

Mehemet Ali's Dagger.

An English Drama in Prose.

SCENE I.

Mr. George Playfair, an English merchant of great wealth, was one day sitting in his counting-house in Calcutta, looking over some complicated business papers.

Mr. Playfair looked up, and said: "Tell him to call another time, for I am very busy now."

A few moments after the clerk returned, saying: "He tells me it is a matter of life or death, and that if you will see him he will not detain you many minutes."

"Did you ask his name?" inquired Mr. Playfair.

"Yes, sir; he said his name was Mehemet Ali Singh, replied the clerk."

"Well, show him in, Jones; but I know nothing of the man."

Jones did as he was directed, and Mehemet Ali was soon standing before the merchant.

After a variety of oriental salutations, he began to explain the business that he had come about; but his English was so bad that Mr. Playfair, who happened to know the native language, requested him to speak in Hindustanee.

The man complied, and soon explained his wishes. He stated that he was the representative of a Hindu family of fabulous antiquity; that he was the father of many children, all of whom were dead save one only daughter, a little maid of surpassing beauty, and that she was now lying at the point of death; and that, having lost his all in one of the numerous native feuds, he, Mehemet Ali, had no resources wherewith to provide medical aid, or even the necessaries of life for the child.

Mr. Playfair, thinking from this that Mehemet wished to obtain alms of him, and being a benevolent man, sought his purse. But the Hindu, a nobleman, of nature's own stamping, drew himself up to his full height, and said:

"Let the English lord wait until he hears what his servant would say."

Mr. Playfair paused. The Hindu also hesitated. They looked one another full in the face, and then Mr. Playfair, beginning to recover himself, said:

"Well, Mehemet, tell me what you want. I'll do what I can for you; but don't, please, waste my time."

"My lord shall know, replied the Hindu in his own language, and looking so sadly that Mr. Playfair was touched, and said:

"Well, tell me what it is, and I will try to help you."

Mehemet, who pretended to speak as if unmoved, replied:

"I am now a poor man, as my lord sees; but once it was not so. Once my fathers had lands, and palaces and servants, much gold and many wives—all that the heart of man could wish—but this day I, the son of a great race, am alone and have nothing. For myself I would die; but little Fatima, can I see her die without help, without food, the last of my race? Only one thing I have: this dagger. It has jewels worth many rupees, but it is charmed. It is charmed for good to the house of Ali, but for evil to a stranger. I may not sell it, or I could soon get money. But I learned that my lord was rich. Will my lord lend his servant a few rupees, and keep the dagger till Mehemet may ask for it again?"

"Well, you see, I don't—began the merchant. I never lent money in that way, he went on. If the jewels are genuine, you could easily get money of the—"

"he continued, when all at once the piteous face of the poor Hindu father knocked over all his prudence, and he said:

"I don't care a straw about your dagger. You can leave it, or take it away. But I think you are telling the truth, and I cannot see a man in real misery without helping him. Here are two hundred rupees. Get food and plistic for the child. If you want more, come to me, and then I'll see properly into the case."

The Hindu bowed lowly as he heard the rough decree of the English merchant, and uttered countless thanks. He left his dagger and departed.

Some hours after, when the merchant was less busily engaged, a friend of his, a well-known Calcutta banker, came into his room and began to chat. Suddenly his eye lighted upon the dagger, which had remained unnoticed since the beggar left, and he said:

"I wonder that you leave this dagger about."

It is fully worth from twenty to thirty thousand rupees.

"Are you sure?" exclaimed the merchant. "Certainly," replied the banker. "And then he entered into a long explanation needless to repeat here."

The merchant looked up the dagger in his safe. But he was not easy. He said to himself:

"I thought the dagger was only a dodge. I did not believe what the man said about the stones in it. I wish he had taken it away. I wish he would come for it."

The dagger troubled the merchant so much that he employed the police to find its owner, purposing to give him not only the weapon, but a good round sum of money. This he never did, though God will reward him for the intention, for the police reported that their utmost efforts had only resulted in finding the man dead, and that the child had died the very day that the man came to the office.

A few weeks after, Mr. Playfair left India for Europe. His wife had been dead for some years, and their only child, a little boy, was educated in England, and was now grown beyond childish years, and was bidding fair to become as stout a man as his father. When Mr. Playfair was introduced to a young lad, of more than eighteen years, although he saw in him a likeness of himself in early days, he could hardly believe his own eyes. The retired merchant was, however, very proud of his son, and being almost as wealthy as he was proud, got on very well with him, which is saying much for his wealth, for his pride was no small matter.

SCENE II.

Time passed on, and young George fell in love with a poor American girl. Her father, who was nothing much to speak of, had taken her over to Europe in order to prosecute some claims to property there. He unexpectedly died, and she was left alone. With great difficulty she obtained a post as teacher in a school. It was indeed strange for a young American girl to be a stranger in England under such circumstances. Young George Playfair met her by chance, and fell in love with her in that wild and desperate fashion in which some men do fall in love once in their lives.

It was no easy matter for George to make love. His father's eye was ever upon him, almost absurdly affectionately, and Annie Lee, his heart's idol, was very much against secret meetings. At first she did not know his wealth or position, and thinking him as poor as herself, felt kindly toward him, and it was not until after the true position in which she was placed first clearly appeared to her, that she saw how unwisely she had acted, and tried to retrace her steps.

In vain! Young George loved her, and of course all her assumed devices—for she really loved him—failed. Her intentions were right, but after all she learned the truth of the poeise of Sir Walter, the "Great Unknown," who truly declares,

"Love is lord of all."

She agreed to see her lover, and do all that a lover could rightly wish; but upon the condition that before they were wedded, he should have the full consent of his kind and indulgent father.

Annie Lee was a beautiful girl, and had many lovers and admirers, but she had only one love, and a stranger in the land of her forefathers, she only thought of him.

One night after meeting the idol of her heart, she entered the long dark lane where she lived, in a pretty little cottage kept by a man named Whitton, but she would not let her lover go home with her, as she expected old Whitton or his wife might be coming up the lane to meet her.

The lovers parted in lovers' fashion. The next morning the body of Annie Lee was found with a deadly dagger wound, life extinct, in that very lane. The body was cold and stiff when it was first discovered in a pool of blood. Life had long fled.

SCENE III.

George was frantic when he heard of the fearful crime. He went to the dead-house, whether they had carried the body, and wept bitterly over it. But, even in the anguished state of his mind, he was surprised at the change which had taken place in the features of the dead. A lover is always familiar with every shade and expression, every line and dimple of the beloved one's face; but the features of Annie Lee were so changed by death that George was greatly shocked. It appeared to him that the features were unaturally changed. Old Mr. Playfair, although he had before refused his consent to the wishes of his son, now, fully sympathized with him in his great grief, and acted a father's part in endeavouring to console him.

The next day was appointed for the inquest and it was agreed that they should attend it together, as Mr. Playfair had consented that George should claim the body of the friendless girl, and inter it with those unavailing honors with which we strive to show respect for the dead. The secret of George's love for the deceased was now generally known and every one strove to show their sorrow for his loss.

The inquest was held at a tavern in the village, and after the jurors had examined the body they retired to a large room which was prepared for them, and proceeded to business.

The first witness called stated under what circumstances they had found the murdered girl.

George Playfair then stated, with evident emotion, how he had left her on the night when she was last seen alive. His deep sorrow excited the warmest sympathy of every one present in the crowded room.

Old Whitton and his wife testified that the girl had not returned as usual; that they had waited long for her, and early in the morning, going up the lane to make enquiries, had found her dead, as already described. They swore to the identity of the body, but observed that a diamond ring which the deceased always wore, and which was a present from her lover was not on her finger. This was the more singular as her purse was found in her pocket, and she had on at the time of the murder a singular cameo brooch, which no one had before seen her wear, and which George swore that to the best of his belief, she had not worn that night. Strange to say a packet of letters from her lover and a likeness of him, which it was said by old Mrs. Whitton, she always carried about with her, were not found either upon her body or in the little trunk which belonged to the deceased. This was, to say the least, singular, as, although the missing ring was valuable and might tempt a thief, yet her money, etc., had not been touched, and the portrait and letters could be of no possible use to any one but the owner.

Two other witnesses ought to have been present: one a young fellow-teacher, Jane Ellis, a girl about the same age of the deceased, and greatly resembling her in appearance, and the other the teacher of the boys' school, John Hall. Jane had been the bosom friend of Annie Lee, but had left the village for her home, as the holidays had now begun. She had gone very suddenly without telling any one; but as she resided in the school-house, this excited little wonder, and it was supposed that a letter which she had received the morning before, had caused her sudden departure. The only person who felt aggrieved at this was a sturdy young farmer, who stated that she had said nothing to him of leaving so abruptly when he last saw her, on the very night of the murder. The other absent witness, John Hall, who was known to have greatly admired Annie Lee, was supposed to have escorted Miss Ellis on her journey, as their parents lived in the same town. It was concluded that they must have gone by the late night train, or a very early morning one. By the carelessness of the secretary of the school board, the addresses of Miss Ellis and John Hall had both been mislaid or lost, and no one knew whither to send for them; but as their testimony was of quite secondary importance, the coroner said there was nothing to prevent the holding of the inquest. After the examination of the last witness, one of the jurymen asked the police sergeant:

"Was any weapon found near the body?"

"Yes, sir," said the officer; "did you not hear me tell his worship the coroner that that there odd lookin' dagger was found near the body?"

He pointed to the table. Every eye was fixed upon the dagger, which the coroner took up, observing that the marks of blood were plainly to be seen upon it.

At that moment George happened for the first time to notice the murderous weapon. His face became a ghastly hue as he turned to his father, and exclaimed:

"Good God! Do you see that dagger, father?"

Mr. Playfair looked. His eyes could not deceive him. The dagger was unique; there were the glittering jewels and the name of its former owner in Hindustanee. It was the dagger of Mehemet Ali!

Then the words of the dead Hindoo came vividly to his mind:

"It is charmed for good to the house of Ali, but for evil to a stranger!"

The old man was not superstitious but he trembled and turned pale as he recognized his own dagger, and called to mind the long forgotten words of the Hindu.

A keen lawyer, well known to Mr. Playfair, and who was now present to assist in the investigation, noticed this, and whispered to the coroner, who had also observed the perturbation of the old merchant and his son.

Mr. Playfair, the coroner said, I have just been told that that dagger is yours. Can you give any account of how it left your possession, and came into the hands of a thief and murderer?"

Mr. Playfair was confused. He stood forward, and was rigidly cross-questioned. He acknowledged that the dagger was his; told how he had obtained it; said that it was so peculiar that he would know it among a thousand; and also stated that his son had borrowed it a few days before, to show to a young companion as a curiosity, but had not returned it. More he could not tell.

George whose confusion was really pitiable, was next examined. He said he had shown the dagger, on the "very night of" the murder, to a young man named Reeve; that after it had been duly examined, and talked about, he had put it carelessly into his pocket and had ever since, in the great trouble which had befallen him, forgotten it. His evidence was given very reluctantly, and the crowd around him, who had so lately evinced their sympathy, now began to look upon him with suspicion.

It so chanced that young Reeve himself was present, and he was ordered to stand forth. He had begun to see the awkward position in which his friend was placed, and gave his evidence with great reluctance. He corroborated what George had said. He and Playfair attended, he stated, a sort of little village club. Playfair had told him of the dagger and he had expressed a wish to see it. On the night of the murder, Playfair had shown it to him, and had then put it in his coat pocket. No one else was present except John Hall, and he had taken no part in the conversation. He expressed a perfect conviction that his friend was far above even the thought of a bad action. This last expression was quite uncalled for, as no one had yet spoken a word against George; but it showed what was passing in Reeve's mind, and adding to the growing suspicion. Reeve also made some very damaging admissions, allowing that young Playfair had once asserted to him, when he was excited by his father's refusal to the love affair, that he would murder himself and the girl and all before he would give her up. Reeve said he believed that this was only idle talk, spoken in anger; but it now told sadly against poor George.

The case certainly was strange. Young Playfair admitted that he was last seen with the girl when alive. He had spoken of killing her if thwarted. And his dagger had been found beside her body. The ring, etc., missing, he might have a motive for taking, but what motive could any one else have? Was it not very possible that, knowing his father would never consent, fearing a rival or possibly after an angry quarrel with the girl herself, he had killed her in the heat of passion, and that his present evidently real sorrow was only an expression of despair?

So the jury thought. They did not retire or consult, but gave in a unanimous verdict of "Wilful murder against George Playfair." That was the newspaper story. Wilful murder corresponds in England, to murder in the first degree in this country.

The coroner, as in duty bound, gave the proper instructions. George was committed for trial. In England there would seem to be a greater value set on human life than in this country.

Here we have three degrees of murder. The name only is changed, and there they are called wilful murder, manslaughter, and justifiable homicide, which last means where one man kills another, as when he is attacked by thieves upon the road, or when his house is broken into, and in defence of himself or family he kills the intruding villain. Though of course, in such a case, his action may even be meritorious, he cannot be bailed; and even in case of theft or forgery, bail is never accepted. He must go to jail and trial.

The scene at the inquest I dare not attempt to describe.

[CONCLUDED IN OUR NEXT ISSUE]

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