

THE DEATH-TRAP

WRITTEN FOR THE ADVERTISER
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"The Nameless City," "The Dwarf's Chamber," Etc.

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I was inconsolable when the Countess Gisela refused to marry me, yet I half expected she would answer as she did. How could the daughter of wealthy Szarkoszy nobles condescend to mate with a poor doctor, who had both position and fortune to make? It is true that I also came of ancient race—the Cornish Trethearrolls; but lands and money had long since passed away from the old stock, and I remained the sole representative of a family once prolific and powerful. Left an orphan at an early age, the remainder of the estates had been sold to provide for my education, and gave me a trifle of capital to make a start in life. I elected to be a doctor, and on becoming entitled to write M. D. after my name, accepted the post of medical attendant and companion to a young baronet in delicate health. Before settling down to regular practice, I wished to see something of the world; hence my glad acceptance of the offer. With Sir George Winston, I wandered over the greater part of Europe, and thus came to visit Vienna, where I met with Gisela Szarkoszy. It was the old tale of the moth and the candle.

Gisela cast a spell over me from the first moment she raised to my face her sea-blue eyes. My passion sprang up, as it were, in a moment, and grew more intense, as the days went by. I haunted her like a shadow, and was wildly jealous of all who approached her. At first she did not respond to my worship, and might have been a statue for all the notice she took of me. But gradually she warmed into flesh and blood, and welcomed me daily with a look which could mean only acceptance of my homage. I grew to understand her as no one else did; and when in one another's company we frequently passed many hours in silent communion. I say hours, for both George and I were free of her house, and repaired there twice or thrice a week. The good fellow invariably devoted himself to a withered old baroness, who watched over the girl, and so left the coast clear for me to creep up to Gisela's side. All the same, George warned me that this mad passion could come to no good end.

"You are going out to meet sorrow," he urged. "She is not strong enough to accept you, Stephan."

"You mean that a poor man like myself is not a fit match for her?" I said, somewhat bitterly.

"No, I don't mean that," he replied. "I am thinking of Count Taroc." This was a tall dark man from the wilds of the Carpathian Mountains, who haunted Gisela almost as much as I did. He also was in love with her, and devoured her with his great black eyes, until she shook and quivered under the magnetism of the gaze. Of my rivalry he must have known something, yet he took absolutely no notice of it, and was always as polite and affable as his fierce nature would let him be. Taroc was reported to be poor, and I ungenerously ascribed his pursuit of Gisela to his knowledge of her wealth. Something of this I hinted to Winston.

"No, Stephan," said he, quickly, "the man loves her as passionately as you do; and he will marry her, mark my words." "She will never accept him."

"Not willingly, I grant you. But he has some hypnotic power over her, and she will become Countess Taroc through sheer inability to resist."

"But she hates him! I know she does." "It is not so much hate as horror," said Winston. "Taroc is a brute. I daresay he wants her money, but he wants her for herself also."

"Yet he must know that I love her!" Winston hesitated. "I hope you won't think me rude, Stephan," said he, "but, the fact is, Count Taroc never thinks of placing you, a commoner, in rivalry with himself. Remember," went on George, hastily, "that he knows nothing of our social laws; he is unaware that an Englishman, without being titled, can

come of an ancient race. He looks up on you as nothing—or, if you will, as an amusement for the Countess Szarkoszy, pending her marriage to himself."

"He shall find I am no contemptible rival, George."

"I don't see what you can do. He's a good shot and a magnificent swordsman. In a duel, you would be killed. Then there is that man of his, who seems absolutely devoted to him—Andreas, another brute."

"They are certainly well-matched," I answered; "but I shall ask her to be my wife. Then we shall see."

It was the afternoon of a dull and cold day when at length I tempted my fate. Gisela sat alone beside the fire, in a pretty salon of lacquered white wood, painted and decorated in the Pompadour style. The walls were a riot of Watteau rustics, clusters of roses, smiling cupids, and bunches of blue ribbons. The polished floor reflected the shining mirrors, the gilded furniture and the griddles with their glimmering candles. It was so dull that the Countess had ordered these to be lighted, and now sat shivering over the fire complaining of the wind.

"It vexes me, monsieur," she said, in her charming French; "it torments my nerves. I am ill today—so ill!"

She looked towards me for sympathy, but I had seen Taroc leaving the house, and was annoyed. "You have not had the best of company to do you good, Countess," I said.

"He stayed only for a few minutes," she said, looking anxiously at me, "and he was less gloomy than usual."

"You do not like him?" I asked, abruptly.

Gisela put out her hand with a gesture of fright. "I do not know," was her answer. "You are a doctor, monsieur; you know me well; perhaps you can explain to me."

"What is there to explain?" She answered with all the innocence of a child.

"Count Taroc makes me afraid. When he looks at me with those big eyes, I tremble—I feel as though I stood in a cold wind." She pressed her small hands against her breast. "I am 'him' when he looks so."

"I can quite understand—he magnetizes you."

"Then with you," she pursued, dreamily, taking no notice of my interruption, "it is different. I am all myself, and in sunshine; when you watch me, I am happy, and gay. If you could understand—"

"I do—I do understand!" said I, impatiently. "You hate him; you love me!"

The declaration was crude and rash, but the Countess did not seem surprised. With a sudden smile, she leant forward and took my hand. "I like you too well, Stefan,"—so did she call me for the first time—"too much to let you say that to me. It would end our friendship."

"And commence our love—Gisela."

I did not pronounce her name as glibly as she had uttered mine; but I got it out, nevertheless. She was still smiling. "I know you love me," she replied; "but I am not sure if I love you." Then her face grew dark, and her mood changed on the instant. "I cannot marry you!" she said, abruptly. "Do not speak like this to me again!"

I have compared her to a fairy, and certainly no fairy could have disappeared so quickly as she did. At one moment seated on the couch beside me, the next, with a flutter, she was out of the door. There was nothing for me but to go. When I called the next day, she had left Vienna.

II.

For myself, I remained in the city. One day in the crowd of the Prater Andreas touched me on the shoulder.

"The air of Vienna is not healthy to your lordship," said he, giving me a title to which I had no claim. "I advise you in all humility to go."

"For what reason?" I asked, defiantly.

"Has Count Taroc sent you? Let him speak to me as my rank entitles me to demand. I do not hold conversations with servants."

The eyes of Andreas flashed, but his face was set like a mask. "By a servant may be a friend, noble Englishman," said he. "Whether I come from the count or not, does not matter. But go back to your own land," he nodded significantly. "All will yet be well for you!" he murmured.

"What do you mean?" I drew back, for his smile was hot on my cheek. The man smiled, laid a lean finger on his lips, and disappeared.

On returning to my hotel, I found Winston much agitated. His mother had telegraphed him to come home at once. George was fond of his mother, and implored me to return with him to England without delay, since something serious might have occurred. He was too delicate to travel alone, and my duty demanded that I should accompany him. After the message of Andreas, I was unwilling to leave Vienna, lest Taroc should think I had obeyed his insolent warning. But in the face of George's anxiety and my duty, there was no help for it. We were on our way to London the ensuing morning, George apologizing all the journey for taking me from Gisela.

"That's all right," I replied, "as soon as you are comfortably settled with Lady Winston I shall return!" And then I told him of my meeting with Andreas.

"It is strange," said Winston, "but if the man is disposed to be a friend I should make him a firm one."

"I don't know that he is so disposed," was my answer, "and nothing I could offer him would induce him to betray his master in any way. You know how he is said to be devoted to Taroc."

"Nevertheless, I should see him when you return to Vienna."

Of course I readily promised to do this, little thinking how many months would

elapse before I again set foot in Austria. The excitement of the journey, the anxiety for his mother, and a drenching he got while crossing the channel, ended for George in a dangerous illness. I was too devoted to him to think of my own troubles in the face of his possible dying; so I put Gisela out of my head, and night and day attended to my sick friend. It was only by a miracle that I pulled him round. And the vexatious part of it was, that he need not have come over at all, and had the telegram been more explicit, he need not have worried himself into a fever. Lady Winston had lost her diamonds and had summoned George to lament with her; for certainly he could be of no other use at the time. The jewels were valued at thirty thousand pounds; famous gems that had been in the Winston family for generations. The strong-room of Winston Court had been broken into, and the thieves had got clean away. At the request of George, I put the police to work, and when I could spare time, I attended to the matter personally. But all was in vain. The thieves had vanished without leaving a trace behind them, and the jewels were irrevocably gone. A famous detective named Meredith expressed the belief that the work was that of a gang in Vienna, but there was no real clue to go upon.

When George became convalescent I sent him off to the seaside with his mother, and began to think again of Gisela, and a return to Austria. All these months I had heard nothing from her. She was back in Vienna, and Taroc still haunted her, but there was as yet no word of the marriage. I rejoiced at this, and made up my mind to see her again and again plead my suit. Then an incident happened which quickened my movements.

A letter arrived at my club bearing an Austrian postmark and addressed to me. I opened it to find a single line in a woman's hand-writing, enigmatically enough as is here apparent: "Kara Hissler, July 24. Save me."

The writing was unknown to me, but to be sure I had never seen the calligraph of Countess Szarkoszy. Yet I was certain that the imploring message came from her. It was now the latter end of June, so there was not much time to get to Austria and Kara Hissler, wherever that might be. I had a dim recollection that it was a castle in Turkey. But how could she be there? In this dilemma I went to see an attaché of the Austrian embassy, who knew Gisela, Taroc, and all about my love affair, and was friendly to me as I had cured him of an illness. At the first glance he gave me the desired information.

"That is Count Taroc's castle in the Zillertal Alps."

"I thought his Schloss was in the Carpathians."

"He has four castles more or less ruined," replied Branka, "and this one in the Zillertal Alps. It is called the Kara Hissler or Black Castle, from that more famous one in Turkey."

I made up my mind at once to go to Austria. After writing to George telling him of my intention I made my preparations, got my passport re-dated, and went off by the club train. I made up my mind to get somehow to the bottom of this business. Meredith accompanied me.

III.

Leaving Meredith in Vienna, I set off myself in the direction of the Zillertal Alps. The date was July 2, so I had 22 days to reach Kara Hissler. It was no plan to appear at the castle as a pedestrian, since, if I showed myself with mere formality, Taroc might be suspicious.

For many a day I trudged through the pine forests, dipping into wild valleys and climbing rugged steep slopes. So far as I could, I made what the Americans call a bee line to the Schloss of Taroc, and three days before the appointed time I saw its peaked turrets. It was an immense building of weather-worn stone, and poised on a bleak, treeless, herbless rock, which thrust itself upwards from a forest of oaks. Here and there in the wood villages appeared in spacious clearings; but it seemed to me as though the inhabitants of these were always beating back encroaching nature. Immediately below the rock upon which Kara Hissler frowned, foamed an ice-cold current in a deep ravine, and near this was the town—so-called—which appertained to the castle.

True to my plan of appearing unexpectedly, I waited till night-fall before venturing up the steep and winding path. The red sunset had given place to a gloomy sky ominous of rain. And, sure enough, when I was half way to my goal, the storm broke with surprising fury. Whirling wet, foot-sore and weary, to the roaring of heaven's artillery, I presented myself at the small gate which was set in the huge entrance door. Nature, as may be seen, had done her best to stamp my adventure with the necessary realism; but I do not know that I was grateful. Yet to dispel suspicion nothing better could have happened.

I was soon ushered into Count Taroc's presence.

"My dear Monsieur Trethearroll!" he cried, shaking my hand in the English fashion. "I am delighted to see you. What happy chance brought you to my door?"

"A pedestrian tour and the storm," said I, readily, whereas he vowed with quite unnecessary heartiness that he was glad to be my host.

"I have many people staying here," said the count as he led me to a bedroom; "at least a score; you may know some of them. Nay," he added with a significant smile, "at least one you know—the Countess Gisela Szarkoszy."

"Of course," I replied with feigned carelessness. "I saw her often in Vienna, as you know, count."

"You must offer her your congratulations, Monsieur Trethearroll, or 'cher

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offer them to me. In a month she becomes my wife."

"I congratulate you, Monsieur," said I, bowing to conceal my face, for he was watching me like a tiger. Under all his suavity I saw the fierceness of the treacherous beast.

"A suit of my clothes will do for you at present; you are about my build," observed Taroc, with a swift glance. "Then you can join us in the hall. A very rough place, I fear, Monsieur; but here we live in the middle ages."

"With the same manners I doubt not," I murmured as he hurried to rejoin his guests. "At all events there are more civilized people here than my host. They will see no murder done."

Anxious to see Gisela, I dressed with all speed in clothes brought by Andreas, and, when less weary, was conducted to a large hall blazing with many lights. I was surprised to note that the apartment was illuminated by electricity. To be sure, the castle had plenty of torrents near at hand by which the dynamos might be driven at small cost, but I hardly expected Taroc to be sufficiently civilized to trouble about such modernity.

Shortly I saw Gisela. She was seated at the head of a long table in her favorite white dress, and looked much the same as when I had seen her last. But on coming near I noted that her face was thin, her eyes unnaturally large and bright, and she cast frequent glances over her shoulders and at the company.

"An old friend, Countess," said Taroc, leading me up. "Monsieur Trethearroll has arrived quite by accident."

I repeated my little story, and strove to read relief in Gisela's eyes. But she seemed startled and beside herself with terror.

"Do you know any of my friends?" asked Taroc, politely.

I glanced around and noted several I had met in Vienna. One was a woman and three were men. None of the four appeared glad to see me, and acknowledged my greetings as briefly as possible. They seemed uneasy, ashamed; the why or the wherefore I could not then divine.

Naturally the Countess, with her hypersensitive feelings, gave way to the strain. With a faint cry she sank down, white and unconscious. I bent to pick her up, while the count frowned. "But you are a doctor, Monsieur Trethearroll," said he, with a sardonic smile. "Let us see if you can revive Mademoiselle Gisela."

When in her own room Gisela revived, but appeared to be so ill that it determined not to leave her for a few moments, alleging that she needed medical assistance. To my surprise Taroc made no objection.

The moment the door was closed Gisela raised herself up and clutched my arm. "How did you come here, Stefan?" she gasped in terror.

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"You sent for me," I replied; "you asked me to come here, on this very day, and save you!"

"Ach Gott!" she wailed. "And I need to be saved. I am in deadly peril; you also, Stefan. I did not send for you, No!"

I showed her the letter. She glanced at it and threw it aside.

"A trap! A trap!" she cried. "You are in danger. You will never leave this castle alive. The count wrote it."

"Can we not escape?" I asked, glancing at my poor darling, and her still more terrified maid.

"Impossible! Impossible!" cried Gisela, wringing her hands. "But you will be called back to the hall soon. I shall never see you again. I must tell—I must tell!"

"Tell what, my dearest?" I thought she was distraught.

"Of Count Taroc's wickedness. Listen, Stefan," she said, rapidly, "when my brother was alive he fell into the snares of Count Taroc. He lost money at play, he could not pay, and then—I do not know how it came about, but he was forced to join the band."

"The band!" I echoed, and the robberies occurred to my mind on the instant.

"Yes! Yes! Count Taroc is the head of a band of thieves. All those people in the hall are thieves. You see English, Austrian, French—every nationality; many in good positions. Taroc is the head. It was his idea; they are all afraid of him. He could disgrace many; hang some. Oh, you do not know what a wicked man he is!" And she wept.

So Meredith's chance arrow had hit the bull's-eye. It was a pity he had not come with me to verify his suspicions. In Vienna he might learn the truth, but from my lips he would never hear it. I was as I well saw, in deadly peril. Yet, strange to say, I thought less of that than how the Countess came to know of this modern band of the Forty Thieves.

"It was my brother," she explained when I asked her. "He was deceived in some way into joining them. I knew not how Taroc forced him to degrade his honor, but he snared him. Bela realized his position, when it was too late. But he refused to commit any crime, and in a fit of remorse he told me all about the band. Then," she paused with a choking sob, "he killed himself."

I uttered an exclamation of horror. I had heard rumors that Count Bela Szarkoszy had committed suicide, but I did not know that he had been forced by Taroc to take his own life. "And this is why you would marry him, Gisela?" I said. "Because you know the secrets of—"

"To avenge my brother," she whispered, convulsively. "Oh, do not think badly of me, Stefan. I loved my brother so much. I was mad when he died. At the time I was ignorant that Taroc was the head of the band, but he found out what Bela had told me, and then confessed. He worked on my feelings, and I promised to marry him if he would avenge my brother. He has brought them here to slay them!" she said.

"How?" I asked, with a chill in my veins.

"I do not know. But they are all here. He called them from London, and Paris, and Vienna, and Rome. It is for tonight, and that was why he got you to come on this date. Oh, I am sure. They will die and you will die with them. But I know not how, I know not how!" She wept again.

"What else, Gisela?" I asked, steeling myself to these horrors.

"I am to leave the castle at midnight with the count," she faltered. "A carriage will be at the door then. We go straight to Vienna, and—marry. Heavens! I shall die!" she clasped my hands.

"Yet there is one hope."

"One hope! What do you mean, dear-est?"

"Andreas!" she whispered. "He hates the count, and I—I did him a kindness. There is no time to tell you more, but Andreas may help."

I remembered the observation of the man that "All would be well," and won-

dered if indeed he was our friend. At that moment a knock came to the door, and he appeared pushing brusquely past the maid. "My master is waiting for you, noble Englishman!" said he.

It was like a prisoner being summoned to the guillotine by one of Robespierre's minions; but I had no alternative but to go.

"She is better, I hope, monsieur?" said Taroc, meeting me at the door.

"Much better, count. A night's rest will restore her to complete health."

"So!" sneered Taroc. "A good night's rest!" He laughed, and I knew he was thinking of the night's journey, of the dead he did not guess that Gisela had betrayed his wickedness; but he seemed to have no fear. "Permit me to introduce you to Madame Durande," he said, and led me up to a beautiful woman covered with jewels—stolen, I presume. Then he left me to mix with his guests.

"Noble Englishman,"—it was Andreas who was at my elbow—"the Countess is again ill. She calls for a doctor. Come!"—he squeezed my arm, significantly—"come quick to madam!"

"Ah, that poor Countess!" cried my companion. "She is so delicate. Lose no time, monsieur, I beg!"

I did not need her voice to speed me. The pressure on my arm was quite enough. I followed Andreas as he moved quickly to the door. On the threshold he grasped my arm with a breath of relief. "Safe!" he muttered.

"What is safe?" I asked, stupidly.

The answer came, but not from Andreas. A cracking, riving sound made me glance back into that vast hall, brilliant with light, crowded with humanity. The floor was giving way in the middle! It split lengthways, and before I could utter a cry the table, the gold, the crystal, and—oh, horrible!—the men and women went sliding into a black gulf! A wall of agony rose, but only for a moment. The next, and there was silence. Pale as a corpse Andreas grasped my arm. I stared aghast. The electric lights in the ceiling glittered over a mighty chasm that went down blackly into the very bowels of the planet. The flooring hung on either side, linged to the walls and I stood with my companion on the very verge of the abyss! From that awful grave breathed a moaning wind, cold as the wind of death. And that it was. They had gone down in their wickedness; in a moment they had been cut off; and the earth had swallowed them up! I looked dry-mouthed, horror-struck at that tremendous judgment.

"Quick! quick! The carriage is at the door!" whispered Andreas, gripping me again. "No time to be lost!"

I was too stunned to reply. He led me at a swift pace along many passages, down many stairs. We emerged on to a plateau, and there a carriage with two horses waited in the night. Andreas thrust me in, and clambered up beside the driver. The next moment and we were tearing down a rugged road at break-neck speed.

"Gisela! Heaven's! She is left—"

"I am here, Stefan! And two soft arms were round my neck. What I said or did I know not. But the horror of that hideous memory was swallowed up in joy. Gisela was safe. Nothing else mattered.

IV.

A week later I was seated with Meredith in my hotel listening to the story of Andreas. He supplied the details of Count Taroc's villainy in a blunt, and, as it seemed to me, rather a brutal manner. But this might have come from the lack of softness which was always apparent in his character. He had done much for me and Gisela, but I did not like the man.

"I have been a servant to the count all my life," said Andreas; "and twice I saved his life. Once on the mountains, and again when he was nearly drowned in the Danube. For years I was devoted to him, until I became his bitter enemy," and the man's face grew dark.

"For what reason?"

"He had me flogged!" said Andreas.

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