

## AN ATLANTIC STORY.

A SALIENT feature of life on board an Atlantic liner is the rapidity with which a man drifts into the company most congenial to his tastes, and sticks to it throughout the voyage.

A certain number will beguile the time with poker, *ecarte*, or a quiet rubber of whist. Then you have the body of deck loungers who revel in the briny sea-breezes, and the little band who devote most of their time and attention to the fair sex. But when you find a man who prefers the solitude of his state-room to any of these attractions, you may put it down as certain that he has a substantial reason for keeping to himself.

On one occasion a man came to me and asked to see the passenger list. He was a big, powerful-looking fellow, with heavy flat features, and a mop of hair that rose straight from his forehead. His face, too, was covered with hair almost to the eyes, which gave him rather an odd appearance. I took him to be a Russian, though he impressed upon me he was Austrian. His name, it seemed, was Volker.

His manner was decidedly peculiar. He was desperately nervous, apparently, and scanned the passenger list as if he expected to find the name of a deadly enemy therein. He said he was a miserable sailor—oh! he knew he would endure tortures during the voyage, and could I manage to stow him away somewhere by himself, so that his sufferings might not be a source of inconvenience to his fellow passengers?

Well, as we hadn't a very full ship, and as he had paid a high rate for his passage, I promised him a small state-room which happened to be vacant. He appeared immensely relieved, grasped me by the hand, and hurried down below. I saw no more of him until we dropped anchor inside the forts at Queenstown.

I then noticed him on deck, looking rather "washy," I thought, and keeping well in the background. As the tender with the mails and passengers ran alongside, I observed he paid close attention to those who came on board. After that he disappeared again, and for two days remained shut up in his state-room.

On the second evening, however, he ventured out and made his way on deck. Gradually he grew bolder, and the next day took his place at table for the first time. That night, when I looked into the smoke-room, I was rather astonished to find him there, talking and laughing loudly, smoking the best cigars on board, and imbibing an abundance of champagne.

In fact, there was a marvellous and unaccountable change in the man. He seemed to have completely shaken off his fears, whatever they were, and from being a timorous, frightened sort of a

creature, he broke out into a noisy, blustering, showy boaster. I soon found he was an inveterate gambler; and though undoubtedly, he played a straight game, and had plenty of money at command, the smoke-room company fought rather shy of him, for he was not content to play except for very high stakes.

There was one man on board who seemed to take a singular interest in Volker. His name was Klein—a Swiss apparently—and he had joined the ship at Queenstown.

There was nothing remarkable about him in any way. He looked like a man who, from long necessity, had schooled his features into betraying little of his character. In all probability he would have escaped my notice if I had not detected the earnest yet stealthy manner in which he watched the Russian.

About nine o'clock on the last night of the voyage I dropped into the smoke-room. The Russian was seated behind one of the small tables, in a very boisterous mood, snapping a pack of cards between his fingers and boastfully offering to play any of the company present. No one responded to his challenge. Then Klein got up quietly, laid his newspaper aside, and walked to the table.

"I will play," he said, taking a seat.

"You?"

Volker looked at him steadily, and I thought suspiciously, but the other took a handful of gold from his pocket and laid it on the table. It was enough; the eyes of the Russian sparkled, his greed was aroused and they began to play.

For the first ten minutes or so Volker had the best of it. Then the tide turned, fluctuated for a while between the two, and finally settled in favor of the Swiss. In half an hour his opponent was cleared out.

"Wait a moment!" cried Volker, springing up eagerly. He rushed down below, and returned with a fresh supply of notes and gold, which he flung down triumphantly on the table.

"Double?" he said as he took his seat.

"Yes."

The stakes were doubled, and they went at it again. By this time the excitement of the contest had got hold of all present, and they stood around in a cluster.

Luck still favored the Swiss—perhaps because he appeared indifferent as to whether he lost or won. The Russian, on the other hand, followed the vicissitudes of the game with the true passion of the gambler. His pile was steadily dwindling away; he was growing desperate; he rapidly counted what remained, and offered to stake the whole on the result of the next deal. The offer was instantly taken up.

Amidst a death-like silence, the game

was played out until the last deciding card remained in Klein's hand. He hesitated a moment before playing it, and then held it up in the hollow of his palm, so that it was visible only to his opponent.

The Russian bounded from his seat, his white lips uttered a terrible imprecation, and he fell back into the corner, cowering, shaking, gasping. The muscles of his face twitched spasmodically, while the craven and horrified look he fixed upon the immovable countenance of the Swiss showed he was the victim of some awful and mysterious dread. Without a word, he got up and staggered from the room. Klein, still retaining the fatal card in his hand, went on deck, leaving the stakes on the table.

The rest of us were looking at each other in blank amazement, when the report of a shot ran through the ship. I sprang down the stairs. A tiny wreath of smoke was curling out of the state-room occupied by Volker, and inside I found the Russian lying dead on the floor. He had shot himself through the head.

About an hour later, the captain sent for me. While I was passing along the deck to his cabin, I came upon Klein. He was bending over a camp stool, upon which lay a mass of gold and notes.

"I suppose you know that Volker has shot himself," I remarked.

"Yes, I know it," he replied, without looking up.

"You made a big swoop, at any rate," I said, glancing at his winnings.

"To my utter amazement, he crushed the money together, and, with a wide sweep of his arm, flung it out into the sea!"

"Bah!" he said, "it is the price of blood!"

"Of Volker's, you mean?"

"No, but of those he betrayed to a brutal and fiendish government."

"Who was he?"

"Like myself, a Russian; though Volker was not his real name, any more than Klein is mine. He was a trusted member of our society, though I myself was never brought into contact with him, because I have lived in London of late years. The Judas bartered away the lives of his comrades. My own brother was among the victims."

"And the card?"

"It was not a real card, but one upon which was engraved the traitor's death sentence. His suicide has saved me the trouble of carrying it out. I think I will go back again with you," he said, after a pause, "as I have nothing more to do out here. When do you return?"—*Quiz.*

Wife—"My first husband was a great fellow to get other people into scrapes." Husband—"He must have had me in mind when he died."