

partly conscious of the Indian's hot breath on his face as he strained at the strangling noose. In a wild spasm his right arm doubled, and his clenched fist shot out with the furious strength of despair.

He was conscious even at that extremity of a thrill of triumph as he felt his knuckles meet the Indian's jaw and heard the quick thud of the blow.

Abdallah fell in a heap, and Hugh, with groping fingers, found the silken noose and eased the intolerable strain at his throat. Breathless and dizzy, he steadied himself against the wall while he drank in a deep draught of the reviving air.

For a moment his mind was a blank, his memory lost. He wondered vaguely where he was and what had happened. Then memory returned, swiftly as it had fled, vivid and urgent, and he knew that a moment might mean life or death. Groping in the darkness for his assailant, his fingers touched something small and smooth and hard, and he picked up the electric flash lamp, which had fallen from the Indian's hand at Hugh's first onslaught, the lamp that had given Hugh himself the precious gleam of warning.

As he pressed the button the round disc of light showed him the half-naked Abdallah stretched on his back, his limbs loose and motionless as one dead. But leaning over him Hugh felt his heart beat, and knew there was not a second to be lost, for at any moment the assassin might revive and master him.

SILENTLY he half-carried, half-hauled the carcass to his room, and flinging his burden down in the middle of the floor he locked the door and turned the electric lights full on. Kneeling down beside the body, whose stentorous breathing urged him to haste, Hugh tied the limp wrists together with the long pliant scarf of Indian silk, which he had found dangling in a noose round his own neck. The ankles he secured in the same fashion with the cord of the blind, and then with a revolver in his hand stood aside to await the results.

He had not long to wait.

Abdallah came to his senses with dramatic suddenness, waking like a wild beast from sleep, alert and ready. There was no second's interval of half-consciousness. The instant he saw Hugh he sprang at him. The leap carried him to his feet, but with his ankles and wrists securely tied he swayed, tottered, and fell with a crash on his face.

Hugh turned him over with his foot. The man's face was livid—a dirty yellowish white. His eyes stared into Hugh's like a wild beast trapped. There was rage and terror in his maddened gaze, but no appeal. He knew himself without mercy and hoped for none.

"Abdallah," said Hugh slowly, "I know why you came and who sent you. I had my choice while you lay there to hand you over to the police, or do for you as you meant to do for me, kill you as you lay. I will do neither. You may go back to your master and tell him that his plot has failed."

He deliberately loosened the bonds that held Abdallah's ankles together, and the other stumored to his feet. All fight seemed to have gone out of him. He looked at the revolver that Hugh still held, as though he feared some trick to shoot him unawares.

Hugh made a motion to loose the bandages on his wrists. But the Indian gripped the pliant silk in his teeth, twisted and tugged till the knot loosened, and the long silk scarf fell to the carpet, and lay purple, green and orange like a beautiful snake and as deadly. Then he stood stock still like a man ready to take orders.

"Go back to your master," Hugh said again, "and as quickly as you can for your life's sake. Within twenty-four hours the police will have a description of you as a dangerous anarchist and assassin. You know what that means. Go while you can. As God hears me if I see you again in Rome I'll shoot you at sight. Go, go!"

Without a word the Indian slunk

from the room like a tiger that had missed his spring. Within an hour, Hugh, from his bedroom, which overlooked the street, saw him in the moonlight pass below, a big travelling bag in his hand, which he swung as lightly as a lady swings her fan.

With that departing figure the shadowy presentiments that had lain so heavy on his heart wholly vanished.

Next morning Sybil rallied him on his gaiety as she had rallied him on his gloom.

"You have come to believe in the luck of the lost key," she said, "the gods are appeased."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Revenge.

LORD STERNHOLT, as he paced up and down his sitting-room was in a nasty temper.

That morning he had had a telephone message from his solicitor to say he would be glad to see him at once on important business.

Old Mr. Dobson, in a flutter of perturbation, waited for him in his private room.

"Sorry to trouble your lordship," he said, "but I thought it best to see to the matter at once. It seems a piece of sheer insanity, but still—"

He hesitated.

Lord Sternholt caught him up brutally. "Go on, man, what are you stuttering about?"

"Yesterday," Mr. Dobson said, "I ventured to accept service of a writ on behalf of your lordship. It was an insane document, and I would not have given it another thought, but there were the names of three counsel attached, including that of Mr. Yorke, one of the most astute King's Counsel at the Bar. It is very unusual for a man of his position to put his name to a writ. Will your lordship be pleased to glance over the document?"

"What the deuce good would that do? I could not understand a word of the jargon. Tell me what's in it."

"Certainly, certainly. It purports a writ in ejectment on the title brought by Miss Sybil Darley, otherwise Ackland, sole daughter and heiress of the late Vincent Ackland, sixth Earl of Sternholt, against Frederick Ackland, seventh earl of Sternholt, to recover possession of all that and those, the lands, tenements, and hereditaments of Sternholt to wit—"

"Oh, drop that tom-foolery," cried Lord Sternholt testily, "and tell me in plain language what it all comes to."

"Certainly, certainly," Mr. Dobson faltered, "the plaintiff claims to be the only daughter and heiress to your lordship's late brother, and seeks by this proceeding to eject your lordship from Sternholt Towers house and land."

For a moment his lordship glared angrily at the solicitor, as though he were himself the plaintiff, then a queer smile stirred his lips and showed his teeth—not a pleasant smile by any means.

"I do not think the young lady will succeed," he said very quietly.

"Of course not, of course not," cried the fussy solicitor. "I saw her solicitor, Foster, at once. He is a great friend of mine. He says they have a strong case, but that is absurd, of course. It appears that the instructions were given in the first place by the famous picture dealer, Hugh Limner, but he told them to delay proceedings till there was an authorizing telegram from Rome, where the plaintiff is staying. The telegram came two days ago; the writ was issued yesterday. It is a pity they did not delay a week longer. Your lordship would then have been in undisputed possession for twelve years and we could plead the statute and end the case at once."

"What difference does it make one way or another?" said his lordship. "It is, I assume, a matter of blackmail, and I shan't part with a farthing. I don't suppose the precious pair of swindlers will proceed farther."

Again that curious smile twitched his lips.

(To be continued.)



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