

NUMBER ONE.

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Respecting the following strange story I wish to observe, before commencing, that I can in no way be answerable for its truth. I give it in the very words in which it was communicated to me, and without reservation or addition.

I was for many years one of the crew in charge of a very small lightship which marked the position of a dangerous sand-bank, a few miles from the East Coast. The crew comprised four men altogether, but only a couple were required on board at the same time—the rule being that two months on duty should be followed by two months off, so that our work was not as monotonous as might have been expected.

It was a very lonely time on board the ship, however; for, although we were only a few miles from the coast, we were not allowed to go ashore; and except the lad who rowed out twice a week to bring us oil, wick and provisions, we saw no one with whom to exchange conversation from week's end to week's end.

One afternoon, in late autumn, as my companion, Hughes, and myself, were engaged in hoisting the lanterns for the night, we heard the sound of a man's voice hailing us, and saw that a solitary oarsman was approaching from the shore. We threw him a rope in response to his request, and in another moment a tall, dark, powerful-looking man had clambered up the side, and stood before us.

"Look here, messmates," he said, in a voice that had, I thought a foreign accent, "I've got into trouble on shore there, and I want you to put me up till the hne-and-cry's over. Fact is, I shot the man who had come between my wife and myself, and I know, by the look of you both, that you'd have done the same in my place. Unfortunately, however, he happened to be a nobleman, and it will be more than my neck's worth if I'm taken. Will you put me up a bit, comrades? I've plenty of money, and will pay you handsomely for your trouble besides which you'll be doing the friendly thing to a poor fellow who's "down on his luck."

There was an air of authority in the way he spoke which, in spite of his appealing words, made me feel that he would be a dangerous man to thwart; and although I had an uneasy presentiment that his coming forboded trouble, I had not the courage to oppose him. I noticed also a sinister look in the eyes, and certain lines about the mouth and chin, which told me he would pause at nothing to attain his purpose. The recollection of a time when I was myself in somewhat of a similar plight came to my mind, however, and I turned to Hughes, saying that, if he were willing to allow the gentleman to remain, I had no objection—to which he nodded a surly assent. I knew the man's tale was true, as, in a paper which had been wrapped around some groceries, I had read of the very case to which he alluded—namely, the shooting of a profligate and abandoned nobleman by a gentleman named Rissler; and I remember that I had felt at the time that what he had done was the very course I should myself have pursued under the circumstances.

"Your name, sir," I said, "is——"

"Rissler—Max Rissler," he replied, showing a row of white, tigerish-looking teeth, and with a strange smile, which made me shudder; "but why do you ask?"

"Because I have read your case in the papers," I answered, "and must say that I entirely sympathize with you."

"Thank you, thank you," he said, with another glitter of white teeth. "Then you will understand how necessary it is that my whereabouts should not be traced. I took the liberty of borrowing that boat from the beach, but, unfortunately, had no time to obtain the owner's permission. Perhaps you would oblige me by taking it back again, as it might lead to inquiries when missed. You can easily tow it back after dark, fastened to your own boat. Here are five pounds between you, to show that I intend treating you fairly; and you shall have the same sum for every week that I remain here. Is it a bargain, gentlemen?"

Hughes eagerly closed with the offer, to which I also assented, and so it was arranged that he should take up his quarters with us, we having first solemnly promised to keep his presence a secret. He had not been with us a week before he was complete and sole master of the ship. Neither Hughes nor myself were particularly weak-minded, but there was something about that man which so cowed us that we dared not oppose him in any way.

A month went by, during which our strange guest had made no mention of leaving, although he had paid us the five pounds regularly and fairly each week. We knew no more about him than when he had first come on board—indeed, we felt more mystified than ever, for both Hughes and myself soon came to the conclusion that the assumption of the name of Rissler was merely a ruse to disarm suspicion. Hughes' opinion was that he was a French spy, while I believed him to be connected with the smuggling trade. All we knew was that he was frequently engaged in writing of some sort, the manuscripts being invariably locked away in a box in his cabin. This cabin he never left without carefully locking the door, the key being always kept in his own pocket. But the most suspicious thing of all was that every evening, provided the weather would admit it, he would have the boat out, telling us that he was going to take a little exercise, and would then disappear for four or five hours, generally returning with a parcel, which appeared to contain newspapers, letters, and plans. That he had newspapers I knew, for he would sometimes give them to us when he had done with them; while at other times he would carefully and deliberately destroy them.

Frequently, after reading and destroying a paper, he would sit looking out to sea, with a smile on his face that was positively hellish in its malignity. On such occasions his exultation would render him almost jovial, but it was joviality which made me shudder. He would invite us to join him in a cigar, and press us not to spare the grog, although I noticed that he carefully abstained from more than merely wetting his lips with it himself. There were times, however, when the news seemed bad, and then he would grind and gnash his teeth, whilst he had a look in his eyes such as I have never seen in the eyes of any other human being. If I were asked of what he most often reminded me, I should say, without hesitation, "a serpent," for there was that in his face, at certain moments, which vividly recalled the look I had once noticed in the eyes of a dying viper. At other times I saw a tigerish, treacherous expression glide across his countenance, but it was only when he thought he was unobserved. I must confess that I was intensely curious to discover the mystery that hung over him, although my fear was so very great that I dared not take any step to gratify that curiosity.

At last Hughes, who was an ignorant, credulous man in every way, was seized with a strange superstitious dread about our visitor, and said that, unless something were done to set his mind at rest, he could not stay on the ship any longer. One night, when the subject of our suspicions had gone for his usual nocturnal row, Hughes told me that he had manufactured a rough skeleton key to unlock the cabin door, and that he was engaged in making one which would fit the box in which Rissler's manuscripts and correspondence were so carefully kept. I endeavoured to dissuade him from any such project, as I felt a firm presentiment that evil would come of it; moreover, I was positive that Rissler would discover that his papers had been tampered with, and would be revenged in some terrible way upon the delinquent. But Hughes refused to listen to my warnings, declaring that, come what might, he was determined to set his mind at rest, and I was obliged to leave him to his own devices. The night came at last when everything was ready for the examination of the box. I declined to have anything to do with the matter, so, when we had seen Rissler safely off on his evening voyage, Hughes descended to the cabin, while I remained on deck to watch.

Whether our mysterious visitor suspected anything or not I cannot say, but he had not been gone more than half an hour before I heard the stealthy plash of his returning oars, so I hastily called down the cabin stairs to apprise my companion of his danger. Never