero, she can scarcely drive back from her heart a feeling of terror. She goes mechanically through the quadrille, but she sees nothing but that face.

In vain her partner turns on an even flowing stream of regulation nothings into her ear. She does not hear a word; and, at last, answers an elaborate criticism on a new prima donna which she has learnt by heart from yesterday's 'Times,' by saying—

'Yes, quite black.'

The irreproachable lieutenant treasured this as a fact, and avoiding any display of ignorance at the time, he sought his newspaper on his return home to see if he had omitted to notice that Mademoiselle Sopranetti was a coloured artiste.

The last figure of the quadrille is drawing to a close, when Ringston changes his position, and their eyes meet.

Have you ever watched eyes, which as they wake from sleep knuckle into love beneath your own?

Some such sparkle gleamed in Ringston's, before Laura could withdraw her gaze. She saw the trance fade in an instant, and the light of life come back.

At the same moment the thought crossed her mind, 'If I were destined to claim him back from death?'

She sits by her chaperon for a moment: the next Ringston was before her with a steward by his side.

'Miss Etheredge, Mr. Ringston.'

'Can you possibly spare me a dance Miss Etheredge?'

'I can give you the next—a waltz, I think?'

What could it have been that induced Laura to keep herself disengaged for that dance, when she had enough petitions made to her to fill her card over and over again, before she had been in the room five minutes? What answer could she have made to herself? She must have said that she liked to keep one dance in case some one came in late, with whom she might wish to dance. Had she any idea who the 'some one' was to be?

It was evident that at some previous period of his existence Mr. Ringston had liked dancing much better than he had professed to do since he had resided at Shallowell.

'How they go!' said Snaffleton.

'Fine action. Do for a curlicue,' replied Captain Maberley.

'I thought you never danced, Mr. Ringston, said Miss Etheredge, as the music ceased.

'I did not think I should ever dance again,' he replied, and the dark cloud passed over his face once more.

She shuddered. 'Can he allude,' she thought, 'to the story of his approaching death?'

But he seemed to shake the gloom off with an effort, and began to talk. Supper was announced