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Dr. Silex.

A STIRRING TALE OF ADVENTURE.

By Harris Burland Author of "Dacoura." Dr. Silex is the latest thing in fiction.

(CHAPTER II—Continued.)

I found the opening in one corner of the square. It was not more than three feet in width, and lay between high dead walls of crumbling brick. Two dirty children followed me curiously to the entrance and then stopped and whispered to each other. The passage ran for some distance and had two right-angled turns in it. It finally opened out into another square, the sides of which were not more than twenty yards each way. Some of the houses were four stories in height, and had evidently once been inhabited by prosperous people. I could see at a glance that one house, which occupied a whole side of the square, must have stood there many years before the ever rising sea of brick and mortar had crept up to its walls. It was lower than the others and built of brick mellowed with age and crusted here and there with lichen. A wrought-iron gateway stood in front of the steps, but the gate had disappeared. The walls had cracked in one or two places, and all the windows were boarded up. The whole place looked as though no one had lived in it for years.

And, indeed, the square itself might have been part of a deserted city. All the other houses appeared to be in a worse state of ruin and two of them were roofless and blackened with fire. There was not a soul to be seen in the whole place. A few blades of grass appeared between the stone flags in the centre of the courtyard, and the square was so small that most of it was in shadow. There was almost complete silence, but I could hear a barrel organ in some other street playing a music hall air and an occasional squeal of laughter in the distance.

I smiled. The place was so unlike a London square. A sensible landlord would have patched up these ruins and converted them into rookeries teeming with life. I thought the owner must indeed be mad, or else so rich that he cared nothing for a few pounds a week. It was interesting.

I crossed the square to the house with the iron gateway, and, when I reached it, I saw a small black tin plate nailed on the the door. A close inspection revealed the following inscription:

"JOHN SILVER. Dealer in Books."

The name of the man stood out clean and white, and appeared to have been painted over some other name. The record of his occupation was faint and scarcely decipherable. He had evidently taken over some other person's business.

My heart beat fast with expectation, but, as my eye wandered over the decorate front of the building, I felt some misgivings. It was a strange place for a book-seller to choose. There was only one entrance to the square, and no one would b likely to enter it except by mistake. There were no passers-by, and the neighborhood was the last that would commend itself to a book-hunter.

But it was possible that the man advertised and was independent of chance customers. I tried to recall the name. I could not remember having heard of it until a few hours previously and I knew the name of every dealer of importance in the whole of Europe. Yet the man who had a Mazarin Bible to offer could hardly be a common street hawker of two-penny selections.

I ascended the broken steps and looked for the bell. I only found the place where it should have been, and I saw that the knocker had also been wrenched off. Then for a moment I was disheartened and half inclined to turn back. I recalled the idle gossip of the people in the "Blue Boar," and coupled it with the somewhat enigmatical condition in the man's letter. I remembered the book was to be bought for a price—not money, but a service to be rendered—and for a few seconds I hesitated.

Then I laughed at my own timidity, and resolved to see the matter through. I raised my stick and knocked. I waited a minute, but there was no reply. Then I knocked again and heard the sound reverberate through the house, but still no one answered. I determined to take the question of entrance into my own hands, and, turning the handle of the door, pushed it open.

It opened into a sort of dim twilight. The hall windows were boarded up, but some window high up on the stairs let a few rays of light filter down into the gloom. I certainly did not feel very cheerful as I tried to distinguish things in the semi-darkness. The whole atmosphere was depressing. The ruined houses and deserted square, the absence of light and sound, the damp cold air, that suggested a cellar, all combined to produce a chilling effect on my spirits. I hesitated again, and had half a mind to turn back. Then the broad band of light that had streamed in from the square outside suddenly narrowed and disappeared, and the door swung to with a crash. At the same time I heard the faint notes of a violin in the distance.

I grooped my way back to the door and, fumbling for the handle, flung it open again and listened. The sound of the violin came from upstairs, and the instrument was played by no mean performer. I made up my mind to proceed on my quest, and, striking a match, found the baustrade of the stairs. Before I ascended, however, I struck another and examined the hall and staircase. The whole place was absolutely devoid of carpet or furniture, and the only thing that attracted my attention was a horizontal iron bar fixed on the ceiling. It ran from the door to the foot of the stair, and then ascended at the same angle as the staircase, finally disappearing round a corner. The use of it was not apparent, and it was certainly not ornamental; but I gave it no further thought and commenced the ascent with one hand on the balustrade.

The stairs creaked horribly, and I stumbled more than once in the darkness. The violin still played on. Whoever occupied the house must have been very deaf or else have been completely wrapped up in his music. Then, as I reached the half-landing, the music stopped, and a few seconds afterwards I heard the sound of an opening door.

"Is anyone in?" I called out. There was no reply, but in a few seconds I heard a curious thumping sound coming closer and closer towards me. I stopped and listened. Then, in the semi-darkness, I saw a black mass moving swiftly towards me along the ceiling, and a second later something bumped against my head. I quickly put up my hand to ward it off and grasped a man's body. Then I stepped on one side with a cry of horror, for my hand had passed beneath it and encountered no legs. It was merely a body suspended from the ceiling.

CHAPTER III.

John Silver, Dealer in Books.

I sprang down one or two stairs, and, fumbled for my matchbox, struck a light. A strange sight met my eyes.

There, hanging from the iron bar on the ceiling, was a man, or rather the half of a man. He had no legs and he clung to the bar with both his muscular hands, apparently as much at ease as though he was standing on the stairs below. By the flickering light of the match he looked like some great spider. I stared at him in silence; then the match burnt down to my fingers, and we were again in darkness.

I lit another, and this time saw that the strange apparition was smiling at me.

"Who are you?" I cried.

"The owner of the house," was the quiet reply. The voice was soft and musical, with some trace of a foreign accent.

"Didn't you hear me come in?" I asked.

"I have just heard you come in," he replied; then he laughed.

"I am Dr. Silex," I said curtly. "Are you John Silver?"

"I am," he answered. "Come upstairs." Then the thumping noise recommenced, as he began to move hand over hand along the iron bar.

I followed till we reached the landing. The light was better here, and I saw that the iron bar went straight into the wall over the top of one of the doors. The man moved quickly towards the entrance, and, holding on by one hand, pushed the door open with the other. Then he dexterously swung himself under the lintel, and, grasping another bar within the room moved a few feet forward till he reached an upright stanchion. He slid down this and dropped himself into a chair. I followed him through the door and saw what at first appeared in the dim light to be a lumber room.

It was a large apartment, and was crammed full with an odd mixture of treasures and rubbish. The walls were covered with shelves piled up with books and china and bundles of clothes. The floor was thickly strewn with heaps of old firearms, Hindoo gods, tin kettles, cracked earthenware, moth-eaten skins, hats, sham jewellery, and every conceivable article under the sun. Even the space on the ceiling was not wasted. It was covered with iron hooks, and from these hung dark bundles of various shapes and sizes. A narrow footpath, a few inches wide, was left for any visitor who might come to inspect them. The owner himself was independent of all such conveniences. The room was traversed in every direction by bars similar to that by which he had entered but nearer to the ground, so that he could wriggle his way to almost any part of his establishment. The whole place was thick with dust and every corner of it was crossed and re-crossed by hundreds of cobwebs. Some of the articles must have lain undisturbed for years and years, and it was evident that John Silver's trade was not a very brisk one.

I threaded my way carefully along the narrow path and searched the whole room with eager eyes. The man watched me with a faint smile on his weather beaten face, and taking up the violin, which lay on the floor beside his chair, fingered it lovingly, and drew the bow across its strings.

"I got your letter," I said, as I reached the further wall and tried to decipher the titles of a heap of dusty volumes; "have you any other good books beside the one you mentioned?"

"For its size," he answered, "this is the best collection of books in the world."

I looked at him with an incredulous smile. The man was either jesting or else he was what he was supposed to be—a lunatic.

"Can I look at them?" I asked.

"You can, Dr. Silex," he replied. That is why I have asked you here,' and, putting up his violin to his shoulder, he began to play a soft low melody on the instrument. And, as he played, I forgot for a while to look at the books. The air was strangely fascinating. It was not beautiful, as we count beauty in music, but full of chords and intervals that are strange to our Western ideas of harmony. No instrument but the violin could have produced them. At first the music seemed harsh and unmelodious, like some familiar air played out of tune, but, before I had listened to a dozen bars, I grasped the motif, and it seemed to me that no music I had ever heard before, expressed such depth of sorrow. The cripple's eyes were fixed on me, and they seemed to shine with a peculiar light.

At last the music died away in a few weird arpeggio chords, and I felt as though some weight had suddenly been lifted off my mind.

"What tune was that?" I asked, turning again to the bookshelf.

"Perhaps," he replied, "it was my thoughts materialised into sound—but you have not come to listen to music. You are at liberty to examine my books."

I turned to the shelf nearest me and took three books from it at random. They were quartos, black with dust, and had been thrown so carelessly on the shelf that I was obliged to dig them out from under a heap of plated fish knives and odd bits of broken metal. I banged them together till the air was filled with a cloud of dust. Then I opened one and glancing at one or two lines, turned quickly to the title page. I was flabbergasted. The book was the "First Quarto of Romeo and Juliet."

"Man alive," I cried out, striding towards the cripple and catching him by the arm; "do you know what you have got here?"

"One of Shakespeare's 'First Quartos,' is it not," replied Silver, with exasperating calmness. "I thought I put them on that shelf. Which one is it?"

"Which?" I said sarcastically. "Which? Why, 'Romeo and Juliet,' of course. Is the man mad? He talks as if the place was strewn with 'First Quartos;' as if it were one of the volumes of the 'Hundred Best Books,' sold with bookcase complete and half-bound in imitation morocco."

"Look at the other volumes," was the quiet answer. I looked, and, uttering fresh exclamations, sank down on a heap of old uniforms and feverishly turned over the pages. The other two were the "First Quartos of Hamlet and Macbeth" in perfect condition. The three together would have been cheap at £1,500.

There was a minute's silence. Then I raised my head and stared at the crippled object in the chair.

"Who are you?" I cried hoarsely. A millionaire masquerading as a book dealer? What are you? How did you get these books? Have you robbed the libraries of Europe?"

"I should reserve your exclamations," said John Silver, with a faint smile, "or your vocabulary will hardly be extensive enough by the time you have finished. "If you are interested in Shakespeare, you will find a few more quartos in that old copper coal-scuttle, but I am afraid you will blacken your fingers. We use it for its proper purpose in the winter."

I rose to my feet, and, sweeping all the rubbish off the shelf with a crash, reverently replaced the three volumes I held in my hand. Then I went down on my knees beside the coal-scuttle and drew forth its treasures one by one, dusting them carefully with my handkerchief and turning over their leaves with trembling fingers. I was speechless with amazement. John Silver still watched me with his keen dark eyes.

Then I rose and positively ransacked the room, turning out books from shelves and corners, unearthing them from piles of rubbish, drawing them out of strange nooks and hiding places, and, as I dusted each one, I laid it on some shelf, hurling aside everything else and breaking glass and china till the ground was strewn with fragments. Yet never a word of reproach escaped the owner's lips. But he occasionally gave vent to a low chuckle, as some specially heavy article, like a kettle or a bundle of fire-irons went flying to the floor.

And what wonders were displayed before my eager eyes. It seemed to me as though all the treasures of the earth were heaped up and spread out before me. Surely Aladdin in the "Enchanted Cave" had never feasted his sight on such gems as these. Here were scattered, like educational works on a penny book-stall, the finest productions of the ancient presses of Europe. Volumes printed by Caxton, Wynken de Worde, and Richard Pynson; magnificent specimens of the work of Aldus Manutius, with an inch more margin each way than the finest copies I had ever heard of. Early Bibles, rare black letter pamphlets, books that I had not known even to exist, though I flattered myself few men in England had a more complete knowledge on the subject. And, to crown all, a complete and glorious copy of that king of books—the Mazarin Bible, the first book printed with movable type, and even today the most splendid production of all the ages of printing. The value of this book would have purchased a small estate, and it was to be mine—for a price.

There was not a piece of rubbish in the whole collection. An hour passed, two hours, three hours, and still I extracted and dusted and examined. My face and hands were black. My clothes were festooned with cobwebs and torn in one or two places. The room was darkening, though the sun still cast a ruddy shaft of light across it and lit up the swarthy features of the cripple, who sat now with closed eyes, his fingers clasped round the neck of his violin.

Then at last I began to feel faint and tired, and the lines of black letters swam before my eyes. I leant wearily against one of the iron bars and mechanically dusted my coat.

"Well?" said John Silver, opening his eyes. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes," I replied feebly; "it is wonderful. I cannot speak of them. I have many of them myself, but not such copies as these. How much do you want?"

"For the Mazarin Bible?"

"For the lot," I replied. "For the lot? Everyone of them, down to the pamphlets which you have used to wrap up nails in. How much do you want?"

"There are about five hundred volumes,' he answered, "and they would be cheap at £100,000."

I drew out my cheque-book and began to take the cover off my stylographic pen. Then I stopped, and, for some reason or other, Cordeaux's four words began to ring in my ears. I commenced to idly wonder how much good £100,000 might do if spent in a more worthy manner, in the endowment of a hospital, the foundation of a school, the furtherance of some charitable scheme which might lighten the misery of the poor. John Silver noticed my hesitation, and smiled. He did not know the cause.

"For the present, Dr. Silex," he said, "let us discuss the matter I wrote to you about. In any case, the Mazarin Bible would not be included in the sale of this library, whatever price was offered. I am prepared to practically give it you, if you will assist me in another matter I have in hand. I will sell it for fifty pounds, so that you can tell your friends you have acquired a wonderful bargain."

I gave a low whistle. Sir John Thorold's copy, the last that came into the market, sold for £3,900. This copy was, indeed, a bargain at the sum mentioned, but the rest of the purchase price had yet to be considered, and perhaps the whole matter was a fraud. My business instincts asserted itself at once. I took the famous Bible from its shelf and turned over the leaves, no longer a wild enthusiast, but an expert with eyes keen as those of a hawk to detect some flaw or some missing leaf. The Bible, as book collectors know, is not paged, and the task promised to be a tedious one.

"I will guarantee it to be perfect," he said, impatiently drumming on the arms of his chair.

I continued to mechanically turn over the beautiful leaves, caressing each one with the tips of my fingers, as a lover might caress the cheek of his sweetheart.

Then I said suddenly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Sit down and I will tell you," he answered. I sat myself down on a pile of old carpets and continued to examine the book.

"In the first place," he said, "I will tell you that I am a very rich man, so do not imagine that I am a needy adventurer trying to curry favor with a millionaire."

I laughed. "These books alone are a fortune," I replied.

"And only a small part of my fortune," he answered, "or rather of the fortune I hold in trust for another." He drew a small key from his pocket and held it out to me.

"If you will remove that pile of armour in the corner,' he continued, "you will find a cupboard. Please open it with this key and bring out a small green box which you will see on the top shelf."

I moved the armour and found the door of the cupboard. It appeared to be made of oak, and matched the panels of the walls, but directly I turned the key in the lock and swung the door back I saw that the oak was merely a facing and that the cupboard was lined with four inches of solid steel. I struck a match and found the box. It was about nine inches square and six inches in height, and made of some natural green wood richly carved with figures and arabesques. I brought it across to him and reseated myself on the carpets.

He took another small key from his pocket, and unlocking the box threw the lid back. The shaft of sunlight through the window streamed full on its contents, and my eyes were for a moment dazzled by a thousand points and rays of light, white, blue, green, purple, yellow, and orange, quivering and scintillating as the box moved slowly in its owner's hands.

"Diamonds," he said. "Would you care to look at them?" and he handed me the box.

I took it and gazed on its contents with wondering eyes. Then I stirred the jewels with my fingers, and, taking one or two handfuls out of the box, let them stream down again in a shower of rainbow light. The gems were of various shapes and sizes. Two were as big as small filberts, and some no larger than a small pea. Some were cut rose fashion, some tablet, and all were of wonderful whiteness and brilliancy.

"What would they be worth?" he asked.

"I could not tell you," I answered, still playing with the cascade of colored fire. "I know nothing about jewels, but the total value must be enormous. Why have you shown them to me? I am not likely to purchase any of them."

"I have shown them to you," he answered, "because they have some connection with our bargain. I want you to take them to a diamond merchant and obtain an offer for the lot. I also wish to sell all my books. Will you obtain an offer for these as well?"

"I will buy the books myself," I said.

"That is as you please," he replied. Personally, I would rather that you did not, for there are better channels for your wealth than collecting old books. Money is power, but when it is locked up in curios and objects of art it is so much dross. I wish to realize a large sum of money for a certain object, and I want your assistance."

"I will sell them for you," I answered. "It will not be much trouble to me, and, in fact, it will be some occupation and amusement; but why do you depute such a matter to another?" and I looked at him suspiciously.

"I am, as you see, a cripple," he replied, "and have not moved from this house since I first entered it five years ago. I am also an unknown man, believed to be poor and by some even a lunatic. It would be hard for me to dispose of these jewels. I should be subjected to annoying questions and inquiries. I should be beaten down in price. I might even be accused of theft. I will gladly pay to be freed from such annoyances. No one will doubt Dr. Silex, the millionaire."

I gave a keen glance at his face, and my look was returned frankly and openly. I experienced a strange feeling of shame at my suspicions, which, after all, were only natural, and I half opened my lips to make an apology.

"I will sell them for you, Mr. Silver," I replied quietly. "Do you want me to do anything further?"

"Yes, when you have sold them, I want you to place the money to your own account. There will be no need to invest it, for it is all going to be spent within the next few months."

"I will do so," I replied.

"Then I want you to make all payments and arrangements in the matter I have in hand, in your own name, and take all the credit of it for yourself. I will discuss the matter with you another day, and will not bind you to anything now. It is sufficient to say that it is a worthy enterprise in the cause of science, and that probably you will be as enthusiastic as myself before the preparations are complete."

"I will give my assent," I replied, "when I know the project."

"Then I want you to call on a man, Captain Thorlassen by name. His address is 266 Budd street, West Ham. Tell him that you can offer him a post as leader of an expedition which will bring him both fame and considerable pecuniary gain. Make an appointment for him to meet us here, and I will lay my scheme before both of you."

"I have no objection to calling on the man," I said. "Is that all?"

"No, there is one thing more, a slight thing, and yet of great importance to me. Before you leave here I wish to introduce you to my ward, to whom all this treasure belongs. I want you to promise me that you will treat her as though she were in reality a queen, and that you will humor her in whatever she pleases to ask."

"I will do so," I replied, with a rather doubtful voice. I began to wonder whether it would not be better to pay the full price for the book and escape an interview with a girl, who, as it seemed, was not quite right in her head. But, as I fingered the volume, I remembered it was not for sale, and that I could only obtain it on these conditions, and at the same time I again felt a vague desire, of which I did not understand the full purport, to assist John Silver in this matter.

"I will do so," I repeated with more decision; "that is to say, if I am not asked to commit any offence against the law, or do anything impossible, or unworthy of a gentleman, or to impair my private fortune in any way."

"You will be asked to do none of these things," he said; "at the worst you will merely appear to yourself ridiculous."

"I don't mind that," I answered. "I will do as you ask."

"The book is yours, Dr. Silex," he said, "perhaps you may think that I have asked too much for it, but, if you offered me fifty thousand pounds, I would not take it, except on these conditions."

I laughed and held out my hand. "It is a bargain," I said, and the man's enormous fingers closed on my own, "yet I do not know why you have selected me for the business."

John Silver loosed my hand and looked me steadily in the face. "You are the man I want," he replied, "and I think it will be for your good. There is something else in the world beside books."

I was a little irritated at the remark. Why was everyone harping on the same subject and trying to make me believe that I was wasting my life? Even this stranger, though probably for his own ends, seemed to be concerned about my method of living.

He saw my look of annoyance, and, taking up his violin, began to play, and, as he played, I began to understand that there were emotions and passions and thoughts untouched by the world of literature. The rugged face was transformed with a strange light as he poured out his melody into the darkening room. A broad ray of crimson fell athwart the door, touching the bowed head of the player and casting a black shadow of his profile on the reddened oak.

Then, above the music, rose the sound of a clear voice singing in the distance. Nearer and nearer it came. Then it ceased, and there was a creak of some loose boards in the passage outside. The player half turned his head, and suddenly the gentle melody swelled into a glorious march of triumph, crescendo and crescendo, till the whole room seemed to vibrate. And, as I listened to him, I was filled with a quick and strange yearning to break loose from my present life and cast all my talents and energies into some fierce battle of arm and intellect.

"She is coming," he said in a low voice, "kneel when she enters. I emplore you to kneel when she enters. It will not be for long. You have promised."

"Who is coming?" I asked.

"The Princess," cried the cripple, drawing his bow across the strings until it seemed to me that the whole room was filled with the blare of trumpets. "My Princess, and perhaps one day—yours."

The handle of the door turned, and the door itself swung back with a crash, and the broad red bar of sunlight fell on a glory of cloth of gold, and jeweled crown, and golden hair.

CHAPTER IV.

The Princess.

I looked for a moment in wonder; then I fell upon my knees and bowed my head. John Silver continued his triumphal march and did not look up from his violin.

For a few seconds the girl stood in the doorway, the red sun illuminating her from the golden crown upon her head to the golden sandals on her feet. I raised my eyes furtively and examined her. She could not have been more than eighteen, and was tall and beautiful as some white lily. Her eyes were of a deep blue, and her hair like some glorious golden cloud at sunset. Her bearing was queenly and dignified; but her lips were slightly parted and her eyes wandered from object to object with swift uncertain glances. I thought that I could read in their light the history of her throne, and could guess the awful source from which she had inherited her kingdom.

The marvelous splendor of her beauty, suddenly disclosed in the setting sun, filled my whole mind with reverence; but, as I looked steadily into the dark blue depths of her eyes, a great wave of pity swept over me, and once more I bowed my head.

She moved from the doorway down the narrow path, her silk and gold encrusted robes rustling at every step. When she came to John Silver she laid a white hand glittering with gems upon his shoulder, and the music began to slow and die away until it passed into absolute silence.

"Who is this?" she said in a low voice. "Let him rise. I can scarce ask a stranger to de me homage in a place like this."

I rose to my feet and gazed on her with heartfelt admiration. She was like some being of another world, some illuminated saint from an ancient missal. No ordinary beauty could have moved me like this.

"Who is it?" she repeated.

"It is one," said John Silver, "who has hitherto devoted his life to books, but who has now promised to do much in your service. He is rich and powerful. His name is Edward Silex."

"A man who is in the service of books," she replied, with a sad smile, "needs no worthier master. And yet I am in need of another willing servant, for I have but one in all the world," and she held out her hand to me.

I advanced and put forward my own hand. Then I suddenly changed my mind, and, dropping on one knee, raised her fingers to my lips. And, as I did so, a curious and wild idea seized me that this was no mock courtesy. A thrill of emotion went through all my frame as I kissed the cold jewels on her fingers. Before my lips had touched them, I had been merely acting a ridiculous farce in accordance with my promise. I had been humoring a poor deluded girl with a foolish pantomime. But now, as I knelt at her feet, it seemed a natural and becoming action, and I could almost believe that I was in the presence of Royalty itself. I rose to my feet and tried to rearrange my thoughts.

"Dr. Silex," said the cripple, "has consented to sell your Highness' property, and lodge the money in his own account at the bank. He will also make such payments as are necessary, and call on Captain Thorlassen."

"It is kind of Dr. Silex to undertake so much on our behalf," she said simply. "Does he understand the project we have in hand?"

"Not yet, your Highness. The matter is to be discussed with Captain Thorlassen, and he will be present at the interview."

"Then it is still more kind of him to interest himself in that which is unknown to him, and for the benefit of strangers."

(To be Continued).

CASTORIA

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