

A FOILED PLOT.

CHAPTER I.

This is a strange story, but a true one. For six months prior to my "coming of age" I appeared to be a confirmed invalid. "Ah, my dear," the old doctor once said, "you are becoming an admirable candidate for the churchyard."

I remember I returned the compliment by making an old joke. "Do you think a churchyard is a particularly healthy place?" I asked.

Dr. Harrison was not good at conundrums, and he reflected seriously for a moment, and said, "No, I cannot say it is."

"Then why do you send so many of your patients there?" was my parting thrust. I was in a very peculiar position. My father, a wealthy cotton broker, had left me £50,000, and had appointed his brother executor under the will.

By strategy I succeeded in getting a skillful specialist into the house and I took a sudden change for the better. I appeared very likely to cheat the churchyard, my uncle and his mercenary doctor at one stroke. The specialist assured me that I was not likely to die soon, but, with a shake of the head, told me he suspected there was a good deal of poison in my constitution.

With this sudden change in my condition, my uncle's resources as an actor seemed to terminate. His face became fearfully and wonderfully elongated, and a terrible look was in his eyes every time he came near me. He was trying to secure the £50,000.

Almost every evening a friend of mine, George Wilcox, visited me, and afterward spent a long time in consultation with my uncle in his study, which was just beneath my bedroom. Though I had every confidence in Wilcox I was seized with an intense longing to know the precise nature of these long consultations.

Whilst my uncle was away in the city one day I pulled up the carpet and bored a hole right through the floor of my bedroom. The boards and the plaster were so thin that this was an easy task, even for an invalid. When Wilcox left me that night I got out of bed, and placed my ear to this hole. It has become a proverb that eavesdroppers never fear anything good about themselves, and I certainly was not an exception to the rule.

"Look here, George," in spite of all our precautions he's getting better. During my absence in the city he sent for Dr. Henderson, and he has upset our nice little game, and I am not so sure he has not discovered traces of poison in our victim. We must keep a sharp eye on both. There is another matter. I was so sure of getting that £50,000 at a comparatively early date that I borrowed a large sum from my employer—without his consent—and lost it on the Grand National. If I do not replace it within the next fortnight I shall be placed in a terrible position.

This was very pleasant information for me, but worse followed.

"That's bad enough, Mr. Hewitt, but I

am in a worse position than you," responded Wilcox. "I should not be at all surprised if a detective laid his hands upon me within twenty-four hours."

"Well, to the point. He must die. He has every confidence in you. You must lead him to his death, but you must be very careful to do it in a natural sort of fashion. I am not anxious to see you with a hempen cravat around your throat."

There was a long silence.

"Yes, I'll do anything you suggest, if it shows a possible chance of getting me out of my difficulties."

After I left the sick room, Wilcox, true to his fearful compact, sought to lead me into excessive drinking. I resisted all his overtures. At last my uncle's home became intolerable to me, and I made arrangements for leaving it. On the last night I was walking through Lime street when a young man ran up to me and effusively greeted me.

I looked at him. "You have the advantage of me," I said.

"Nay, Hewitt, surely you have not forgotten your old chum Wilson—Dick Wilcox."

"You Dick Wilson? Well, a few years have made a great difference in you. I am delighted to meet you again."

While we were talking together it began to rain piteously, and my companion literally dragged me into a brilliantly lighted hotel. He called for two hot brandies. We were alone. He paid for the drinks, and then my attention was directed toward a very beautiful mirror of exquisite workmanship. While I was looking through it I saw my companion pull a small bottle from his coat pocket and empty its contents into my glass. In a wild frenzy I seized him by the throat. There was a sharp struggle. A false beard came off his face into my hand, and, by all that was terrible, I was once more face to face with George Wilcox. In that moment of recognition I think I must have been mad. I held him by the throat until I was startled by the horrible sound of the death rattle. I flung him from me, and he fell to the floor with a hideous thud. I had killed him, and I cannot say that I was sorry for it. I emptied the contents of my glass on the floor, seized an overcoat, and dashed out of the hotel.

CHAPTER II.

The instinct of self-preservation compelled me to hail a cab and call to the driver: "Central Station! quick!" When I reached the platform a train was steaming, ready to start. One of the arms of a semaphore bore the word "London," and, tickleless, I made a dash for the train. Fortunately I secured an empty carriage.

It was while on the long journey that I began to take stock of my exceedingly dangerous position. I had killed a man. What were my hopes of escaping? I was well supplied with money. While debating with myself I looked at the overcoat. I had never seen it before. It must have belonged to my victim. I remember that when we entered the hotel we both pulled our dripping coats off and threw them over the table. I dived into one of the pockets and fished out a letter. As I read it a ray of hope gleamed across my path. It contained this startling statement: "After you have poisoned your victim make for the station and get to London as quickly as possible. I have engaged a cabin for you on board the Nora, and have deposited with the captain a letter containing a check for £1,000. For obvious reasons I have made out the check in the name of Wilfred Englefield, and the cabin has been engaged in that name. When you reach Cape Town you can cash it at the bank of Messrs. Wild & Co. I will cable to tell them of your expected visit. Mr. Wild is an old friend of mine, and when you reach him your course will be plain. Do the work neatly and then lie quiet in South Africa for a few months. I will see that you are well supplied with cash."

CHAPTER III.

I had been in Africa about six months when a strange thing happened. After a hard day's hunting I threw myself down on the summit of the hill, and I think I fell asleep. I was awakened by the sound of singing. In that wild country, far away from the center of civilization, I heard in sweet girlish notes the song of "Home Sweet Home."

I jumped up, ran to the other side of the hill, and looked down the valley. There was a fair scene. There was a large kraal, surrounded by a neatly kept garden. In the center of the garden the songstress was sitting sewing.

It was a strange meeting. The singer was an English woman, and a very beautiful one into the bargain. As I walked toward her she rose and extended her hand in welcome. From that moment I loved her. In a few simple words she explained to me that she was the daughter of an English missionary, who had died at his post of duty and had committed her to the care of a chief, who, under his teaching, had accepted the new faith.

Well, to make a long story a short one, I married her according to native custom. But trouble followed us. One morning a hostile tribe put in an appearance and several shots were fired into our kraal. Hastily the old chief summoned a few men, and we did our best to defend those we loved. I took up a position in an upper room and plied my breech loaders with vigor. But ours was a use less game. The enemy broke through our defense, and I was just on the point of running down the rickety stairs when once more I was face to face with George Wilcox.

Wilcox approached me and dragged me from my horse. "We meet under different conditions," he sneered. "You had the advantage of the last deal. Now I am going to kill you, as I have killed your wife."

The four men who had till then stood by him, seeing his condition, emptied the bottle and were soon in a similar state of utter prostration. Now was my time. By a tremendous effort I burst my bonds, seized the revolver, and, just for a moment, was seized with a horrible desire to empty the contents into the unhallooed brutes upon the floor. Once, twice, thrice, I put my finger on the trigger, but I dared not pull it.

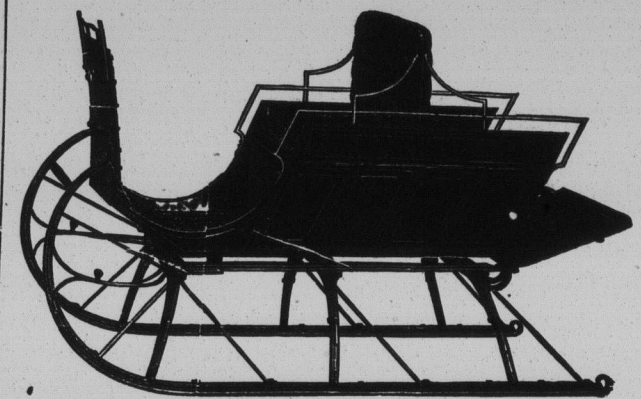
After a fearful struggle with myself I ran out of the tent, mounted a horse and rode into the blackness. Through the night of agony I rode, and when the gray streaks of dawn crept over the hill I saw the remains of my kraal in the distance. My poor wife had a bullet in her heart.

Truly Wilcox was right when he said that he had the advantage of our second meeting. I came back to England and found that my uncle had been sent for a long term of penal servitude for robbing his employers. I had cheated him and Wilcox, but at a terrible cost—the cost of a broken heart.



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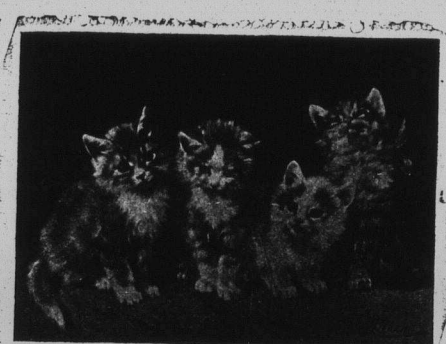
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