

THE CRYSTAL GOBLET

The Story of a Cup with a Fatal Draught

By DRUID GRAYL, Author of "Satan's Snare," "The Body in the Box," "No Clue," &c.



"LOT 143," said the auctioneer: "the most important item of the collection. A rock-crystal goblet of the sixteenth century, engraved with poppies and the figure of the goddess Proserpine; having also on its foot an emblem of a phoenix rising from its ashes—probably the cognisance of a noble family of mediæval Italy."

"I quote from the catalogue," he went on. "But now permit me to call your attention to a peculiarity in the stem of the goblet. Riley, take the article round, carefully, and tilt it gently between the light. Notice, gentlemen, that the stem is hollow, and contains a few drops of some liquid."

There was no doubt as to the fact; the fluctuation could be observed distinctly; moreover, certain prismatic hues came and went as the liquid flowed to and fro.

"The goblet has been submitted to a scientific expert," continued the auctioneer, "and he informs me such a state of things is quite possible—though rare—in the matter of the crystal, which sometimes absorbs and retains a small quantity of water or other fluid during formation. He states, too, that an article such as the present specimen, if long buried in the earth might receive liquid by infiltration through the seam of the stem. In either case, the object is probably unique, and therefore of the greatest possible interest to connoisseurs. Such a specimen has never passed through my hands before, though in sale annals there is a record of such ancient goblet having been offered years ago. It was, I understand, broken in the course of inspection, when such a delightful odour filled the auction-room that the broken article fetched more than if intact."

A burst of laughter followed this statement.

As it subsided, the voice of a little, dark Hebrew was heard saying to a companion—

"Can't he tell the tale, though? O, my, not half!"

"Dot's drue, Levi; I read him in a book," replied the other—a stout, impassive-looking foreigner—just as audibly.

"Thank you, sir," said the auctioneer, turning in his direction, with a bow and flourish of the hammer. "The corroboration of a perfect stranger is as gratifying as unexpected. Make the best or worst of the liquid in the stem, gentlemen, as you please. Now, will someone kindly make me a bid for the engraved rock-crystal goblet of the sixteenth century, presumably Italian?"

"Ten pounds!"

"Twenty!" said the little Hebrew.

"Dirty!" added the stout foreigner.

There was a long pause. It was evident that others of the company were awaiting developments, suspecting collusion.

"A mere thirty pounds for a rock-crystal goblet of the sixteenth century!" remarked the auctioneer. "Well, I must pass this item, and go on to the next. The last specimen fetched thousands, as you all know; and though, admittedly, it was a more important piece than this, I beg to observe that the poorest samples are not quite so plentiful as Bristol diamonds, or the star-stones of Warwickshire. Replace the goblet, Riley."

"I gif vivvy," interpolated the stout man.

"One hundred guineas," said a quiet, but distinct and musical voice.

Everyone turned and looked at the speaker—a slender, singularly handsome young man in faultless morning costume, but with something un-English in his appearance nevertheless.

One or two persons present knew him, evidently, for reassuring glances were exchanged, and the little Hebrew said to his companion—this time in a whisper—"Markham's adopted son. It's all right; go on, Rafitz."

"Nod I!"

"I will, then. Fifty!"

"Two hundred guineas," said the young man, calmly.

This coolness acted on those present as a clear frost does on the appetite, and one bidder after another

other hungered for the goblet with a stimulating craving. It ran up to three hundred and fifty guineas, when the bidding checked again.

"Don't lose it, Mr. Antonio," pleaded the auctioneer. "I should like you to have it, because it will be thoroughly appreciated. Say three-sixty. I'll take five guinea bids now."

"I'm bidding entirely on my own responsibility," replied the young fellow, courteously; "though I think the goblet would interest Mr. Markham. I'll risk the price you suggest, but no more. Any-one is welcome to it at a higher figure."

"Three hundred and sixty guineas for the rock-crystal goblet. Any advance? Once! Twice! Third, and last time—three hundred and sixty guineas."

There was no higher bid, so the article was knocked down to Mr. Antonio, who wrote a cheque for the amount and took his acquisition away in its velvet-lined case—oblivious of or indifferent to a score or more of envious, disappointed or admiring eyes directed upon him as he wended his way out of the auction-room.

He did not make his way direct from Covent Garden to Mr. Markham's house in St. John's Wood, but proceeded to John Street, where he had two rooms on the ground floor, one of which was tastefully furnished as a sort of study sitting-room, the other being always in use, more or less, for the numerous purchases he made for his adopted father from time to time; for he had the Italian's true, inborn love of art, and the unerring instinct for good specimens, which comes of it.

Markham himself had been an invalid for some years, and could not ride his hobby-horse in the actual pursuit of curios; but he read with avidity every dealer's and auctioneer's catalogue that was sent to him, and then entrusted Antonio with his commissions. At his house, "The Belvedere," known of every art-loving person in London and to all provincial sightseers as one of the free shows on a Thursday in the metropolis—the student could see most things genuine, costly, and rare, from an English pewter chalice of the fourteenth century to an Ashanti gold-mask. His own pictures were not the least noteworthy objects of a unique exhibition, though he never attempted to sell one or exhibit in a public gallery. Swell cracksmen had paraphrased Blucher's remark on London, in reference to "The Belvedere"—in the words, "What a house to crack!" But a knowledge of his great boarhounds and private information that secret-wires, which, once touched, connected the place with its corresponding number at the nearest police station, made them refrain from the job with sincere envy but small emulation.

The crystal goblet intended as the most recent contribution to the house's treasures, was very carefully scrutinized by Antonio, therefore, before it was submitted to the master; with a powerful telescopic lens he went over every line of it methodically, carefully and patiently, time after time; and then perused many works of reference before returning to the specimen again. In fact it was nearly eight o'clock before he left his rooms for home, with the precious goblet. But he was plainly self-satisfied. His step was light and firm, his bearing confident, and there was that smile on his face which comes only once in a life—when the fulfilment of the heart's desire is near at hand.

On reaching his home he went straightway to Mr. Markham's private room, thinking to find his adopted father alone at this early hour; but, as he was about to put his hand to the door-knob he checked himself and listened awhile, with an inscrutable expression on his face—for he could hear a woman's clear tones reading aloud from Browning's poems. It was the voice of Clare Nasmith, Mr. Markham's niece, a motherless young woman who had been an inmate of the house for two years now, to Antonio's great unrest, for he loved her passionately but secretly for herself, whilst distrusting an influence with her uncle which suggested future complications as to the heirship of that gentleman's wealth and possessions. Moreover, she was something of an enigma to him, frank, but irresponsible, and at times a little ironical, which intensified the distrust and filled him with vague alarm, till passion nourished on itself, banished the apprehension. He himself had

been told, in somewhat ambiguous terms, on one occasion, that the same blood ran in his own as in his adopted father's veins; but he had never ventured to ask the exact relationship, partly because Mr. Markham was not the sort of man to be questioned, and partly because there was a lurking fear that the kinship was not a matter which it was advisable to put to analysis.

The voice within the room went easily on, so, biting his upper lip, and forcing a smile, he turned the handle slowly, and went in.

"A prize, a prize for you, sir," he ejaculated, exultantly; "pardon my breaking in on your reading Clare, but here is something the like of which I have never seen before."

He took the goblet from its case and held it on a level with their eyes for inspection.

Clare looked brightly at the object, saying: "What a beautiful glass"; and Antonio, had he dared, would have replied: "There is but one beauty in the room—yourself—and in truth he would not have erred greatly, for the rich complexion, golden-red hair, and great blue eyes of the lovely young woman made everything else in the apartment cold and lifeless by comparison."

Mr. Markham, a tall, picturesque, but pallid and grey-haired man, remarked, quietly, in a low and tired voice: "A rock-crystal goblet I perceive; where did you get it, and what was the price?"