

was at stake. With the sting of that throbbing finger for companion there was no danger he would sleep when sleep meant death.

All night he lay awake, silent and watchful, with the easy regular breathing of quiet sleep.

Just before dawn, when a ghastly light began to steal upon the darkness, he felt a touch of a colder air upon his cheek. Watching through half-open eyes he could see something moving silently, an inch at a time across the floor of his tent. He had the revolver in his right hand, and he lay and watched.

The outline of the shadow grew clearer on the background of faint, grey dawn. Softly it moved until it stood beside his bed, the figure of a man, lithe and strong, whose face he could not see. Very slowly the right hand was raised, he felt something touch the back of his head, light as the touch of a butterfly's wing. A noose of fine silk was closing round his neck when he fired. In the flash of the pistol he saw the face of his assassin. It was Abdallah, whose right arm dropped limp to his side, broken by the bullet.

The report brought a score of men rushing to the tent.

But Lord Sternholt had his story ready for them. He told them how Abdallah had lain in wait and grappled with the Thug, how, firing at random, he had wounded his faithful servant, and so gave the assassin a chance to escape. So he packed them off in vain pursuit, and was left alone with his would-be murderer. When he lit the lamp, and saw Abdallah standing there patiently waiting death, making no attempt at resistance or escape, the thought came to him that he would save him for himself, that he would convert assassin into slave.

The broken arm was set when the surgeon returned with the others from their useless search. The whole camp was lavish in their praise of the gallant servant, who had risked his life for his master's. But the shadow of death visited the camp no more, and to Abdallah was the credit of their deliverance. In less than a month he was himself again, strong and active as a young tiger. But meanwhile he had sworn himself by all he held sacred to be his saviour's servant body and soul.

Now the master reminded him.

"I remember," said the Indian in a low voice.

"**W**HY do I speak of those things now—because I claim the fulfilment of that oath."

"And I am ready, sahib, always ready."

"I want two lives, Abdallah, for the life I gave you. I want the life of the man who cheated us both, and the life of the girl he loves."

"They shall both die."

A subtle change was wrought in the Indian as Lord Sternholt spoke. The impassive mask had disappeared. He had reverted to the beast. Like a dog held hard when the prey is in sight he strained at the leash. There was a horrible eagerness in his eyes and voice.

"I am ready," he said again.

"The man you know," Lord Sternholt said, "the woman is called Sybil Darley. She lives alone with her mother in upper Cheyne Row, Chelsea. I forget the number, but I have her photograph, and she cannot be very hard to find."

"Which first?" Abdallah asked, the same suppressed eagerness in his voice.

"As occasion serves. But understand, of the two, it is more important to me that the girl should die. Both are in a conspiracy against me. It is a choice between their deaths and mine. Abdallah, you have often begged for liberty to return to your own land. I refused, and I am glad I refused. I had a presentiment I should need you. But the hour you tell me the thing is done, you are free to come or go, and you shall fix your reward."

Abdallah salaamed. "I shall come to you soon, sahib," he said, and vanished.

It was fortunate for Hugh Limner, and fortunate for Sybil Darley, that

they were no longer in London within reach of Lord Sternholt's messenger of death.

That evening a quietly dressed, softly-spoken Indian visited Mrs. Darley's house in Upper Cheyne Row, and learned that the lady and her daughter had left nearly a month before for Rome. Later in the evening he called on Hugh Limner to tell him he had been discharged by Lord Sternholt on account of the theft of the picture. He had a story ready of Lord Sternholt's savage treatment, ending with an offer of his services. He got no chance to tell his story or make his offer, but he got Hugh Limner's address in Rome, and next morning he was amongst the passengers that crossed from Dover to Calais.

CHAPTER XXIII.

In the Shadow of Death.

SWIFT as boat and train could carry him, tarrying nowhere on the way, Hugh Limner had rushed to Rome. He had been there before in the heyday of his success, with his heart untroubled by love given wholly to art, had feasted his eyes on the beauties and glories of the Eternal City. The masterpieces of Raphael and Michael Angelo in glowing colour on cold white stone had ravished his senses. He had revelled in the glorious inheritance bequeathed to him by the genius of those distant days. Heedless of past or future, he lived only for the present hour, with the fresh, vigorous vitality of youth, which feels itself eternal. Where all around spoke of the inevitable end, no thought of death had touched his consciousness: his delight was then without alloy.

Now all seemed changed. The sun was as bright, the sky as blue as when he had first seen the glory of Rome, but he did not see it through the same eyes. Heavy and dark, a presentiment hung like a cloud around him, stifling his soul in gloomy thoughts, and shutting out the life and beauty of the world. He had started on his mission full of the joy and hope of his great discovery. But in the long, sleepless run across the continent a vague fear fastened on him. In vain he strove to shake off a dismal foreboding of impending peril to the girl he loved. It clung the closer for his efforts, and followed him everywhere, growing stronger and more intolerable with every hour of his fruitless quest.

Rome to him now was a city of the dead, its most glorious masterpieces full of a terrible suggestiveness of the inevitable fate of man. Where were they who built those massive walls that still defy the worst that time can do? The innumerable host of workmen who raised the vast circuit of the Coliseum, the succeeding swarms of spectators, who generation after generation thronged its benches, and laughed and howled with delight while man and beast fought for their pleasure, and the sand of the arena soaked their blood—all had vanished. Bone and flesh and brain, and that brief stir of consciousness that is called life, had gone back in dust and vapour to the material of the inanimate universe from which they had been drawn. Death and annihilation were everywhere. As he walked the streets in his unguided search, as he lay sleepless far into the night, the same maddening thought filled his brain. Why work or play? Why live or love when death was the end of all, and death came so soon?

(To be continued.)

Explanation Enough.

"Well," said Smith, "I hear that old Jones, editor of the Trumpet, was found dead in his office last night."

"Yes, so I hear," answered Brown. "Foul play is suspected, of course," he added. "That's the police theory. But why should anybody kill him? Had he been making any enemies?"

"None at all, as I can hear. You know he had stopped all sensationalism and was printing a pure, modest, highly moral family paper."

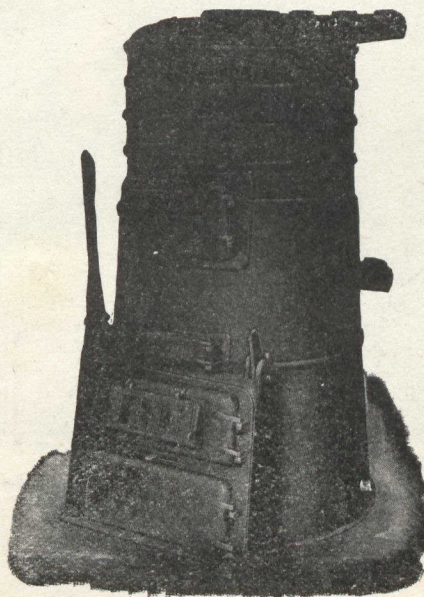
"Aha! That explains it!"

"Who could have killed him?"

"He wasn't murdered, man. He starved to death!"

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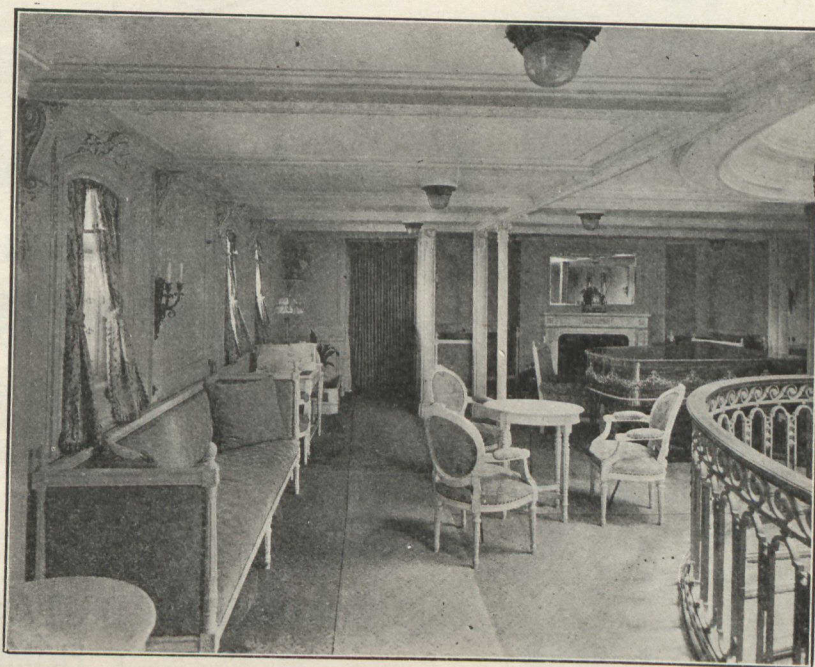
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