

lacio, "Lord Sternholt will see me."

"I think not, my fine fellow," retorted the flunkey. "If you don't like to leave your message, or have none to leave, you had better get out."

Furious at the man's insolence, Pallacio again strove to push past the opposing bulk of padding and powder, and the enraged footman stretched a huge paw to put him back violently. But before the broad palm touched Pallacio's breast, footsteps crossed the chequered marble of the hall, swift and silent as a panther's, and a dusky hand closed quietly, almost gently, on the lackey's wrist. But the big man writhed and whined with the pain of that gentle clasp, and shrank back nursing his wrist tenderly.

"Salaam, sahib," said the newcomer, in a soft purring voice, "my lord will see you most assuredly. I know my lord's wishes and will lead you to him."

HE bowed profoundly as he spoke, and recovered himself with graceful ease. The man was pliable and elastic as Indian rubber, every movement suggested, not grace only, but marvellous strength and activity.

Pallacio looked into the handsome face, which he knew so well, of Lord Sternholt's factotum, and read there, as he had often read before—nothing. The clear-cut, perfect features, the gleam of the teeth between the scarlet lips, the moustache and beard of glossy black, the wide forehead and firm chin all went to make a superb statue of a man. There was light in those dark eyes, but it was light that gave no glimpse of the mysterious soul within.

The man was an Indian—that much at least was certain, from the thick rolled turban of spotless white to the gold embroidered sandals on his feet, all proclaimed him an Indian of one of the high caste warlike tribes.

"My lord is in the picture gallery," he repeated, with the same soft purr in his voice. "Will you come?"

"Thanks, Abdallah," Pallacio said, and followed him up the wide marble stairs, which the Indian mounted with the ease of a cat.

Down a long corridor Abdallah led and Pallacio followed, to a door of dark mahogany polished like a mirror, which Abdallah pushed open without ceremony.

"My lord told me he would see you when you came, and he is there."

He pointed to the farther end of the long picture gallery, where Pallacio had a glimpse of a figure lying back in an easy chair in front of a rich riotous Rubens, of Actaeon flying from the nude nymphs and goddesses whom he has surprised, by the mossy margin of a forest pool overcanopied with trees. Pool and forest, nymphs and flying youth all painted with a splendid prodigality of glorious colour.

There was no furniture in the room, except a number of easy chairs with large rubber-tyred castors that moved with a touch over the floor of polished tessalated oak. The walls were panelled oak of a darker hue, and the roof was of glass. High windows on either side looked out on the garden and demesne, and the room was flooded with light. On the panelled wall, with many spaces between, were hung about ninety pictures, old and modern, large and small, but each a masterpiece. No second-class artist, and no second-class picture, even of a master, found admittance. The family portraits of the famous Sternholts were, with a few exceptions, banished elsewhere, for to art, not to ancestry, this gallery was devoted. Only when the ancestor or ancestress, whether gallant warrior or simpering beauty or pliant courtier had the good luck to be painted by a Reynolds, a Romney, a Hopper, a Gainsborough, or a Laurence, was a place found for the picture.

Pallacio had shambled half-way up the hall before Lord Sternholt, absorbed on contemplation of the luxurious beauty of the Rubens, noticed his coming. Then he sprang from his chair and came with a quick stride to meet him.

In all those years Lord Sternholt had hardly changed at all. He looked

almost as young as on that day long ago, when dripping from the thunderstorm, he came into the cottage of Margaret Darley in far away Connemara, his eager, overflowing vitality still craved indulgence and enjoyment—with a craving not to be denied.

Here and there was a strand of white in his black hair, wrinkles had come under his eyes and at the corners of his mouth, but his figure was as alert, his voice as vibrant, his eyes as full of fire as of old.

"Hallo, Pallacio," he cried, "I got your wire, 'want to see you immediate and important.' Well, here I am!"

"I had some trouble getting to you," grumbled Pallacio.

"How was that, man? I told Abdallah that you were to be brought to me here, at once."

"Oh, Abdallah was not to blame, but a booby footman of yours. He would have flung me down the steps if Abdallah had not turned up in the nick of time."

"Ah! Abdallah has a way of turning up in the nick of time, useful fellow—at a pinch."

Some pleasant reminiscences connected with Abdallah seemed to amuse Frederick, Lord Sternholt. He smiled as a man smiles in appreciation of a neat joke.

"Who is he? Where did you pick him up?" blurted out Pallacio. "I'm half afraid of the man at times; he seems to have a strain of the wild beast in him."

Lord Sternholt smiled quite pleasantly. "Quite right. He is my tame panther. Panthers are hard to tame; some people say they are untameable, but I know better. Would you like to know how I tamed Abdallah? Some day, perhaps. It's a very interesting little story. But I may tell you here and now that Abdallah belonged to one of the most ancient and exclusive castes in India. He was rather a fanatic in his own special line, and when I first met him he was engaged in one of the most exciting ceremonials of his creed. But by sheer force of argument I converted him to Christianity."

Sternholt spoke throughout with laughter in his eyes, as if at some jest underlying the obvious meaning of his words.

"I would not give much for his Christianity," objected Pallacio.

"That is at it may be, but you did not come here, I take it, to discuss Abdallah's moral and religious qualities. What did you come for?"

"To warn you of a great danger."

"That all?" retorted his lordship, lightly.

"And to show you the way out of it."

"You are very kind, I'm sure; but couldn't you contrive to be a little less mysterious? What's the danger, and what's the way out of it?"

"The danger first," said Pallacio. "It concerns that picture."

LORD STERNHOLT grew serious instantly. "Well," he snapped out, "what of that? Go on, man!"

"You remember the boy, Hugh Limner, was on the spot when the picture disappeared. He is in London now in the picture business. He is perhaps the best judge of pictures in the world."

"Oh! I know that. I know the man himself. Have you nothing new to tell me?"

"The girl Sybil Darley has just come to London. The two are friends. I have reason to think they are sweethearts."

"Well, that's their own affair. I don't see how it concerns me."

"My lord, you may as well put your cards on the table, for I know what is in your lordship's hand. Besides, it is a rule of the game never to deceive your partner."

"You're a cunning rascal, Pallacio, what do you guess?"

"Know is a better word, my lord. You are very fond of a good picture, and would go a long way to get hold of it. That Velasquez was a glorious canvas. But that was not the only reason you wanted it."

"Why did I want it, then? What do



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