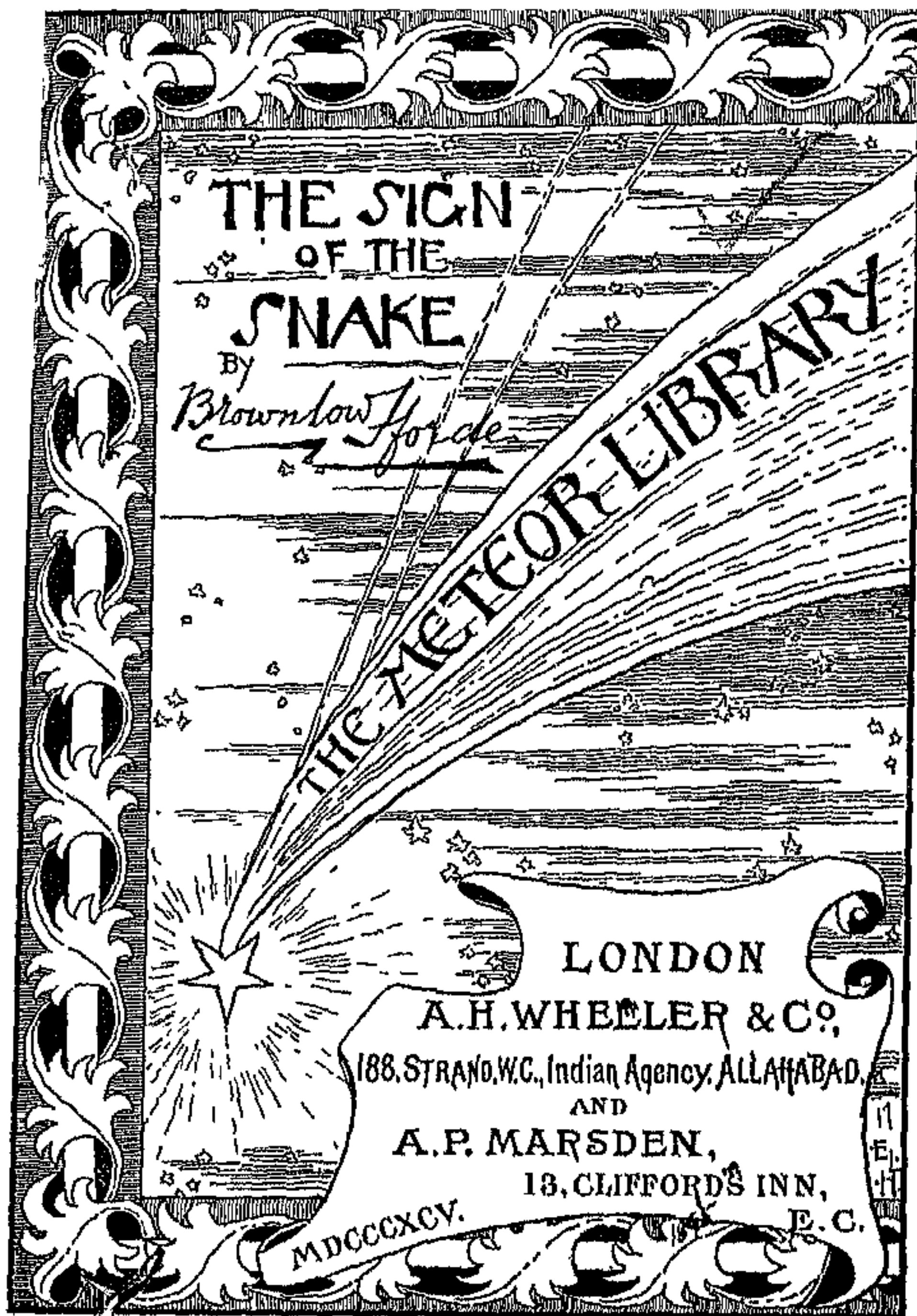
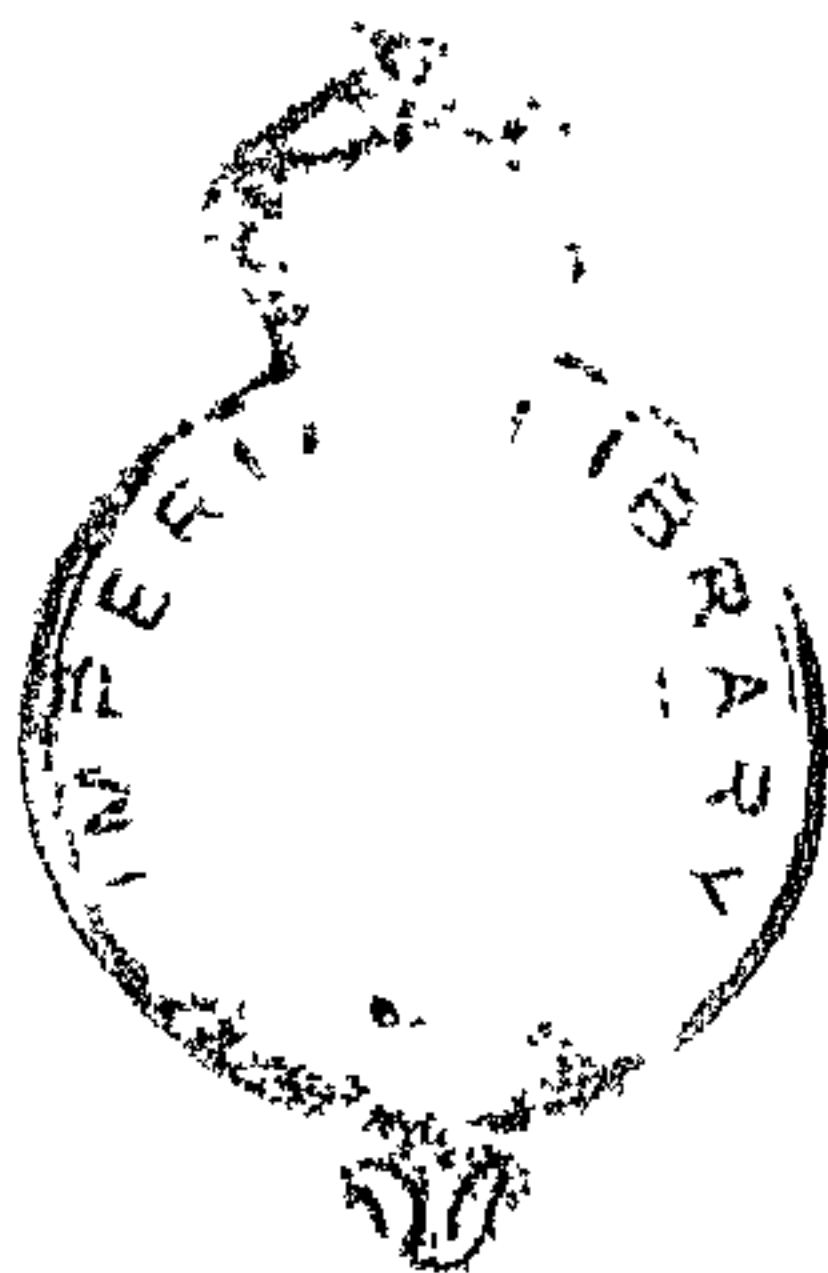


## THE SIGN OF THE SNAKE.





INDIA-OFFICE



*Printed at the Motley Press, Amsterdam.*

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# THE SIGN OF THE SNAKE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### A Drama on the Pavement.

WO men lay on a London pavement, marking upon it in the mud the form of a cross. The situation had come about in a moment, with a rapid and almost dainty simplicity. The lowermost of the two had been spun on to the pavement by the shoulder of a cab-horse, and the other had fallen upon him. It was done as deftly as the three-card trick. The uppermost man recovered himself quickly, and rising, picked up his hat, which had dropped in front of him. The other lay as he had

fallen. So thin was he that he almost looked like a strip of carpet, placed there for the express purpose of being fallen upon. The mere stoppage of way had already caused a small crowd to collect, and there happened to be a policeman at hand.

"Here is my card," said the man who had risen, offering it to the policeman. "I will appear, if called upon."

He was evidently a soldier, a well-dressed, slightly grizzled man of middle age. In spite of his late wallowing in the mire he did not look soiled, perhaps because his clothes were dark in hue. The first desire of the ordinary man in a case of this sort is to hit back, but Colonel Julius Milvain—that was the name on his card—had seen how the accident had occurred, though he had not time to save himself from a fall. He looked down at the other man, who did not move, but lay face downward. The other man was shabbily dressed, but decent in appearance, as far as his back and legs were concerned. He might have been a respectable mechanic. The



policeman was taking the number of the hansom cab.

"It's Miser Merton," observed a newspaper boy from the inner fringe of the crowd. The interest of Colonel Milvain instantly evaporated.

"Hallo, Milvain!" cried a man who had just alighted from a brougham, which had pulled up behind the cab. "Get in with me."

The man on the ground stirred slightly and turned his head, glancing at Colonel Milvain, who did not see the movement. He was looking towards the good Samaritan. Slowly the man picked himself up, no one helping him, for the word "miser" had alienated the sympathy of the crowd. When Colonel Milvain turned to take a last glance at the scene, the other had disappeared into the swirl of the human stream, which now resumed its course.

From the time of the occurrence of the accident to the disappearance of the victims from the scene, scarcely more than a couple of minutes had elapsed. The play was

over, and the principal actors had left the stage where they had been extremely popular for the moment. Colonel Milvain went off to his house with the friend who had been raised up to his salvation, and changed his clothes. The other man crept slowly home to a squalid court, thinking deeply by the way.

This man, who had been identified by the small boy as Miser Merton, was tall and thin, the dried anatomy of a man who had once been a fine specimen of the genus. The frame was still upright, and in the now sordid face there were evidences of a past which had not always been sordid. The lower passions leave their lines on the surface. It is possible to treat the human face as a palimpsest and to erase, as it were, the writing of debasing years. Beneath this there is always to be found the traces of what God first wrote upon the face. They may be faint, but they are assuredly there.

To look at this old man's face it would have been difficult to find them now. As he

slowly, and with apparent pain, dragged himself along the crowded pavement, there was upon his countenance an expression of vindictive hatred. In the great city there is no necessity to conceal the effect of the thoughts upon the face. A London street is as private as the desert, except in those parts where the same men meet day after day. The scurrying mass of mankind judges by the clothes, as jockeys are recognised by their colours—"a well-dressed man," "a woman of fashionable appearance." The dress of the face, fashioned by the soul, passes unnoticed by the crowd. A glance of the eye at a weeping woman, an angry man, but the clothes of a harlequin will draw a multitude.

This man's expression of intense hatred almost obliterated the look of hard meanness which was habitual to him, and actually made him more human. He walked along, seeing nothing outward, instinctively finding his way home. A young man accosted him as he was about to turn down a side street.

"Hallo! It's you! What's the matter with you?"

The old man raised his eyes, leaving the hatred in them. This young man was his son, and before him he could put any sort of clothing on his face.

"I'm injured," he replied, and the words seemed to suggest, suddenly, a new line of thought. The hate went out of his expression and a look of pain replaced it.

"Hadn't you better go to the hospital, then?" suggested the affectionate son, looking him over. "What happened?"

"Knocked down by a cab. No hospital. Either a man knows what's the matter or he don't. I do. This is the end of me, but I'll attend to my affairs as long as I may. Give me your arm."

"I can do that. You never trust me. Better go."

"Don't be a fool. I'm in pain, but I shall last long enough to do what there is to be done. What could I do at a hospital but die there?"

The young man did not believe his father was so ill as he said he was. Even if he

had, his relations with the old man were not of a sort that produced affection. He could see from the state of his clothes that his father had fallen in the mud of the streets, and so far he believed him. But the old man did not look any worse than usual, and the son was accustomed to see him act all sorts of characters in his miserly bargainings. He might easily be shamming for some purpose of his own not at once apparent. The young man was a medical student and had an experience of such cases. This one showed no serious symptoms.

The pair shortly reached their home in a quaint old court which had once apparently been the location of some extinct Inn. It had now fallen into a state of squalidity, and smelt of stale soapsuds and damp clothes. The houses were smoke-grimed and leprous with damp, and the yard of the court was filthy. There was a look about the place as if it only held together because the houses had in course of time become cemented into one mass, and must fall or stand as they were. The lintels

of the open doorways were weary and slatternly, tired by the touch of successive hands, worn by the attrition of indifferent shoulders belonging to people who took no care of their dwelling-place. The father and son entered one of these houses, almost the least inviting of them, if one could be said to be more inviting than another. They ascended a flight of broad stairs, with carved rails, dirty and polished by the grip of countless hands. At the top of the highest flight they entered a small room, bare and as squalid as the look of the house promised. There was a poor fire in the grate, for it was a chilly day in November. Near the fire stood a large chair, and into this the old man sank with a slight groan.

"Give me some brandy," he gasped. It was an unusual extravagance, and the son hesitated. "I said brandy," repeated the father, with feeble exasperation.

"You shall have it fast enough," replied the son, sullenly going to a cupboard in the wall and extracting thence a bottle. He poured

some of the contents into a cracked tea-cup.

"More!" cried the father, who was watching him.

"Want to get drunk, I suppose. What for?" asked the other. "You're not so bad as all that."

"Which of us knows that best? Give me the bottle."

"No, you don't."

"Want to see if I've got the strength to get up and fetch it? You are a fool, John. It's all in your interests if you had the brains to understand. I can't last without it. Give—"

The old man seemed to turn paler, and his son brought the liquor to him. He drank a little of it neat and appeared a good deal better.

"That pulls me together for a time. I haven't much to waste, though you mayn't think so. I've seen my enemy to-day."

"Only one?"

"The only one I have. I am the enemy of only one man. There are plenty who are mine, some in my own house, perhaps," he added, glancing at his son. "I don't care about those.

He has beaten me all along the line. We were soldiers together. Even to-day when I met him after many years—he had the better of me. He fell on top of me.”

The son laughed.

“Yes, you fool, it's comic. I know that as well as you. It is too obvious for anyone but a fool to notice. Don't interrupt me. We were brother officers together once—he is my cousin. If it will stop only your looking like a boiled owl, I may as well tell you that I'm going to surprise you in several directions. It's hardly a quarter of an hour since I was as well as you are, and now—more brandy.”

The son gave him more without a word. What he was hearing was quite new to him, and he was much interested in it, though he did not believe more than a little of what the old man said.

“A touch from a horse's shoulder, and all the past comes back—and to meet him, too, damn him!” The look of intense hatred returned to his face. “I'll cut the history part of it short. That man was the cause of my being



cashiered. They said I robbed the till. I didn't; I only borrowed a little. He could have hushed it up, anyone else would have. He was acting for me as Adjutant, damn him! He married the woman I wanted—scored all along, he did—even to-day. I married another woman after that, and I loved her too. I got into jail—another man's fault—three years afterwards, and my wife died. It was in India it all happened. The Jaffarnagar Irregular Horse was our regiment, and a good one it was, none better. Smalley was our colonel—a smart officer, and—but never mind all that. My wife died—not your mother—and my two little children with her. Two little children, a boy and a girl. He could have saved them, and I went so low as to write to him from prison about it. He had two of his own, nearly the same age, and I thought he would have helped me. There was another reason why he ought to have done it. My father cut me off when I came to grief, and soon after he died, leaving his money to my cousin. Thirty thousand pounds, and not a

penny to me, his son. Ah! the sound of hard cash fetches you, my son John! Well, when I got out I had my revenge. Life for life is good scripture; the Lord is a man of war. He lost his two."

"You old devil!" cried the son, taken aback.

"You young fool!" replied the father. "You suppose they were killed, do you? Prove it, then. Never mind that, they disappeared. Do you know what you were born for?"

"To have you for a father, I should say, and to listen to all this rot."

"You were born to get back that thirty thousand pounds and to give me my revenge on that man," continued the father.

"Murder and sudden death?"

"No risk at all. More brandy, and light the candle. It's getting dark. Have you ever looked under your left arm?"

"He's wandering," thought the young man, giving him the brandy and lighting the candle. "No, I haven't."

"I'm failing. That fall has finished me," con-

tinued the father. "Do it now." His voice became perceptibly weaker.

The son saw that his father meant what he said, and he took off his coat and waistcoat and drew his arm out of the shirt.

"Close to the light," said the father. "Get that little mirror over there. You can't see it without." The son obeyed. "Now you can see it: The Sign of the Snake."

Underneath the arm, close to the arm-pit, there was a small red mark, apparently tattooed upon it. It represented two snakes, cobras, intertwined as they appear in the ordinary snake rings, a circular signet.

"Never knew it was there," remarked the young man, surprised.

"There are several things in this world you don't know," replied the father. "I wouldn't have told you now, only that I have but little time."

The son gazed curiously at him again.

"You walked up the stairs all right," he said.

"I'm not a man to give in at once. More

brandy. You must get that thirty thousand pounds, and I'll tell you how. That man—Colonel Julius Milvain is his damned name—is married, and I heard he had two more children. You have to remove him, and his wife—yes, his wife too—I loved her once, but she must go, and the children, the whole cursed brood. They must be a little younger than you and your sister, those children.”

“Well, I am damned!” cried the son, astonished. “You propose—and all for your rubbishy revenge!”

“Thirty thousand pounds sterling and no risk, my son John.”

“You old devil!”

“As you please. I got a lot by them, and it will go to increase the other sum, if you do what I tell you. That mark on your arm will help. You can't get the means for it without the mark. I'm done.”

He sank down into a silly-looking heap in the chair. His son pulled him up again and threw some water in his face from a caraffe

on the table. The father feebly raised his hand to the breast-pocket of his coat and drew therefrom a small phial of a peculiar shape. He put it to his lips and drained it.

No sooner had he taken the dose, whatever it was, than he seemed to change completely. A slight colour tinged the parchment cheeks, the aged eyes brightened, and he sat upright, pushing away his son with a hand which was almost vigorous.

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## CHAPTER II.

### The Effect of the Phial.

“**H**Al” he gasped, and his voice sounded quite different,—“that gives me twelve hours more.”

“What on earth is it?” asked the younger man, astonished.

“There’s no more of it, my young friend,” replied the father, “not a drop.”

The son grabbed at the phial, saying, “Chloric ether, I suppose.” Then he smelt it. “No. What is it, father?—It’s not opium; nothing I know of by smell, anyhow. What is it?”

“Nothing you know of, no,” and nothing you can get. That phial was never made in Europe, nor the liquor either. There is no more of it, and it gives me as much as I want.”

“Lord! father.—What a patent medicine!”

"One and eleven pence half-penny, including the Government stamp, etc., John?—No, my son. It's not medicine, it is *time*. Just twelve hours of life, and then it kills."

"This is what you want me to use on these people?"

"No. It kills a healthy man in five minutes. Murder, my son, murder if you use that. But you can't, and you never will. There's full time now for me to tell you all I want. Without that I couldn't have done it. I have kept it all my life for that, and it has given me back a little speck of my youth. Go and call your sister—No, wait a bit. She musn't hear all of it."

The old man paused and placed his elbows on the table, pinching his mouth with his fingers meditatively. The son seemed quite abashed before this astonishing revival. In former days he had been completely under his father's rule, but latterly had become contemptuous of him, as he appeared to sink into senility. This galvanised corpse before him upset the order of things and it was now

gazing keenly at him, a half-satirical smile on the thin lips.

"I know you, my son John Merton," cried the old man, breaking the silence suddenly and sharply, with a strong voice.

"One shoe off and one shoe on'.

"You want my shoes,—the old miser's miserable brogues! Well, you shall have them, but not quite as you expect; no, not quite!" The old man chuckled and continued—

"Now, listen to me. The man you have to find is Colonel—he may by this time be General Julius Milvain. Remember that name,—curse him! He may have children; he had two once, but he lost them. Him and his wife you have to find. If he has any children—and they say he has two more—" The old man paused, and then brought down his fist upon the table gently, but with a pressure that made his hand quiver.

"They must go," he continued, quite calmly, but with a crisp intensity. "Light the candle; I want to see you better, and the lamp over the way isn't enough. You needn't mention



the expense. I know you better than that, John, though you've never guessed it."

The son was taken aback and almost involuntarily cowed by his father's manner, which, for the time at any rate, seemed to revive the old authority; and the extreme change in his father—this sudden return of almost youthful vitality astonished and awed the younger man. He obeyed without a word.

"That's better. Now for the way you're to do it. In the Bombay Presidency there is a town called Jaffarnagar. To this place you must go, and you will find near there an old Hindu devotee. You will show him that mark under your arm. You needn't speak, John, or ask any questions," said the old man, holding up his hand as the other was about to interrupt. "He is there, and that's all you need know. From him you will learn all that will enable you to remove the obstacles to your possession of that thirty thousand pounds. He will tell you how you shall avenge the cruel injustice to me."

"I don't care about that," interrupted John

Merton who was recovering from his astonishment.

"No, I know that, but I can make you care for doing what I wish. I know you, my son. You would spend money if you could. I have made you taste poverty. More, my son, I have made you feel it in your bones. Oh, yes! I know how you have lived these years past. The old man had not eyes for nothing!" He chuckled.

"You didn't pay anything," growled the son, "except the medical fees, for my education, and I suppose that was part of your damned scheme."

"No, I didn't. I knew better; but I am rich."

"I guessed that. I have eyes too," replied the young man.

"Yes, and you would have seen the end of me if you had known where to find the money. I've seen you looking. How I did laugh! You're as hard as hard, and so's your sister. That's your natures, but the poverty's been my training, to give you something to be hard for. Now, my son, I shall put you



on the track of money this time. Ah! now you're alive! Well, listen carefully. The old *Bawa* or devotee will give you the means of avenging me, and of gaining thirty thousand pounds. May be—*must* be more. Besides that, as soon as you can prove to him—I say *prove*, *mind*—that you have carried out the vengeance I demand, he will give you a sum of twenty thousand more,—the whole of what I have saved. That'll make fifty thousand."

"You don't suppose I'm going to put my neck in the halter for nothing more than this, do you?" asked the young man, with a snort of disgust. "You want me to murder some one for money, and you tell me I'm to have it if I do. It's too thin."

"No, it isn't, John. I have made arrangements which will show you that it's well worth your while. I buy my revenge."

"You buy the gallows for me it seems, if I do what you want."

"My son, you will most assuredly come to that even if you *don't* do what I want. I know you. You will commit some crime or other

for money, because you love it or what it gives. I'm not a fool, John, oh no, not a fool. I've foreseen all this. Lord! If I'd given you money, you'd never have been any use to me. If I'd taught you what they call 'high principles' you might have turned out a respectable man—not a good man, only respectable. With capital, respectability pays. What sort of use would you have been to me then? I've hardened you, and let you know what the reverse of riches is, that you may know what wealth means, and now I offer you an easy way to it. There's no risk."

"How am I to get to that infernal place with the damned name to it, then? I'm to go like this, am I? I think I see myself!"

"Now, John, you're practical. Bring me that old letter-rack over the mantelpiece."

The son did so, and the father turned over some letters.

"Here's a thousand pounds," he said, taking out a note. The young man started.

"Ha, ha! You never thought of looking there, in the most conspicuous place in the

room, did you? The old man's no fool! I've seen you look all over the place, but you never yet found anything, and here was a cool thousand before your very eyes for years. Yes, for years it's been there. I'm dying. You needn't start. It's the words that startle you, not the fact, and that suits me. You'll be glad of it, and I want you to be. Do you remember how that man Southy died? Do you remember how the woman Price and the man Hudson died? They left me money. Did you ever hear any hint that their deaths were not natural? Well, that is how these people will die. Oh, curse them! curse them!"

Even that young man, utterly hardened by teaching, by training, by poverty, perhaps nature, was horrified. His lips contracted, and he gazed at the awful, half-dead face of the elder with a sort of aversion, not for the man, nor even for what he had done, but for the fiend that appeared to look out from his face.

"Look here," continued the father, thrusting out his livid visage, with the keen, glittering eyes. "Look here, I am *dead*. I am *dead*.

It is not life that is in me now. That stuff keeps the machine going for a few hours, but I am dead. The one long wish of a longish life has been for vengeance. I could not do it. I tried once, but I failed—partly. I *did* have some success. I did make their lives miserable for years, never mind how; but I want more. I want to complete it. There is more for them to lose, and more for you to gain. Not for me, for you. Money, John, Riches, Respect, Honour, Love, if you want that. You can have them all, and with but little labour. No labour at all, only an easy and safe experiment, and interesting, too. I have paid all your fees. You have passed your examinations, for you have brains of that sort that passes examinations. You can't make your way in the world, for you have neither originality nor money nor friends, but you can learn what books teach you. Shortly you will go to Bombay. Do you comprehend now, John? I give you one thousand pounds as earnest money. When you appear before that old devotee I have spoken of, you will have

another thousand. On the successful completion of your first experiment, five thousand will be paid to you, and another five thousand for each succeeding experiment. If you don't carry out the instructions you receive, your receipts will end at two thousand pounds. If you do complete the experiments, you will come in to a total which will reach to about fifty thousand at the least. You're not a miser, and you never were, but you love money to spend. You pretend to be a miser to deceive me, and to get me to confide in you. I never did. Ha! ha! John, but you have been poor!"

"You old devil!"

"Yes, that's what I am. Call your sister. I'm going to tell her some of this, and a little more. Never trust a woman, John. Call her here. You may put some coals on the fire. I want it to keep me up."

The son put coals on the fire and blew it, and lit another candle, for the one they had was almost out. Then he went upstairs to call his sister.

The room, though respectably furnished, had


a sordid appearance. It seemed to be decent under protest. After all, the house was a mere habitation, a dwelling-place, not a house. When his son had left the room, the old man rose and stood upright, with his back to the fire. He seemed quite vigorous, but the faint colour which the medicine had given to his withered cheeks, had faded away, leaving his face livid. As he himself had said, he seemed to be dead, but for the keen, bright, piercing eyes. As he stood upright, he was the wreck of what had once been a man, a fine framework of a man even yet, but an awful face. Presently he heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and he sank down again into his chair, and spread his hands feebly to the fire.

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## CHAPTER III.

### A Loveless Beauty.

HE door opened, and a girl entered. Words can scarcely tell the loveliness of that girl's face and figure. The most perfect, angelic beauty; the most innocent, sadly sweet. Guileless violet eyes in the loveliest features; a tender witchery in the full curves of the beautiful, rosy mouth, and in the delicately rounded chin. Surely no more beautiful, appealing, tender creature ever lived than this.

"What is it, father?" she asked, and her voice was as sweet and gentle as the little breezes that kiss. She was only eighteen, and in the very flower and perfection of beauty. The brother was handsome and well built, but he had a commonplace face. She? No, man, or woman either, could see that face and not be moved. Her exquisite figure and carriage,

and the perfect setting of her neck gave a nobility to the lovely face, and to the head with its burnished chestnut hair, that completed the perfection of the girl. Yet she was apparently hard as steel; annealed in the slow furnace of a most sordid life of poverty. Educated to disbelieve in anything but self-interest, loveless for lack of love—for lack of time and opportunity for love to seek her,—perhaps of the very capacity for loving. She seemed utterly unemotional.

“Gertrude,” said the old man, in a scarcely audible voice, “I am dying. Your father is dying, my daughter. You will lose me in a few hours.”

The girl moved to the table, where the candles stood burning. One was of considerable length, the other had barely an inch left.

“Then you don’t want two candles,” replied the girl, and she blew out the longer one. “Can’t you do without any at all? There’s the lamp outside, and that’s generally all you want.” She stood ready to blow out the other,

leaning over the table on her two hands, a lovely Madonna.

"No, no, Gertrude, let it stay. It's only a few minutes."

"Very well, then," she returned. "What a waste of coals!"

Her father turned to her, a smile of horrid joy on that frightful face.

"You don't care, then?"

His daughter looked at him again, and was a little startled at the sight of a face so full of life and power, white and withered though it was. She gazed at him silently for a space, with those beautiful, tender eyes, which were not tender.

"Was that all?" said she, indifferently. Her brother came forward—he had been attentively listening—and took the other chair. He said impatiently—

"Don't talk rot, father. Tell her what you have to say."

"Why should I care?" continued the girl. "You never taught me to care, and I don't. No one—not you nor anyone else—would care if I were dying. It will be one less."

"Stoic philosophy, Gertie. Go on, father," interrupted her brother.

"Haven't you any pity for your old father?" asked the elder. "Twenty years and more I've worked for you, fed you, clothed you, educated you, eh? You haven't had too much, but you've always had enough. Aren't you sorry I'm going?"

"Why?" returned the daughter. "Why should I be sorry? Haven't you always told us, both of us, that what people say about pity and sorrow and love and that sort of thing is nonsense. What's the use of talking like that? Is it that sort of softness that has kept me to myself when I've had offers, and what they call temptations? You've taught me what the real thing is, and there's nothing but myself to look after. You say you're dying, and you've never said you cared when any one else died. The other way,—you've only laughed. What's the use of beginning it now? How are you going to leave us? It's a matter of business. What are we to have? I'm not sorry about you, and I'm not glad. I don't care;

no more does John. He'll be glad, I dare say, if he gets anything by it. If you've nothing more to say, I'll go back to bed—I'm tired."

"Haven't you ever been in love, Gertrude?"

"Love! I've had offers, hundreds, but they've never been high enough. I know my value."

"What would you do if you had money?"

"Money! Are you going to give me any? Give it, and save probate, then I should get more. Ah! If I were rich after all this poverty! Do you think I should spend it for nothing? Look at me, father," continued the girl coming away from the table and standing free, with her lovely head and figure erect, and that angelic beauty shining from her face, even more lovely by contrast with the surroundings, while the delicate features were accentuated by the single candle on the table.

"Look at me. What am I worth? Nothing can buy me. You taught me my value first, and how to keep it; and the world, such as I know it, has taught me more. I got it from you and my mother, but you never gave it me. You have given me nothing but what you

couldn't help. What is there in the world but what we can get and keep? One less; that's what you'll be, and it's what you've always said when anyone died,—one less. Now, I'll go back to bed again."

"Wait, Gertrude, there's money."

"Oh! very well," replied the girl, sitting down sideways on the table.

"Here's a thousand pounds," continued the father, holding up the note "I've shown it to John already. I shall give it to you."

"You said me!" cried the son, starting up.

"Sit down," replied the old man.

The son made a sudden snatch at the note, but the father evaded him, and putting his hand in the breast-pocket from which he had previously taken the phial, drew a double-barrelled pistol.

"My hand is steady; sit down," he said quietly, and the son sank back into his chair. "This is for you, Gertrude," continued her father, "and it's for your own interest to keep it. You must give a receipt for it to John, and a signed promise to pay it to him when

receive in return a certain document with my signature. to it, authorising him to demand it. The papers are all ready. If he does not produce that document, it is yours. If he does, he can legally force you to pay it to him. If you don't agree to this, you needn't sign, and you will get nothing. If you do sign, you will receive £500 down unconditionally at the time you give up this note. I have told John what he has to do, and I will tell you as much as you need know."

He then told her most of what he had already said to his son, except that he did not say what form the revenge was to take. That, he said, was to be left entirely to her brother, acting under instructions, which would be given to him in due time. Provision was made for recompense to her in return for any assistance she might give to her brother, and for her aid in the details entrusted to her.

"There is one thing I have not yet told your brother," continued he; "I kept it to tell you both together."

"Tell me all, father," said the girl. "I'm worth two of him."

"No, Gertrude. After all, you're a woman. There are two things the world can't do without, only two. Take away all the rest and leave those, and the world will go on. Everything human springs from them. They are food and love."

"Love!" cried the girl, but without a sneer on her beautiful face. She always looked angelical, whatever she might say.

"Yes, men can't live without food, and the race can't continue without love. We'll call it love, you know. While love exists you can't trust a woman. It is easier for a man to go without love than without food, but it is easier for a woman to sacrifice her life than her love. I've seen it. I found that out long ago. Once a woman really loves she cares for nothing else. I don't think you will fall into it, but you're a woman, Gertrude, and you are worth while for men to try. But I have something more to tell you both." He paused.



"Soon after I came to grief," he resumed, "I married,—not your mother. She was a beauty, that woman, and you often remind me of her, Gertrude. We had two children—a boy and a girl. When I tried a second time to have my revenge on that man, curse him! I was imprisoned, and she and the children died while I was there. The children died first—died of neglect, I suppose—at Jaffarnagar, a pal told me. When I came out, in default of prosecution, I heard that she too was dead. I had my revenge for that. I was a fool in those days, for I loved that woman and my children. I know better now. But I had my revenge. It was not enough. I must have the man crushed, oh! curse him! He took away the woman I should have married, and he took away my money. Food and love; he deprived me of both. Your mother—"

The girl started, and looked searchingly at her father, but said nothing.

"She's dead," he continued, "and that's all you know or need know about her." He collected the papers from the old letter-rack, and

handed them to his son, together with a small box.

"Read and keep these," he said, addressing him. "You'll find all you want there to enable you to carry out my wishes, and to become rich in doing so. Here, Gertrude, here's the thousand pounds, and your receipt is among those papers." She had already signed it. "I shall last till the morning."

There was no sign of approaching death in his face. In fact he appeared stronger than they had known him to be for years, but when the girl came down early the next morning, he was not there. On the table she found a piece of paper, on which were written with a firm hand, the characteristic words—

"My death shall cost you nothing."

The girl tore up the paper into little pieces and threw them away.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### A Decimal Fraction of Her.

**I**T was at his own request that John Merton was attached, in medical charge, to the 67<sup>th</sup> Bombay Native Infantry stationed at Jaffarnagar. This was the Headquarters of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bombay Light Cavalry, formerly the Jaffarnagar Irregular Horse. Colonel Julius Milvain commanded that Regiment, and as senior officer, the Station also. It is a large cantonment and divided into two portions. On the southern side of the old



native fort, now the arsenal and public offices, are the Native Infantry lines, and some of the

civilians' houses. On the northern side are lines of the cavalry regiments, and the barracks of the European troops, consisting of Headquarters of a line regiment, and a battery of artillery. Near the old fort is the *Gymkhana*, containing a small Club-House, cricket ground, golf links, lawn-tennis courts, etc.

Dr. Merton is not a favourite, but his sister is the adored of all the unmarried and some of the married men, and is admired by every one of them. George Milvain, subaltern in his father's regiment, is so far gone that he has ceased to care that every one knows it.

"It's no use, you know, Milvain," remonstrated his friend Vansittart of his regiment. "You're only sending yourself to the wash for nothing at all. You give yourself away, man. Proper thing to do in this sort of business is to look as if you didn't care a gooseberry-skin about her. Why, you and the other 'fellas' go about as if you'd shed your bones and hadn't a kick in you!"

"What other 'fellas'?" asked Milvain, instantly attentive. He had been thinking of her eyes.

"What other fellas? why pretty near every one. I don't say they mean Parson and orange blossoms,—most of 'em can't run to it,—but there's Abington and Scott and Smythe and half the show, besides old Greyhurst, who's got a new wig with a curl in it. They're mashed to spinach—the whole lot,—with little crusts all round. It's too sickening!"

"Damn old Greyhurst!"

"You're always doing that, Georgie Porgie, my boy; but, by jingo! if you do, he's got the wig, he's got the tummy, he's got the money too. Drop it, Milvain, drop it, or put yourself out of your misery. Keep your heels down, ram in the spurs, and ask the tender question. Upon my Sam, I don't see why you can't leave her alone! She's a good 'un to look at, I give you, but—"

"I know all that, Van. What d'you s'pose? I dare say she don't care a tinker's damn about me. I dare say she thinks a deal more of old Greyhurst,—infernally old hog-wash. It ain't that, man, it's *me* that's gone on her, I tell you. Who's going to stop me? I can't stop my-

self, not if you double bit me and stick on a martingale. There's not a girl in the world but that one, and I can't help it. , Can't help it, I tell you. I'm mashed to pulp. She may do what she pretty well pleases, and if she walks over me,—why, damn it! I—I'll kiss her little feet,—bless her and them!"

"Oh! By gad! You *have* got'em on. Tã-ra-ra-boom-de-ay! There they go."

The two young men took off their hats, as Miss Merton bowed to them from the little pony-cart, in which she and her brother were driving down to lawn-tennis.

"I don't think much of your brother-in-law, Milvain, anyhow. He's a hard-shell sort, he is. Strikes me, begging your pardon, my lad, that for all her beauty—and she has it on and no mistake—she's got a touch of the rocky in her, too."

"She! Well, Van, you're the only fella that thinks that, I know. It ain't because she's pretty, by gad! But look at her eyes, look at—"

"All right, Georgie, you can do that part of it, only if I were you, speaking as a chum,

I should say put the brake on. When a fella's mashed like you, he's got a heavy trap with big wheels' behind him, and it's a stiff hill to get down safely. Here we are. Now go and have your share of her. You'll get about decimal nought two of a chance. There's a half company and a colour-sergeant round her now, you bet!"

Allowing for a little exaggeration, it was even thus, and Milvain had no more than a decimal fraction of her society. But she looked at him, when she did so, from out the same tender, beautiful, innocent eyes that shone upon all the others with a touching impartiality. If anything, they rested most often on the fascinating and delusive wig of Mr. Greyhurst, the Collector. On the other side of her stood Mr. Arden of the Civil Service, enjoying the situation and trying to discover if this beautiful creature had a soul. This was a question he had discussed with his intimate friend Gurder, the Executive Engineer, in a more or less scientific spirit.

"She gives me the impression of a formula,

Gurder," he remarked to his friend that evening at dinner. "What'll you drink? Try beer. No? Well, my idea is that it is a poor little soul."

"What does it matter if it is, Arden? Don't you go soul-hunting too much, or you'll get entangled in the shell of it," replied Gurder.

"What does it matter? My dear fellow, it matters everything. She is important. There's old Græyhurst can't attend to his work properly, and the whole district suffers, because a girl has eyes and a nose and a mouth more symmetrical than the regulation sealed pattern. Men go mad about that sort of thing. No one goes mad about you and me, Gurder, and they are perfectly sane as regards Miss Caverer, who possesses a mouth which should be put down by a Government Resolution. But the Government of this country suffers vitally by a girl like this lovely creature,—*she is lovely.*"

"She's all that, Arden, and that's just as good a reason as any other for letting her alone."



"Is there darkness at the back of those eyes," continued Arden, helping himself to mustard, "or is it light? I sometimes think that darkness travels faster and further than light, and that the scientific persons are all wrong. Darkness is the power. I tell you, if there is light, if there is a soul behind those beautiful eyes, there will be less damage done than if there is none. The brother is a bit of a cad, I think. There may be a good deal of him in the sister."

"Well, let her alone then, can't you, Arden?"

"She is too interesting—as a formula. She is the formula of fascination, unless she has a soul. If she has, she is the formula of love. In the latter case the equation will eventually solve a single problem, but in the former, the application will be much more extended, and a good deal more harmful. Don't eat that *soufflé* it has 'sat down,' as the vernacular has it."

"She's practical enough. Mrs. Gupson says she screws down her servants so that no one will stay with her but that old butler."

"I never listen to Mrs. Gupson. A woman who has so mean a mind that she will gossip about other people's servants is one to be avoided."

"You learn something from those people, anyhow."

"It isn't worth learning,—the sort of thing you can learn from Mrs. Gupson. It is never true. The girl may have had a practical training, and may object to being cheated. Mrs. Gupson says she screws. That is not fact, it is Mrs. Gupson. Behind it may be a foundation of fact, of course. No, Gurder, one can only solve this problem by working it out. That's what I'm going to do."

"It's just as likely to work *you* out, Arden. You think you're proof. You are as 'one that putteth on his armour.' Wait till you come to take it off."

"Shall we get into long chairs and surround a cigar? What I want to discover—I tell you—is whether that lovely creature has a soul. If she has—if she has—well, don't you think a man could do worse than exchange his own for it?"

"Or lose his own."

"Perhaps. But I think I could stop short of that. Give me the matches, please. At present I am not touched by the girl's beauty and grace, for it seems to me that the tenderness and innocent loveliness of her is too catholic. It is the same for all, and that is not possible if it is genuine. When Mrs. Milvain's little dog was run over, and had its leg broken, I saw no difference in the expression of that lovely face. There was just the same exquisite tenderness in it as there is for old Greyhurst's wig. That is not natural, Gurder. I could never love a woman who was equally tender to a wig which deceives no one, as to a wounded fox-terrier."

"Women like this girl should belong to Humanity," observed Gurder. "They should be displayed in a gallery for the delight and instruction of the public. They're too beautiful for any private person."

"That is a practical idea, Gurder, and we might add a Museum of Antiquities, where they could retire when age had staled their infinite

variety—such of them as could not be restored. Have a peg? I've found out some things about this girl. She has been well educated somewhere; she had no friends, or relations either, at home; and she is an admirable musician, as far as piano-playing goes. I am sure she feels music, too, and that makes me think she must have a soul. These things I have discovered from herself. There is no Mrs. Gupson in the matter."

"While she accompanied your fiddle?"

"Exactly. Wood and cat-gut judiciously manipulated gave me the opportunity. She likes these performances, I can see that, or I wouldn't go on. Some day I shall bore her horribly on purpose, to see if I can't get at another side of her that way. Worst of it is I may have been boring her all along, and she not let me know. Don't think so, though."

"Well, Arden, investigating things that never do you any good was always your favourite vice. Why can't you worship pay and promotion and reports, and the usual gods, like the others? You needs must have a liking for Art and

Music, and that sort of folly, like me. Then it leads you into the paths of pretty young women with very uncertain souls."

"It's because I am a fool, Gurder. Life is not worth anything to me if it is to be nothing but pay and reports. Man shall not live by reports alone. Greyhurst and Sniggleson and the others live in the shop. No small tradesman ever lived more in it. They haven't even a back parlour, or if they have they keep the door open, so that they can see the counter. They never find out what fools they are. I discovered long ago what an ass I am."

"Well, don't go and act up to that discovery by looking too long for a pretty girl's soul, or too near, either. I'm off.—Come and dine with me to-morrow?"

"Can't. I'm going to the Milvain's to dinner. Poor young Milvain's dribbling his heart out about that girl! I gave him my place next her this evening, and he was that grateful you can't think. By the way, that girl's brother seems to be attentive to Miss Milvain. She's far too good for him. Both

brother and sister are rather thick with the Milvains, and the old people, and young ones too, I think, seem to be very fond of the girl. I don't know if they like the man so much. Have another cigar to take you home? No? Good night, then."

"Good night, Arden; and don't let yourself too far down after that soul."

"It may be above me, old man. If it is, I hope I shall rise."

The Mertons had been over three months in Jaffarnagar. Gertrude managed the house with remarkable economy. It was true that servants would not stay with her, but that was partly because those who came first to take service with her were the worst. They hoped to find an easy prey, and they were met by a genius for economy. After several failures they had now obtained a treasure of a butler. He was a gaunt old man, very tall for a native, bent with age and infirmities, but vigorous. He, too, seemed to be nearly as economical, and in some ways more so than she. He was a taciturn old person, who

never replied to a reproof, and very rarely spoke at all. He seemed to know a little English, too, and he certainly understood all she said. They did not entertain, except that they asked people to early or afternoon tea now and then, and occasionally to dinner, which meal at these times was good. Their meals when alone were calculated to do no more than feed them sufficiently.

Gertrude had, with natural perspicacity, adapted herself at once to the society in which she found herself. She knew the value of a certain quiet hospitality, and she was watching opportunities. The girl had no intention of sacrificing herself to any of these people. She and her brother were working to an end that would take them out of the country. How this was to be done, how they were to obtain the money that was possessed by the Milvains, she did not know. That was her brother's business. Something was to be done, but in what way she had not been informed. If it was criminal—forgery or theft—as she half suspected, she had not been entrusted with it,

and in fact she was aware that she would be safer if she did not know. Her part in the matter was to give every facility to her brother, and she had made the Milvains her friends, and therefore his, for that purpose. She was pretty sure that her brother would take care of himself.

For none of these people had she, as yet, much affection. In spite of herself, however, there were some who interested her. The Milvains and Arden. It was new to her to see a man like young Milvain ready to give his life and prospects to a penniless girl, however beautiful. It was not what she had been brought up to believe to be natural, and it puzzled her. Arden was another enigma to her, and she feared him a little. She could not discover whether he was in love with her or only laughing at her, and she was half afraid he was finding her out. It vexed her to find that she made apparently no impression upon him. His evident indifference to money and success and self-interest, astonished and annoyed the girl. She felt she could not



despise him for this, as her theories would have her to do, because he could not appreciate such contempt—it would only make him laugh, or possibly look down on her, and she could not tolerate that.

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## CHAPTER V.

### The Wing of Azrael.



ONE afternoon Aiden came over to tea. Her brother was there of course as chaperon. After tea Arden asked if she would give him some music, and they went to the piano,—he with his violin. He tuned it, laid it down, and said—

“You told me you had no friends at home, Miss Merton. Had you absolutely none?”



“I had none. It is quite true.”

“None at all, male, female or neuter?”

"No. I was brought up alone, except my brother."

"That was hard on you. Not even a girl to confide in?"

"Not even a girl. I had as much to do as I wished. Here it is different."

"Yes, there's not much to do. You have a charming friend in Miss Milvain, at any rate. How did you learn to play so well, the piano I mean, and to accompany? You can't accompany the violin without practice. That means some one else. You don't mind my asking, do you?"

"Oh! no.—I attended classes where we were taught music together, and played concerted pieces. It is not necessary to be friends with a girl because she plays the violin to your piano accompaniment, is it?"

"By no means. Suppose we try that sonata, if you don't mind."

They played it through, and Arden asked:

"Now, what does that say to you, Miss Merton."

"Say to me?" she asked, rather astonished,

turning round on the music stool and raising her lovely eyes to his face. "What would it say? It pleases me. Does it say anything to you?"

"Much."

"What, then?"

"I can't tell you if you don't feel it. What I like about music is that it tells you something that no one can express. Something that is not material, that you can't buy with money. That is the beauty of the emotions. You can't buy them. No money could give you the pleasure you feel in that sonata."

"Do you think it is worth much, that feeling?"

"Worth much? in what? It is worth a great deal in happiness, but nothing in cash."

"Don't you care for cash?" she replied, in her tender, musical voice.

"I don't think I do, very greatly. There are other things I care for a great deal more."

"Perhaps you have never felt the want of it, Mr. Arden."

"Perhaps not," returned he, thoughtfully, "I

don't think I have. But it can't buy me what I want. All it can do is to give me the leisure to enjoy what I already possess."

"Well, that means that it can give you happiness. As long as you are happy and have what you want, perhaps you don't care for more."

"No; I have no ambition."

"You, a man and don't want power and wealth and influence!"

"They don't appeal to me. There are other things I like better. Friends, for instance, and quiet, and music and pictures and beauty of all sorts."

"Money can buy you all those."

"No. It may buy the things, but it can't buy the enjoyment of them. It can't buy friendship, or delight in beautiful things, or the pleasure in music, or—love."

"Are you sure it can't buy love?"

Arden drew his thumb across the strings of his violin.

"Out of tune!" he said. "I thought so. Shall we try another sonata?"

They played again, but it did not go well. The girl felt that she had slipped, and he felt that he had caught a glimpse of a sordid little soul. Of her intellectual ability and force of character he was sure, but he feared to find nothing else, and he feared he had found nothing else. It was an interesting study. Would the soul of that beautiful body ever develop? What Arden had been saying to her, was a mere test. He did not pretend that the ideas were original.

John Merton had no fear that Arden would gain any influence over his sister. He had been somewhat afraid of George Milvain, but he knew that she would not give herself away to a mere official, for his official pay or his local rank. Her ambitions were, as he knew, much beyond that. What she might do with George Milvain, if she were to marry him for the money, he could not say; but he felt that there were schemes of which he knew nothing in that beautiful head.

It was a few days later that young Milvain came over to early tea. He had taken Ger-

trude for a ride—there was a rather large party—and, escorted her home. She had ridden one of his horses, and when they arrived at the house she asked him in a rather perfunctory tone to come in and have some tea. He, poor fellow, was ready to clutch at any chance of being alone with her, a chance she had not given him during the ride. His acceptance of her invitation annoyed her, and she called to her brother, but he was not in the house apparently, or did not reply. She looked into his office, but he was not there, and she tapped at his bedroom door without effect. Then she called the butler and asked him where her brother was, but he did not know. She concluded that he had been detained longer than usual at the hospital.

In the meantime, after loosening the horses' girths and sending home the one ridden by Gertrude, George Milvain came into the little verandah. Instead of being open down to the ground as usual, this verandah was enclosed by a wall, to a height of some three and a half feet, leaving an open space of about

six feet, with teak posts at intervals. Outside, the roof came down so low, to a further row of posts, that there was, as it were, a verandah within a verandah, and no one could see in from the enclosure, much less from the road beyond. This arrangement excluded the breeze, and made the house rather hot, but it kept out the glare also, and gave privacy.

Young Milvain leant against the doorpost, looking at the little cane tea-table. Close to it was *her* chair. *She* used that knife. The sugar basin held nothing more sweet than herself. They all had aureoles of fancy round them. There was a cake with a gap in it, of which doubtless she had eaten a small piece. It was a large gap, somewhat like a bite, and he gave a short laugh as he thought it was such as Miss Caverner might have made at a single effort. The tea-cloth, too, was decorated with little Kate Greenaway figures. How beautiful they were, and now innocent. Just the sort of thing *she* would do.

When she returned, rather annoyed at her brother's absence, and put out at being left



alone with the young man, she said, in her gentle voice—

“Won't you sit down, Mr. Milvain?”

It was such an overwhelming thing to be asked to sit down at that little table, *tête-à-tête* with *her*, and in *her* voice, too, a voice that an angel might be proud to own! He was quite awkward. The chair he selected was very low, and he did not notice this, so that he sat down with a flop, and was much discomposed. This shook him up a little and jerked his ideas into their places, by the scruffs of their necks, as it were. He cleared his throat.

“They will bring the tea in moment, Mr. Milvain. My brother has not come back from hospital yet. Will you have some cake?”

It was too much for his feelings. He pictured her always sitting there, always looking at him with those exquisite eyes, always asking him if he wouldn't have some cake. All his desires, his dreams, his love rose up within him. In his straightforward simplicity of heart he spoke out to her at last.

“Miss Merton,” he began, with uncontrollable

directness, leaning forward as he spoke, "I—I love you. You know it, don't you? You can't help knowing it. You—"

"I am so sorry!" she replied, interrupting him, much vexed, but exquisitely tender and beautiful. "I—"

"Don't say that! Do wait a bit, just let me get it all out. I'm not much, I know that,—not in it compared to—to other fellas, I dare say, but anyhow I'm just mad for love of you. There's nothing, oh! there's nothing I wouldn't do for you. You don't know what it is."

The old butler came in with the tea, but he didn't care, he went on—

"Only let me love you—let me know you know I do. Give me a chance. I'm nothing, nothing; but nobody is worth anything where you are,—nobody's fit for you. If real love—it's all that—if it is any use, perhaps it may help me with you."

The old butler went out again, to Gertrude's relief, and she said, very gently; for in spite of herself she was a little touched, though annoyed at feeling it:

"Mr. Milvain, I am very sorry; but, in every way, it is not possible. What could you gain if I said 'Yes'? I am poor, and you are young, and can do better for yourself than to—to marry a penniless girl."

"Gain?" exclaimed the young man. "I gain you! Is that all? It is like you—like you to think of it like that. Me! What do I matter, except for you. What do I care for, except for you. There's no life but you. I can't say what I mean, I'm not clever, but—but I love you."

"If I returned it," she said, "and—I must say it—I don't. I'm so sorry. If I were like you what would be the use? You don't know me. You—"

"Don't know you? Let me try, then. Let it stay till I do. I *do* know you—a fella can't love and not know what it is he loves. Give me a chance. That's all I ask. What is money, or pay, or anything? I'll sell my polo ponies for what they'll fetch—Mr. Vansittart would take them. I'll chuck racing, though it's only 'sky' races, after all. There's nothing I won't do. I have some money too."

Arden to her brother, and stood for a moment gazing at him. Arden, surprised and unable at once to comprehend, was still looking towards her, holding out his hand. The expression of her face changed into one of absolute terror. She stepped back and clutched at the breast of her riding-habit with one hand, her lips parted and her eyes wide open.

"You—you—" she gasped, in a choked voice.

Merton made an energetic movement of his hand, as if in repudiation.

She could say no more, but stood there, panting and trembling all over, at this Vision of Sudden Death.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### The Sign of the Snake.

“**I** SHALL never forget the look of terror on her face,” said Arden to his friend Gurder next morning, “never!—It didn’t seem to be pity for him, nor any feeling for him at all, but just hopeless fear. Something in the future, it seemed to me,—a terror of something to come. The brother turned as white as this handkerchief, and she stared at him, with that fear in her eyes. Couldn’t have been him, of course. If it was a shock to us, it must have been much worse to her. She left us at once, and I hope she had a good cry.”

“That’s their way of letting it off,” replied Gurder. “A man swears vaguely when his nerves go loose, and wants to have a row with somebody about something—anything. A woman weeps. I don’t see why moisture should

have so much to do with it. Those poor people, the Milvains!—How are they?"

"The girl—nice girl, too, and taking—has been quite knocked over, and his father and mother—especially the mother, naturally, poor thing—are badly cut up."

"He was a good youngster, an honest, manly boy as ever stood. Sad end to him."

"Not at all, Gurder. He died loving the most perfect, most beautiful woman on this earth."

"It was a false ideal, all the same, and he died with it."

"No ideal is false, but the reality often is. To him she was perfect. That young fellow attained the greatest human happiness, and he died with it in his heart. Don't tell me! What does a man want more than that? I'm not talking of religion, but of human—animal happiness, if you like. Many a man throws away the world, his life, his soul, by gad! to get it, and fails. He got it and died with it. Say, he was 'mashed,' and 'spoon,' call it what you please and despise it if you like, and you will be wrong. Why, my good man, it is for that

sort of thing that the greatest crimes, and the most heroic, unselfish feats in this very sordid world have been done. Who has a right to despise that emotion because he don't understand it. The man who thinks little of it is despising one of the most powerful motives of human life."

"Oh! certainly! What was it, Arden? Heart disease, I suppose."

"Undoubtedly. It could be nothing else. Must have been organically weak, and some sudden excitement must have killed him, poor boy! The Milvains are very sorry for the girl, and want her to go and stay with them. The change would do her good, for she's badly upset—nerves all rattling, I fancy. I don't think there's much sympathy between her and that brother. They've—the Milvains—asked me to urge her to go to them. In fact I'm on my way there now."

"They're kind people, and it's like the old lady to think of the girl."

"Yes, I must say I was pleased at the offer, and I said I would do what I could."

"You didn't offer to do it, did you, by any chance, old man?"

"Well, I may have just suggested it."

"So I supposed. Did she care for that poor boy?"

"Not as he did for her, I don't think. I'm a bit puzzled."

"If you've been studying the question, Arden, I can only say 'Beware'—only you won't. Poor Milvain! He, too, was in search of a soul."

"Found it, Gurder. But you may be sure the doubt of it never arose in his simple heart. It is only fools like me who search for souls. I'm off to the Mertons."

"Very well. Common-sense to you. It's the only sense you haven't got."

"I know it is, therefore I have it; but I don't act on it."

Arden went out into the bright sunshine. Far away the low hills were gleaming, yellow-green, and their shadows lay among them, like light which had gone to sleep. The grassy ground in front of the house sloped away toward a hollow, where trees lounged in the



soft air, with their faces to the breeze. Caressing hands, of lazy shadows, trailing from the little clouds, hushed the wide glare of the earth, as the morning sun awoke it. Near him, as he walked, tiny wandering winds turned up the silver sides of the grass in sport, and whisked away round his feet, like the little striped squirrels. To Arden it was sad. The face of it smiled at him, as it had done yesterday and the day before, with the same calm placidity. One young life had gone away from beside him for ever, and the pity of it, however he might philosophise, was in his heart. But that serene earth upon which he looked showed not a sign of its absence. When we lose a friend in death we feel that there ought to be some change in the world. We ourselves are changed, and there should be mourning on the earth also. But when the earth mourns in rain and storm, it is neither with us nor for us.

The Merton's house was not far off, in the same line as Gurder's, and Arden soon reached it. Like all the others it was in an enclosure,

with the ragged vestiges of a former garden in front of it. Someone had planted balsams in years gone by, and these had shed their seeds, and now surprised the observer by bursting into flower in unexpected places. "You



didn't expect to see me here, did you?" they seemed to say. "Quite our own idea, this." Arden cut off the head of a peculiarly fatuous specimen, which was trying to attract his attention by blooming alone on the side of the path. It gave him a little satisfaction to do this with his stick, and then he was sorry, when he saw it lying helplessly on the ground.

He went on to the door of the verandah, and knocked on the step with his stick.

In up-country Stations in India there are no bells and no knockers, and the servants are seldom where you can make them hear. To a native this matters little. He can sit on his heels and wait till it shall please Providence that he shall be discovered. A superfluity of energy is not the salient beauty of the Indian aborigine, and he is perfectly content without any at all. When the native is in a hurry to get back to his sleep, he will stand about and cough and clear his throat and shuffle his feet till the servants, who hear him quite plainly, think he has had enough of it. The procedure of the friendly Englishman is to shout out in a cheery manner, "I say, Jones!" or "Hallo, Smith!" and to stamp on the verandah. If it is a formal visit to a lady, paid in the day-time, the Englishman sits in his trap, swearing in a whisper, because there is no one about, and watching through the semi-opaque "chicks" the figure of the native maid, waddling out, by her mistress' order, to find the servants who ought to be there.

A few days ago Arden would have shouted, but the place subdued him. In that little verandah the Angel of Death had spread his wings, and there is always a shadow there. He looked into the drawing-room, but could see no one. It was so dark on account of the double verandah that it was difficult to distinguish anything. Moreover, there was a doorway opposite to him, with a glare shining through it from the ground at the back of the house, which was only of the breadth of one room.

"Merton!" he called softly, but there was no reply.

"Boy!" he called again, more loudly, in hopes that there might be a servant within hearing. He was successful, and the old butler appeared from the back of the house, blocking up the further door with a silhouette of himself in black.

"Ah! Where is the Doctor Sahib?" asked Arden.

The man replied that he was in his room, and just then Merton's head appeared at a side door.

"Oh! it's you, Arden. I thought I heard some one. Come in here, if you don't mind my being in undress. I'm just going to bathe."

"It's a healthy practice," replied Arden, "and you can't do it with your clothes on, so I don't mind." He entered the room, and put his hat and stick on the table.

"Your sister not dressed yet, I suppose," he continued. "I have a message for her from the Milvains, but you will do as well, if I can't see her."

"All right, sit down a bit. You won't mind my going on with the clubs?" He was naked to the waist, and took up a pair of clubs.

"Not at all. I use them too, before I tub. Let's feel the weight." Arden lifted the pair and tried them. "Too hot to do it with clothes on," he remarked.

Merton then took the clubs and raised them at arms length, till they were perpendicular, throwing his head back at the same time. Arden was looking at the muscles of his arms and shoulders, when he caught sight of the little mark under the left arm, and started

slightly, unseen by Merton because of his position. Arden went over to a chair by the table and sat down, as Merton lowered his arms slowly to his side.

"The Sign of the Snake!" thought Arden, greatly astonished, but he said nothing.

"The Milvains have written to my sister," remarked Merton, and it appeared to Arden that his voice was somewhat constrained. Indeed his whole manner was a little forced, but Arden put that down to the reluctance, some men exhibit to speak of solemn subjects, or to show emotion of any sort.

"I know," replied Arden, "and they asked me to urge her to go to them. They do me the honour to consider me her and—and your friend as well as theirs, you see."

"Well, you'd better ask her, Arden. She'll be out in a few minutes, I fancy. If you'll wait here till I'm tubbed—it's better to see in than the drawing-room,—I'll call her."

"All right," returned Arden, "I'll wait. How is she?"

"Rather upset. Women have too much

nerves. But it was a sad business. He didn't look like a man who had anything wrong with his heart."

"It was that, I suppose."

"Oh! yes. There's no doubt of it. Sudden stoppage of the heart's action. Of course, as you know, there was no *post-mortem*, no need for it. Could be nothing else but that. If I had any suspicions I would have suggested an autopsy, myself. No one says it was anything else, do they?"

"No. But the Milvains don't know the exciting cause. We didn't think it necessary to tell them."

"Quite right, Arden. My sister—you know—eh?"

"Of course, what else!"

"Well, I'll be back in a minute or two."

Merton went into his bath-room, leaving Arden seated at the table. Arden took up a paper-knife and balanced it idly between his finger and thumb, thinking about that curious mark on Merton's arm. He had reasons for being struck with it. Then he looked at some medical

papers on the table and caught sight of the latest number of the 'Lancet.' It was held between the leaves of a large book, and he lifted down the book from the top of a pile of others, and opened it to take out the paper. As he did so he glanced at the page, and saw a pencil mark opposite a paragraph. He looked casually at it and then his interest was excited, and he read it through carefully. The book was a work on "Medical Jurisprudence." His face became very serious as he read, and it was with excited feelings that he closed the book, placing the paper as it was before, and returned it to its previous position.

The paragraph described the effects of a certain rapid poison, and they were very similar to those attending the death of poor young Milvain. Considered by itself, there was but little importance to be attached to his discovery of the marked passage, but in conjunction with the mark on Merton's arm it was a more serious matter. A little reflection, however, quickly convinced Arden of the obvious absurdity of his impression, for it could



be no more than an impression. No inferences, as matters had occurred, could raise them to the point of suspicion. He had had a merely momentary feeling of uneasiness and he knew he could not carry it further, even if he wished. It had so far upset him, however, that he did not feel inclined to talk with Merton, and taking his hat and stick he quietly left the room.

He passed into the little drawing-room, and was moving slowly toward the door, when he heard his name uttered in that musical voice he was beginning, in spite of himself, to like too much. He turned and Gertrude rose from a low chair, in which she had been sitting. She had no book nor work in her hands, and must have been sitting there idle. Arden started slightly at the unexpected sound as he turned to her.

"Good morning," he said, advancing.

There must have been something in his face which surprised her; for as he raised his eyes to hers, he distinctly recognised that expression of terror in the beautiful face—though it only rested there for a moment—which he had

seen on it when the Vision of Sudden Death had risen before her. It filled him with intense pity and a desire to protect her. The thought suddenly came into his mind that it might be from her brother the protection was required. He did not formulate this feeling, which was probably only the result of what he had just seen and read, but it made him more desirous of getting her away from the house.

"Good morning," replied the girl. She was looking pale and weary. "So you were going away without seeing me," she continued, giving him her hand, which he retained in his.

"Yes," replied he, "I was; but Fate has been kind to me. I came on purpose to see you. In fact I have a message specially for yourself. It is that the Milvains want you to go to them."

"They have asked me. What do you think I ought to do?"

"Ought, Miss Merton! There is no ought in the matter. It's a question of sympathy and kindness. Besides, I'm sure it would do you good."

He was for the moment rasped by the way she put it.

"I don't mean in that way," she returned, "not for myself, but the best for them."

Arden was instantly abased. The purest grammarian could not have put it more forcibly that he was an ungenerous Prig. It was quite unconsciously that he pressed, in a spasm of remorse and admiration, the little hand he was holding.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed, with pardonable lapse of memory: "I knew you would follow just what your kind heart told you. I knew you would feel exactly the right thing. Yes, you would be doing them good. They would be glad to have you with them."

There was no doubt that this girl had been suffering. There were distinct marks of it in her lovely face. Naturally, he thought, for he was not conceited, she would turn to some one for help and sympathy, and her brother was not likely to give her either. It touched him that he should be selected. In reality, he was not altogether right in his conclusions. The girl's

nerves were shaken, and she was making use of Arden and gaining his support, as she would that of the Milvains, from somewhat selfish motives. He was a kind of walking-stick to her. Her hand trembled as Arden held it. He pressed it again.

"We are all so sorry for you," he said.

Then the girl drew her hand away from his and sank into the chair and cried, with her hands before her face. What Arden might have done or said was prevented by the entrance of her brother at this moment.

"Hallo! Ah! It's all nerves, Arden. She'll be all right after breakfast. Wants food."

"Good morning, Miss Merton," said Arden, seeing that there was nothing more to be done. "Good morning, Merton; I've given the message to your sister." He left; and after breakfast Gertrude Merton was "all right," as her brother predicted.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### *Circumstances.*

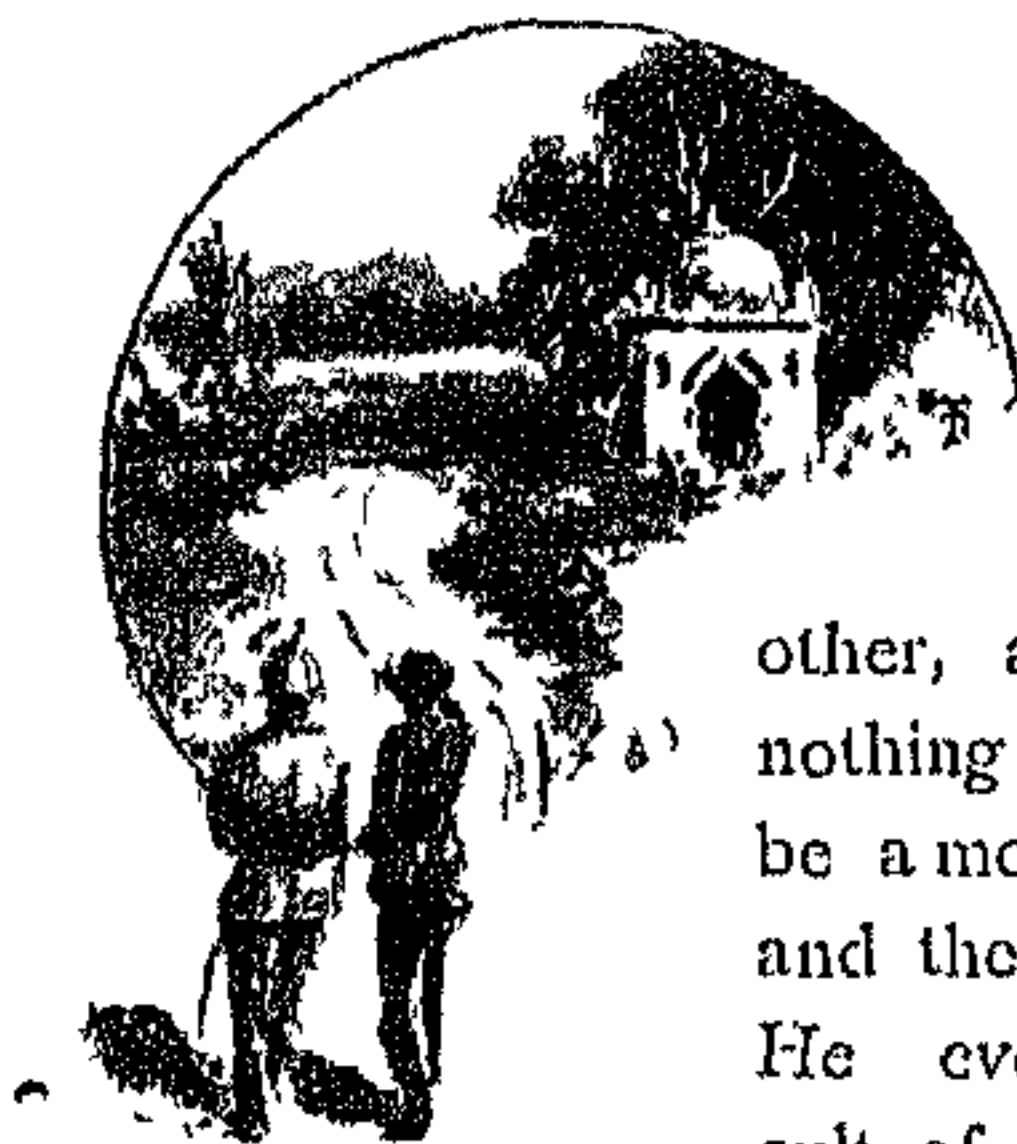


ONE of the saddest circumstances attending death in India is that the dead are put out of sight at once. It is necessary, but it has to Europeans the unavoidable effect of getting rid as soon as possible of the friend they knew and loved. There is no transition. In the morning your friend is with you, and in the evening he is hidden for ever. It does not seem that he is dead, at first, that comes afterwards. He *is* not. There is no one. You look for him again next morning, the day after, for many days. You hear his step and turn round, or you take your hat to go over and see him. At last you realise.

George Milvain's friend Vansittart, with whom he had shared the rat-eaten barn they called a house, could not accustom himself to the

loss. It wasn't fair. He would make a few steps toward his friend's room with a letter, or something he wanted to talk about, and then he would remember. It ought not to have been.

"Heart disease!" he said to Arden. "Why his heart was as strong as mine or yours! Only two days before he did his mile with me along the Mahomedpur road, wasting for the 'sky' races, and was as fit as could be after it. Look at the way he could dive in the swimming-bath."



"It couldn't be anything else," replied Arden.

"How could it?"

"I don't know,"

returned the

other, and he would say nothing more. It grew to be a monomania with him, and the others noticed it. He even neglected the cult of the pony,—a serious symptom.

"Can't make it out!" said Smithson, after mess one evening, to Guider, who had been dining there on guest night. "Fella goes about as if he hadn't any interest in anything. He's chucked polo, by gad! Chucked polo! Keeps his nags all right, and he's taken poor Milvain's too, but all he does with 'em is to go in and pat the beasts in a queer sort of way. It's bloomin' rum. We've done our best, but he takes no notice. I brought up 'Winkle' to him yesterday. Gone in the near 'fore', you know—and he just looked at the beast and said, 'navicular', which it isn't. Seems to care about nothing. Used to be rather a hot soldier, but he's dropped that too, and he's beastly short all round when you speak to him."

"Why don't you fellows get him out of that house? He'll be all right then probably. The longer he stays there the worse he'll be."

"Get him out! Just you try, and see what he'll say. You don't suppose we haven't done our damndest to get him out of it? We got the Colonel to have a turn at it, but it wasn't any use."

"Look here," replied Gurder, "I'll tell what you should do. Report the house as uninhabitable, and have the report sent on to me. I'll examine it and report it as unsafe. If he don't go then, we'll take the roof off."

"That's a good hand, Gurder!" returned Smithson, "but how about the landlord."

"That's all right. I've been at him for years to have his houses properly repaired—those in cantonment limits,—and they all want it badly."

"Same as an Irish eviction. Not a bad idea, we'll have a shot at it, by gad! What an extraordinary dislike he's taken to the Mertons! You'd think they'd killed poor Milvain, to see his face when you mention the name."

"We can't help that, can we, Smithson? It's not much good talking about it."

"Queer thing, though, all the same. Have a peg?"

This curious monomania of Vansittart's had taken a form of intense hatred to the Mertons. Strangely enough, too, he seemed to have considered himself bound to protect Miss Mil-



vain from some undefined danger. At least he was continually near her in public, hovering uneasily about the girl, saying nothing, but keeping in her neighbourhood, with a kind of moody anxiety in his expression. If either John Merton or his sister appeared, Vansittart would move away, watching them all the time, and never losing sight of Miss Milvain. He performed his military duties well enough, but in a listless, rather perfunctory manner, and Col. Milvain was somewhat anxious about him.

Several weeks had passed since George Milvain's death, and yet this monomania seemed to be increasing rather than becoming less. Arden tried to induce Vansittart to go and stay with him for a time, but the young man refused. Col. Milvain, too, had asked him—urged him—to go to them for a few days, but nothing would decoy him from the house where his friend had lived. They could not get him to say what his thoughts were. It was only by observing his actions that they guessed his intense hatred of the Mertons. His servants, when questioned, said that he slept well, but

that on some nights he would get up and go out and walk round the Milvain's house, which stood by itself, and would then return to bed again.

The friendship between the Mertons and the Milvains had become very close. It was almost



an adoration on the part of Phyllis Milvain for the beautiful girl, and in truth she, on her side, had a real attraction for Gertrude. There was something simple and loving about Phyllis, a gentle unselfishness which was new to Gertrude. It must be remembered that this girl had never had any friends till now. Her theories of life were not founded on fact, but on her father's interpretation of facts, and she had been deliberately

taught, from her earliest childhood, to see self-interest in every action. If she had higher impulses they were rigidly repressed. It was new to her to come into a society where she met people on terms of intimacy, and found that they did act upon motives in which she could not find only selfishness. There was no doubt about the true lovingkindness and self-sacrifice of Phyllis Milvain. Gertrude had seen that she never spared herself any trouble or labour to comfort her mother in the grief they had passed through. Unconsciously to herself, this girl had bound Gertrude to her by ties which she could not define, and she herself was, in fact, unaware of them.

"What do you think of her now?" asked Gurder of Arden, one day. "Any glimpse of the soul?"

"Don't ask me, Gurder," he replied, rather impatiently.

"Oh! very well."

"I don't mean to snub you, old man. Beg your pardon. But I've ceased to look for it."

"That's the worst sign of all."

"Well, yes, it is, I suppose, from your point of view. Fact is I don't care whether she has one or not, but I'm sure she has. Look here. I've come to that stage, Gurder, when a man don't care about anything but the woman herself."

"So I thought."

"I know you did, and that's why I'm telling you. It's the final stage of the masculine Fool. I'm always analysing myself, more fool me, and I know it. The whole atmosphere is full of that girl, and I'm always sneering at her and doing the silly cynic when I'm with her. It's my punishment, the one I give myself for my own folly."

"No fool is such a fool as the man who knows he is one and don't care."

"That's all very fine, Gurder, you think it's epigrammatic and new, but it's as old as the hills, and as true. It doesn't do any good to tell me."

"What does you any good, then?"

"Nothing. You can't say anything I shan't find fault with. Vansittart's getting worse."

"Here he is," remarked Gurder, hastily.

"He's never come here before. What's up now?—Morning, Vansittart. Take as long a chair as you can find. Have a peg?"

"How are you, Vansittart?" asked Arden.

"All right. No peg, thanks. Morning to you. I've been looking for you, Arden. Look here. Can you put me up for a bit?"

"Delighted!" replied Arden, much surprised.

"Thanks. I'll send over my kit now. Not much to send. Only for a day or two."

"As long as you like, my dear fellow. Send over your traps at once. I can give you stables, too, if you like."

"No, thanks. I'll leave the nags where they are. Well, I'll go over and tell my servant now, if it's not too sharp for you."

"By no means. Come at once."

"Bye-bye, Gurder. See you soon, Arden. Thanks again for the offer." Vansittart then went out.

"He's better, Arden," observed Gurder, when he had gone.

"No, he's not. This is some new idea of his, but the thing is the same. I'm glad he's

coming, though. It may do him good without his suspecting it. Did you notice the queer look in his eyes? There's a sort of suppressed triumph in them."

"I didn't see. He had the doorway behind him, and the glare was in my eyes."

"Well, I must go over and tell my people to arrange for him."

On the way to his house, Arden met Gardner of the Gunners.

"Have you heard about Vansittart, Arden?" he asked.

"No, what about him? He's coming over to stay with me."

"Is he? Well, it's a good thing for him, but you won't have a happy time."

"Why not? What's been happening?"

"At mess last night—our mess, guest night—he let off in the most extraordinary way. Merton was there, and he went for him. . . ."

"Row?"

"Not exactly. He didn't knock him down or anything, but he made the most astounding charges against him. Must have been off his

head. He was glaring at Merton, who sat opposite, all dinner-time—putting down his liquor in a sulky sort of way. After 'The Queen', he suddenly got up and went for Merton. Called him a murderer, and damned his sister. The C. O., Swinbury, called him to order, but he wouldn't hear."

"Merton's sister?"

"Yes. Said he and she, between them, had poisoned Milvain, and that he had proofs."

"Good Lord! What did Merton do?"

"Turned as pale as the table-cloth. By gad! to look at him, you'd think it was a true bill. Smithson got hold of him—Vansittart—and one or two of us got him out of the place. Case of putting him under arrest, only we know how poor Milvain's death has gone to his head. That fella Merton's a cur, I rather think. He took it lying down, and left soon after. Didn't say a word."

"I'm glad I heard this, Gardner. He's coming to me, and I'll look after him all I can. He's really not responsible, I should think. Daresay he'll get better, when he's been away from

that house a bit. They ought to make him go on leave."

"He won't."

"They could do it with an M. C."

"Why, he won't let a doctor near him. Says he's quite fit. So he is, in other ways. I'm glad his colonel wasn't there."

"Well, I'd better get on. He'll be over at my house soon. Morning to you. Come and dine? Vansittart will be there of course, and it'll be all the better if you come. Do him good."

"I can't, thanks all the same. I'm dining with the Milvains. By the way, I met Merton just now, and he asked me to tell you that he had been to your house, to ask you over this afternoon. Miss Milvain is to be there, and the ladies want you to bring your fiddle. Music-hall entertainment."

"All right. I'll send him a note. Morning. Sorry you can't come to dinner. Which way was Merton going? I may meet him."

"He was on that screw of his, and he's off home. Morning."



Vansittart came over to breakfast with Arden after orderly room, and during that meal he was very silent. He did not appear gloomy or morose. On the contrary, he seemed to be happier than usual, with some internal satisfaction. His eyes would light up now and then, and he would chuckle, as if in anticipation of something. Arden talked to him and did his best to cheer up the young man, and to draw away his attention, but it was useless. He would reply courteously enough, but seemed to listen as if from behind a screen of his own reflections. However, he did not say a word concerning the events of the previous evening, and Arden, of course, did not refer to them in any way.

Just before starting for his court, a note was brought to Arden. It was from Gertrude, and she wrote that her brother had suddenly applied for three days' leave and had gone off. She could not, therefore, ask him to come over in the afternoon, as she had authorised her brother to do, and she was very sorry, but hoped he would come another day.

Arden was disappointed, but he determined he would call at the house in the evening or late afternoon, for he longed to see the girl, if only for a moment. He was always longing to see her, now. What could have called Merton away for three days he could not conjecture. A painful, indefinite feeling of fear came over him suddenly. He thought of what Gardner had told him; and the strange coincidence of the sign of the snake, and of that paragraph he had read in the medical book, came back to his memory. He had clean forgotten all about it. But the perfect absurdity of such an idea was so apparent, that he put it from him at once. The only effect of the recollection of it was to leave a vague alarm and uneasiness in his mind about Gertrude, and to confirm his intention of visiting her that afternoon.

Arden drove down to the fort where his office and court were, and it was not till about half-past five in the afternoon that he could get away. Then he drove to the Mertons. It was on his way home, so he had an

excuse for calling there casually, and he had often availed himself of it.

Gertrude Merton was more interested in Arden than she quite knew. She had come to look on him as rather more than an ordinary friend, as, in fact, a man on whose full assistance she could rely. That he liked her she knew, but she was not sure whether he was in love with her. He puzzled and interested her. She had got into a habit of asking his advice, and she usually took his opinion as final.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and the world was bright as Arden drove down in his dog-cart to the Mertons. There had been heavy rain, up to the previous night, for some days, and the air was crisp and fresh. Arden felt a presentiment of happiness, an exhilarating feeling that the world was going to be well with him, and the world was to him the lovely girl he was on his way to see.

He drove up to her door and found the two girls, Gertrude and Phyllis, standing in the verandah, ready to go out.

"We are going to walk to the Tennis Courts,"

said Gertrude, "but you must come in and have a cup of tea. I know you have had none this afternoon."

"But I shall detain you, and you will have to make fresh tea."

"Not at all. There is plenty, not long enough standing to be bitter."

"Very well," he said. "It is an altar I like to sacrifice upon, when the priestesses are as they happen to be just now."

The beautiful girl smiled to him, and it was enough to make a man lose head and heart, to see those tender, witching eyes and the lovely face looking up at him. He put the reins in the clip and descended, and shook hands with the girls.

"Will you both drive me to the Tennis Courts?" he asked them.

"Phyllis must drive, then," replied Gertrude.

"Oh! yes, I'll drive," said Phyllis. "I've driven your horse before, have I not?"

"Yes, she's quiet enough."

"Will you have half a cup more, Phyllis?" asked Gertrude.

"Well, yes, dear, I think I will," said she.

"You had better put on cloaks of some kind," remarked Arden, "there's a chilly breeze."

"Do you think we must?" answered Gertrude.

"Very well, then, I'll lend Phyllis one also."

"Not for me. I'm coldproof," returned Phyllis.

"You must, dear, if Mr. Arden orders," said Gertrude, laughing.

"I'll remember that," observed Arden.

The butler was sent for the cloaks,—he was the only presentable servant in the house—and brought them just as Phyllis was drinking her half-cup of tea. He was going to put one over Phyllis' shoulders, when Arden called out:

"Let me do that."

But the man had already laid it on her shoulders as Arden approached.

"Ah! my hair-pin!" exclaimed Phyllis, setting down the cup with one hand, as she put the other up to her neck. She then pulled the cloak over her shoulders. Something fell to the ground at Gertrude's feet. She was standing by Phyllis, and taking her cloak from

the old butler. Arden picked up a small bottle and offered it to her.

"My smelling-salts. Please keep it for me just now, Mr. Arden. How did— What's the matter, Phyllis?"

Arden put the bottle in his pocket and turned to the other girl. She gave a little choke, stared at Gertrude with terrified eyes, then held out her hands as if for aid, with a piteous gesture, and sank on the floor,—sank in a heap, where she had been standing.

Arden stooped down in astonishment, and raised her, thinking she had suddenly fainted.

"Bring some water. I have the smelling bottle," he said, feeling in his pocket. He opened it with one hand and sniffed at it. Then he raised his head and looked at Gertrude, with an awful horror in his face. What he saw in hers he never forgot in all his life.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### Was it She?

“**M**Y God!” gasped Arden, his face twitching with a sort of agony, as he stared in horror at the girl.

There was a slight scent of bitter almonds in the air, and it seemed to him that it was like the spirit of Death. He was kneeling on the floor supporting Phyllis Milvain, partly on one knee, partly on his arm. He remained in that position for a few seconds, with his eyes fixed on Gertrude.

She had seized the arms of a little cane chair into which she had sunk, as if she must hold on to something. Her body was rigid and bent slightly forward, and the white terror in her face was awful to see. She was trembling violently, her lips parted and her eyes fixed and wide open. She tried to speak, and her lips moved, but no words came.

The sight of her agony completely terrified Arden. He laid down very gently the body of Phyllis Milvain. He knew she was dead, there was no need to try any remedies. That poison, prussic acid, was instantaneous as he knew; and it was about it that the paragraph in that book was concerned. But the fearful look in the beautiful, distorted face of the other, alarmed him so intensely that all feelings gave way to the instant necessity of caring for her. He strode rapidly to her.

She kept her wide, agonised eyes on his face as he moved, and when he arrived close to her the girl rose and stood up, the fingers of one hand clutching the other wrist, as if to find some support. She suddenly found her voice.

“Oh help me! help me! It is all round me. The world is full of it.”

He could see the muscles of the beautiful throat working, strained and swollen with her fear.

“Where does it come from? Oh! the Death! the Death!”



She clutched his arm with both hands.

"*You know,*" he replied in a hard voice, looking at her with a stern horror in his features.

"I?"

The expression of terror in her eyes was arrested for a moment, and she suddenly gasped, and dropped her arms to her sides.

"Do you think *I*—?"

Her face turned to anger. Then a sudden, fresh access of fear came upon her.

"Oh! they will think.—I, who was her friend,—and you, too, you!"

She shrank back from him. He looked at her doubtfully for one moment, and then he took the beautiful, terror-stricken girl in his arms. She clung to him, put her arms round him, laid her head on his breast, the beautiful head he loved too well, but in all she did there was not a thought of any feeling for him, and he knew it. It was pure terror, and a frenzied desire for protection. Then she burst into tears, and sobbed with an hysterical intensity as he held her close to him. Gradually she calmed down, and the fits of convulsive

sobbing became less violent. She did not raise her face from his breast, and he stroked her hair gently with one hand.

All the time he was nearly sure that the lovely girl he held in his arms was a murderess! He almost believed, now, that she and her brother had killed that other brother and sister; though he could imagine no reason for it. But his own feelings were beyond all rational examination. All he had seen and heard passed through his mind in a flash. The discovery of that strange sign on her brother's arm; the marked paragraph in the medical book; the curious charge brought against them by Vansittart; the same look of terror he had seen on her face when young Milvain lay dead in that same verandah, and its repetition now; all was plain to him except the motive. Yet he loved her. He only knew it now for certain, and the discovery was a horror to him. He must always love her, and he must shield and save her, but he felt that there could be nothing more between them. She could never be nearer to him.

When she was a little calmer, Arden drew her to a seat. He placed her there, and in silence, without looking at her, he went back to Phyllis Milvain. She was lying where he had laid her, and again he raised her head and felt her heart. As he was stooping over her, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and looking up, saw the lovely white face of Gertrude looking down at the body.

"It's no use," she said. "She is dead? I know it. I have almost feared it for weeks, and now I know it. I knew it would come."

Arden made no reply, but raised the body in his arms and carried it into the room he knew to be Gertrude's. On his way, the old butler joined him and helped him to lay it on the bed, silently. Arden looked at the old man, and said in Hindustani that it was from the heart she had died, "like her brother," he said, and the old butler shook his head in silence, then nodded. He was a quiet old man, who never seemed to speak unless obliged to do so.

When Arden returned into the drawingroom,

off which lay Gertrude's bedroom, he found her walking about the room, her hands clasping one another nervously. She stopped and watched the old butler pass out into the back verandah, and then she turned to Arden.

"You believe," she said, in her usual gentle, musical tones, but with an intense feeling in them, "You believe that I did it?"

"Yes," he returned, looking full in her lovely eyes, "I do."

"No," she rejoined, "I did not."

"Then who did?"

"I don't know."

"Listen to me, Gertrude," he said, taking her hand, which was not trembling now. "If you will tell me all, I will protect you. No one knows but me. No, there is one who suspects—Mr. Vansittart."

"He? Why?"

"Yes. He must have some reason, but I don't know it. He didn't say so to me, but he charged your brother with it last night, and this morning your brother went away."

"I don't know where he has gone."

"You had better tell me, Gertrude. You shall know why I have a right to know. I tell you now. It is because I love you."

"Me? and you believe I did it?"

She stared at him in astonishment, a strange little quiver on her lips. He was stern and cold, very little like one who loves a woman and who is in her presence.

"Yes. That is why intend to save you at the risk of myself, of my life, of my own soul."

He was still stern and cold, and he spoke in a hard, even voice. She put her hands to her head.

"I don't understand!" she cried. "It is not true, not true that I did it. Why should I?"

"You must tell me why. I must know everything. You owe me that, after what I have told you, and for your own sake, too. They *may* never discover it, but I think they will. All is against you. I *must* tell you what I know. Do you know of a mark on your brother's arm. The left arm, underneath?"

"The sign of the snake!" she exclaimed in terror. "How do you know? I have it, too. What does it mean?"

"You know what it means, Gertrude, but I will tell you. It is the mark of a brotherhood of poisoners, a native society of murderers. I know, for it all came out in a case before me once, in my court. There are but few in the society. This mark on yours and your brother's arms might be a mere coincidence, but I know that your brother has been studying the effect of that very poison—prussic acid—which has killed that girl and killed her brother before her. On both occasions you were the only one present, and it was from the pocket of your dress that the little bottle of it fell just now. Come with me."

He led her unresisting to the tea-table, and raised the cup out of which Phyllis Milvain had been drinking, and held it up to her. There was a distinct scent of bitter almonds in it.

"That is the scent of prussic acid," he said, setting down the tea-cup. "Can you wonder now, that I am certain? Tell me all. What is the motive? What do you gain by this? Is it money or what is it?"

All the time he was speaking she had not

taken her eyes off his face. She listened, with dilated nostrils and panting bosom, but she seemed to have command over her bodily strength, and she did not move from her upright position. Arden thought she had never looked more beautiful, and inwardly he felt that his very soul was hers, and that he was a triple fool.

"I will tell you," she replied, "and you shall think what you will. We, my brother and I, are heirs to the Milvains. Our name is not Merton, our real name is Anketill. Now you see why we gain by the death of those two. If ever I loved anyone, it was Phyllis Milvain, and I did not kill her, and I did not kill her brother, and I am guiltless. Oh! guiltless of all this, and innocent."

Her lovely face was soft and tender as she told of the girl she said she loved, but as she spoke the last words that painful heart-rending look of terror returned to it.

"To know that Death is in the air as I have done! After he died I felt it, but then it passed away, and I really believed it was

heart disease. But now I feel, I see, I know that there is Death in the air. Oh! I can't tell where it comes from. 'It cannot be my brother—you see it can't. I feel it round me, everywhere, as I did before, for a time.'

She looked round her in fear, as if it were there, pressing her arms to her sides and clenching her hands and rounding her shoulders, as if to shrink from it.

"Arden took the little scent-bottle from his pocket and held it in his open hand, saying nothing. She looked at it.

"Yes, I see, but I don't know. I don't know how it got there, nor who put it there. Ah! Don't you see that is why it is so awful? Not to know. And it comes like this and kills."

"Gertrude," said Arden calmly. "I have told you that I love you, and I don't care whether you return it or not. I know you don't. You have said nothing that does not confirm all I suspected. Yet I love you. Therefore I will shield you—you and your brother. Perhaps you will understand it some day."

His voice softened as he went on.



"Some day, my dear, my beautiful girl without a soul, some day you will know."

She gazed at him, with expectant, uncomprehending eyes.

"When at last you understand," he went on, "you may perhaps find what you have not yet. I know, I see that it is yourself you are thinking of, you fear for. Well, perhaps you may have a lesson that will teach you more."

"What do you mean?" she asked, a little awed by his gentle, serious tone, with its under-chord of a strange, repressed emotion. He stretched out his arms and took her into them, and kissed her on the forehead, and caressed her as one would a frightened child. She left herself in his arms, loving the feeling of safety and protection.

"I love you," he continued, "for the soul that ought to be here, the soul that should match this lovely self of yours. It is not there, but I have it and I love you for it. The shrine of it is empty, but still it is its shrine, and sacred for me. You do not understand. You do not know the soul, the spirit that ought to be

yours, but I do. My love, my worship does not blind me. I know what you are, but love is stronger."

She raised her head from his breast, and looked at him with a lovely, softened face, tears in the exquisite eyes. One would think the soul was there.

"I don't know if I love you," she said, "I don't know if I can love, but I did not do that."

"No, no," he replied, holding her from him and looking into those angelic eyes, with a sort of fear.

"No, you *must* not love me. If you did I should give you to them. I could not do this—what I may have to do—if you loved me. Not for even that reward could I do it, but I can if there is none. Oh! There is nothing can buy it. If it were to be bought I dare not. I can only give. That is the sort of fool I am. Perhaps what I may have to do will give you the soul you have not. I don't know. Perhaps the beautiful soul is there all the time, and it may awaken. There!" he ended, pushing

her from him, "don't make it too sweet for me, too hard for me."

"I did not do it," she murmured, not comprehending. She tottered, and he caught her as she fell fainting, with a little dying whisper between her lovely lips:

"I did not—"

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## CHAPTER IX.

### The Flame is Lit.

**I**T was not till nearly nine o'clock that night that Arden was able to seek his own house. Upon him had fallen the arrangements made necessary by the tragedy he himself had witnessed. The body of the girl who had died was removed to her father's house, and the task of doing this and of breaking the news to the unhappy parents had been Arden's.

In the midst of all this wretched duty there sat behind him the black care of his own doubts. In spite of the apparent certainty of Gertrude's share in the tragedy, he could not bring himself to be sure that she was guilty, and he almost felt that it would have been a relief to his mind if he could have done so, and settled the matter one way or the other. It exasperated and enraged him, too, to think .

that it was the mere physical beauty of the girl, the innocent curve of the lips, the childlike purity of the lovely eyes, the tender caress of her gentle voice which blinded his sight. Had she been even as Miss Caverner, wide of mouth and spotted like the pard, with a voice that would justify the slaying of her, and to which the Salvation Army band was a blessed relief, he knew he would condemn her without hesitation. The perfect piece of flesh could do no wrong, and he almost wished she were as speckled as Miss Caverner.

It was with all his nerves overstrung and in a state of intense irritation, ready to quarrel with anyone or anything, merely to have something to fight with and relieve his feelings, that he arrived at his house. It did not add to his chances of rapid recovery that he had been without food or drink since his breakfast at eleven o'clock that morning. In the verandah of his house stood Guider, and a victim was ready to his hand. He arose and smote his friend, with the joy of battle in his heart. All he needed was a pretext, and

the innocent and sympathising Gurder unconsciously supplied one.

"I'm doosid sorry about all this, Arden," remarked Gurder, as he arrived, "Just thought I'd come over and keep company. The little beast!"

"Who the devil are you talking about, Gurder? I wish you'd measure your words. What right have you to damn her without knowing anything about it?"

"Damn *her*? What do you mean, Arden?"

"Well, who are you calling a little beast?"

"That young Vansittart, of course. Who else?"

"Oh! Then I wish you'd be a little more explicit when you go cursing around the country this way. Damn Vansittart!"

"Who's *her*, Arden. Why should you suppose I could say anything against that nice little girl?"

"Nice little girl! Well, of all the—Give me a peg. Here, Boy, whisky and soda."

"Much better have something to eat before you drink, Arden. It'll go to your head, as sure as eggs."

"Perhaps you'll be good enough to let me make a guess at what suits me. Damn it all! It's hard lines when a man can't eat and drink in his own house, without having impertinent remarks made upon it!"

Gurder made no reply. He saw that Arden was in a state of irritation and that to answer him would only make him worse.

"I'm going to bed, Gurder," remarked Arden. "I can't eat any dinner. You'd better go too."

"All right, we can discuss it in the morning."

"I don't exactly see what business it is of yours, Gurder, nor why I should discuss it with you. It's awful enough and sad enough—bad enough too, if you choose—without talking about it."

"It's bad enough, no doubt, but I don't see what there is so very awful in it. The young fool was vicious, and something must be done to stop this sort of thing, so I thought you might be glad of a friend to consult with. As you please. Anyhow, you don't seem fit to-night."

"What the devil are you talking about, Gurder? That poor girl is dead and you say

there's nothing to astonish you in it! Good gad!"

"Who?" asked the other, suddenly startled.

"Phyllis Milvain. Oh! Man, don't ask me. My God! it's bad enough without any more."

"I never heard, Arden; I've been out at work all day till just now, when I met Vansittart. What he said means hell for some one, if it's true. You must have something to eat, for this is a thing we must tackle at once, if we are to do any good. You can't talk it out till you're more fit. Dead! That little girl!"

He called the servants and ordered food, but Arden could only take a little soup. He drank a pretty stiff whisky and soda, however, which was about the worst thing he could have done. Gurder remonstrated, but to no purpose.

"Now, then, what's this?" asked Arden.

"Van—Hal—lo! Miss Merton!" Gurder rose, and Arden turned sharply round.

She was standing just within the doorway, and must have come in very silently. The lovely face was softly vignetted by the light — from a lamp in the verandah behind her, the features but faintly visible in the more distant .



and scattered illumination of the room itself. To both the men it appeared as if this was not the girl they knew. The exquisite mouth was drawn and suffering, and her beautiful innocent eyes were wide with the dilatation of pain and fear. But there was a look in her face which seemed to express the inner life of the girl, an image of herself, more candid, more true than either of them had ever known before. It startled Gurder, and brought him more into sympathy with her. On Arden, though he vaguely recognised it, the change produced little effect. She was always "She" to him, and he may have taken it for a mere presentment of his own ideal of her proceeding from himself. Besides, as a matter of strict fact, he was just a trifle drunk! A plenitude of whisky and soda and no food. The girl was silent and Gurder spoke.

"Miss Merton, can we do anything for you?"

She made no reply, but stood gazing at Arden. "The fat's in the fire," thought Gurder. "That blessed girl will make him do something assinine, and the Lord help him!"

"I have come" she said slowly, in her pathetic voice, "to ask for help. I cannot go back. I dare not, oh! I dare not. They are all around me."

"You can't stay here, Miss Merton," said Gurder, who was determined to put things on as matter-of-fact a basis as the conjunction of a lovely girl and a much too be-whiskied man, who was in love with her to boot, would allow him. He felt that the absence of either the whisky or the love was unattainable, but he might be able to do something with the girl. She would not look at him nor reply to him, but kept her eyes fixed on Arden.

"Gertrude," said Arden,—*"Shut up, Gurder—you shall not go back. You shall stay here."*

"Do you say that knowing everything?" she asked, her dilated eyes gazing anxiously at him. Arden started and his brain seemed to clear, for his expression became suddenly stern. He stood looking at her, and as he did so, her face hardened. She approached and put her hand on the table. Gurder noticed that it trembled. For one moment Arden hesitated.

"No!" cried Gurder, starting up. "When a man is a maniac his friends have something to say for him. Miss Merton, you have no right to ask him that. I don't judge anyone, but I know what has happened, and I know what is said." Arden did not interrupt his friend; he did not even look at him.

"He says you did it, Gertrude," said Arden quietly. "Is that true? You can trust both of us. Whatever you say here will be sacred to us. Tell us truly."

The girl answered nothing, but stood silently regarding him, with an expression which had become almost wistful. "The damned little—!" thought Gurder. "No idiot can stand that sort of thing! How well she knows him. I'd stake my life the woman is a murderess!"

Arden's face turned pale and rigid. He took his gaze off the girl and looked his friend full in the face. His lips worked with a little spasm for a moment, and an expression of affection and regret spread over his countenance.

"You are wrong," he said to his friend, gently, "*I did it.*"

"What a lie!" replied the other, contemptuously. Gertrude Merton said nothing. She had not for an instant taken her eyes off the man who, she knew, loved her.

"Listen," answered Arden, in the tone of a man who has made up his mind, and seen all the vision of the future, "Listen, Gurder. I tell you—and, by the Lord, I will take the consequences—I tell you I did it, and alone. You want to know why? That is why!" He put out his hands toward the girl he loved, as if he held them full of her, and drew them quickly back. "For love of her. She wanted a life and I have given her one."

"You fool!" exclaimed Gurder furiously. "It's your own you are giving her, and she isn't worth a curse."

"It was prussic acid. Here is the rest of it." He took the little salts-bottle from his pocket and removed the stopper. The scent of bitter almonds spread through the room.

"My God! Arden! You!" cried his friend, ~~—~~horrified at this bit of evidence, which was really none at all.

"It will all come out," said Arden calmly, as if he were resigned. Neither of them was thinking of the girl at the moment.

"Stop!" she cried, with a strange vibration in her voice. Both turned to her instantly. The beautiful face was quite transfigured. Over it, through it, around it shone a new light, the old flame of the eternal lamp, the new gleam of it in those exquisite eyes, in the trembling lips, in the delicate cheeks where it flushed with the little flush of gentle consciousness. She fell on her knees by the table and buried her face in her hands. Then she lifted it again, all in one gesture, as it were, and spoke. Her voice was quite low and gentle, but distinct.

"It was for me," she said. "Oh! forgive me that I should try you. I did not know, I was not sure, but I do know now. No, no, don't touch me." Arden had made a movement as if to take her in his arms. He understood. "It is not true that he—not true that I did it. I loved her; I would have died to save her. Oh! for weeks I have been different.

All this fear, all this sorrow, and the love and kindness—do you think I *could*? Where in the world could I have found such love, and now—now he would have given his life for me. I know I was wrong to try him, but—but it was to be sure that I could give him—that I myself—”

The girl broke down and sobbed bitterly, uncontrollably, as if the tears she could not shed before had found the heart that could make them fall. Arden sprang to her and knelt down beside her, saying nothing, but holding her clasped to him.

“No, no,” she cried, rising and pushing him away. “Not here. You must not touch me. I have come here to give you pain. Yet I tell you, now, I love you. No, don't touch me. Let me say it. Why should I not? You would have offered me your life—ah! that I should have given you that pain. I did not think you—Oh, yes, I did, I knew in my heart. And yet you believed I—You loved me knowing that—thinking you knew it. It could not have been me you loved.”

"Yes, it was You, the real You," answered Arden. "The You that was in my heart, the You that has come out to me now. You must forgive me—me too, that I didn't see—didn't know that it was there, that real You. See, Gurder, what do you believe now? Damn the world, Gurder!"

"By all manner of means," replied Gurder, who had really been a good deal touched by the scene, and convinced that the girl was not acting, but who caught glimpses of hysterics in the atmosphere, "the Universe, if it will do you any good. But I suppose Miss Merton was on her way to the Caverners', which is a little further on."

He wanted to throw cold water on the red-hot feelings of these two, and to give the girl a graceful retreat. But she walked through the douche and refused the open door.

"Don't make me go back!" she cried, in obvious terror. "I can't go back. Oh! the horror of them! They are all around me."

"Who?" asked Arden and Gurder simultaneously.

"I don't know. If I knew, if I only knew!"

"You can't stay here, you see, Miss Merton, and unless there is some serious difficulty, I think you will understand you ought to return to your own house. Better for all concerned," said Gurder, who made an oblique appeal to her feeling for Arden. That lunatic, he was afraid, would be fool enough to allow her to compromise herself and him, too. The appeal was successful.

"Yes, I will go back," she said. Then she blushed, and with a beautiful look at her lover, added, "I shall not be alone!"

"I think I'll go and get an umbrella," remarked Gurder; "it is probably raining." He saw what was likely to happen, for Arden had moved in her direction and she did not retreat.

By the time he returned the pair were not very close together, but to the experienced eye there were evidences that they had not been far apart all the time. The girl was rosy red, and there were tears in her eyes.

"We—I think it would be better if I took her to the Caverners'," said Arden.




"It would be better still if I did so," replied Gurder. The girl smiled. It was a confession of belief in her, and of friendship.

"Thank you, old man," answered Arden, with an assumption of proprietorship, which made the girl blush again. Turning to her, he said, "Neither shall I be alone."

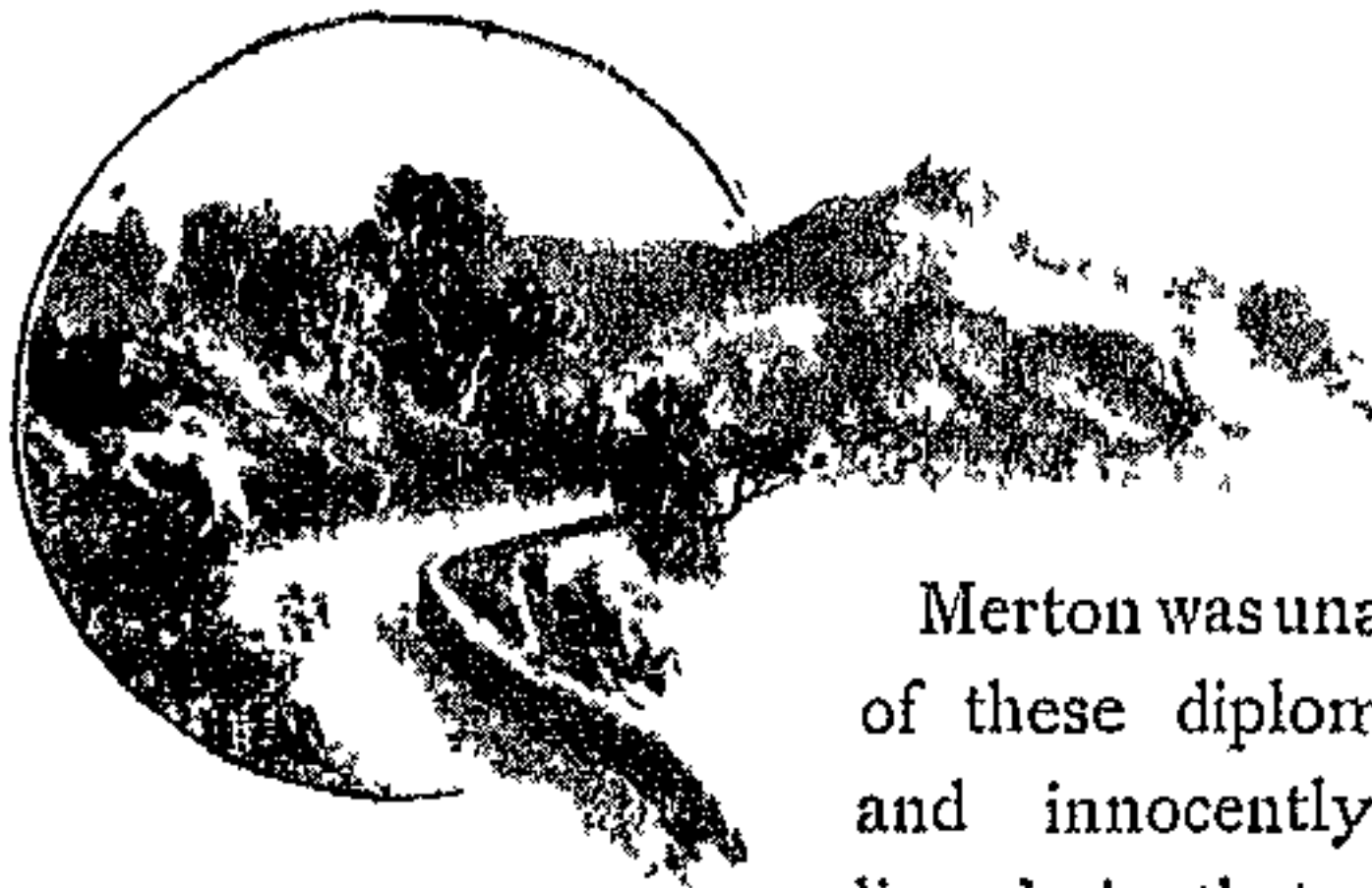
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## CHAPTER X.

### *An unwelcome Resurrection.*

N the evening of the day when Phyllis Milvain died, Dr. Merton was arriving at a little village about twenty miles distant from his home, utterly worn out by that kind of fatigue which sits on a man's shoulders and bruises his bones. He was wet to the soul, besides, and had been towing an impenitent horse by its fiddle head for a large part of the way. That exasperating beast was skilled in the art of simulating a hopeless and incurable lameness, and there was an obvious chuckle in the pendulous lower lip. As a matter of actual fact the brute was not more gone in every strainable sinew than it had always been, and was quite capable of doing its twenty miles with ten stone up, at a moderate pace. But the Indian screw is intelligent, and his ideas about distances beyond

the limits of his usual morning ride are economical. Wherefore this one went dead lame as soon as he found he was going outside cantonment boundaries.



Merton was unaware of these diplomacies and innocently believed in that screw

of his, so that he became its unwitting thrall. Five miles out it went dead lame in the 'off fore,' and at eight miles it made offers to sit down on a small boulder. Then Merton dismounted and dragged it along after him, the animal quite cheery and friendly, now that it had arranged matters on a sensible basis. It finished the play at a small stream, where it lay down and rolled, saddle and all. Then it arose and fled away sportively into the standing crops

of the lesser millet, and fed felonious feeds, leaving its deluded owner to trudge on alone, some eighteen miles from anywhere, and a failing light. It took away with it in the holsters a small provision of sandwiches and whisky, a deliberate larceny of which it was quite capable.

Merton could not go back with his object unaccomplished; he was compelled to proceed, for human lives, he was sure, depended on his success, and one of those lives might be his own. At last, wet, weary, famished and unwhiskied, he came within sight of the little village near which lay his destination. The scene was wild and desolate. Clouds had gathered—silent, sorrowful clouds, and they slid sadly overhead, grey and hopeless, to some vaporous sabbath of dead days. One last little ray of the regretful sun cast a tiny, jewelled gleam on the rounded bosom of a distant hill, but the shocked clouds hid it with cold, chaste fingers. Merton was not of the sort which is moved by the moods of the Earth. The wiles of a sunset colour, and the grace

of a mountain curve were lost upon him, but he, perhaps unconsciously, felt the depressing influences of the surroundings. There were tears in Earth and sky.

Away up a small valley into which he had just entered was a splash of white on the inky wall of rock, notched on the lower edge by a tiny dark square. As he traversed the little village without halting, listless people emerged from their houses and sat on idle heels to gaze cheaply at the unusual sight of an Englishman on foot. The headman had watched his approach from afar, and he and the village accountant had filled themselves with plausible fictions on the various subjects which amuse the inexpressible race of the "White People." It might be stinks or "the Goddess" (small-pox), or that little affair of the nose of Rama's wife, or some new "*takkus*," but they were ready for him whatever it might be. They saluted him as he passed by, but to their astonishment, he took no notice and pursued his way towards the "Nâg Déwul" up the valley, while the village elders discussed the phenomenon with considerable mistrust.

As Merton dragged his heavy feet up the stairlike path leading to the rock temple whither he was bound, it was nearly quite dark, and the white blaze which proclaimed its place to the people and beckoned them to salvation, had become almost invisible. The path, or rather stairway was nearly a quarter of a mile long and covered with loose boulders; for the reflective Hindu always prefers to walk round an obstruction, and to ask the Universe why some one does not remove it. Merton was cursing each individual stone with a separate and particular anathema, and hitting his weary toes against the edges of the steps he plodded doggedly on, sustained by the consciousness of an intense necessity for attaining his object. When at last he arrived at the top of the flight, he was scarcely able to stagger on to the platform which crowned it.

His first impulse was to sit down somewhere and rest, but it was necessary that he should hurry. The cloudy night had closed in, and he could now barely see the extent of the platform. Nowhere around was there any sign

of a living creature much less of men. From the ravine below came the casual hoot of an owl, faintly audible through the swish of a hard drizzle with which the wind was whipping him. He stood a moment to fetch his breath, and moved across the platform in search of something to turn up. On his right was the doorway of the temple, and he stopped before it, looking in. It was quite dark inside, and he passed it by. The platform was small, apparently not more than thirty feet from side to side, and at the further end there was a flight of narrow steps, leading down into an utter darkness. He was about to descend, when he felt himself suddenly seized from behind, bound, and before he could speak he was gagged and carried swiftly away. Not a word was spoken nor was any light visible. He was conscious that those who were carrying him were descending, probably by the steps where he had halted. Then it seemed as if they were ascending again, and they shortly stopped to blindfold him with a cloth, which did not smell of recent washing. They then continued the ascent, for

he could feel that his head was considerably higher than his heels. All that he could hear during this transit was the slipping of feet over a pavement, but he soon lost count of direction, after he had been turned round once or twice.

Merton was considering whether it was advisable to make any effort to struggle, when the men who were bearing him stopped again and set him on his feet. He tried desperately to move his arms, but he was hopelessly bound. Somebody chuckled, and it seemed to Merton that he recognised the sound of it and that the reminiscence was not pleasant, though he could not for the life of him recollect the identity of the chuckler. Then they unbound him, two men holding his arms the while, and removed the unwashed bandage from his eyes. The first thing he was conscious of was a bright light, and the next,—as soon as his eyes revived, was that a familiar face was before him, and that well-remembered eyes were regarding him, while the cluck of a once revered chuckle clattered in his ears with a



shock, which brought back his dazed senses in a gasp of unutterable astonishment!

A thin old man who sat in a comfortable easy chair, beside a table with a kerosene lamp upon it, and half a whisky and soda in a tumbler, regarding him with that amused chuckle, was—

*His Father!*

"My son John," remarked the old gentleman pleasantly, "we meet again. Joy, my son, has bereft you of speech for the moment, no doubt. It ain't every day that a venerable parent returns from the cold, cold grave. Change those clothes and have a peg."

"It is—"

"Me. Oh, certainly. I prefer not to take you to my heart, if you don't mind, because you are unpleasantly damp. Otherwise my open arms would be at your service. At my age one really mustn't risk a chill. Of course you want explanations. It would be just like you not to accept facts, and after all, I may claim to be one. You'll catch cold if you don't change your clothes, and you will be more valuable to me without a touch of the gay catarrh."

"Then you're not--"

"Dead. No, my son John, I am not dead, not yet—and I'm quite as much alive as you are. It was a mere temporary disappearance. Let us be joyful." The old man grinned and chuckled in a very lifelike and disagreeable fashion. "There's a place," he continued, "where you can change your clothes. Go and do so and I will answer your inevitable and foolish questions afterwards. I have a few to ask you, which you will find somewhat difficult to answer."

The son was scarcely in a condition to notice his surroundings. The whole episode was like a strange dream. When his father signed to a native attendant to take him away, he followed mechanically, too tired to think much about anything at all, or to reason concerning the sudden reappearance of the old man. He merely noticed that he was in a vault or cave of some sort, and that the place was made fairly comfortable, as if for ordinary residence. It was dry and apparently well ventilated, for he could feel casual slight wafts of fresh air. He was given a bath and dry clothes and

treated much as if he were in a friend's house. This reception, commonplace as it was, helped to pull him together, and a whisky and soda picked him up and cleared his head.

When he presently reappeared before his father the old gentleman chuckled again in his exasperating manner, which made the son feel himself to be unnaturally young and foolish, and that he was up for an examination which he couldn't pass.

"You look like a coster's donkey at a Shaftesbury Show, my son John," remarked the father, with a grin. "You had better eat something." He pointed to a couple of dishes on the table which had the air of a collation. His son made no reply, but with the hunger of youth and a day in the open air, proceeded to attack the excellent cold meat on the table before him, while the father entertained him with a few remarks.

"You took a long time doing your twenty-mile ride," he observed. "The police have got that old screw of yours, so you won't lose the five rupees he cost you. That will be a comfort to a youth of your careful disposition. You wonder

how I know that? There's a little museum of things you'll be wondering at shortly, with your mouth open. You always were a fool, John."

The food soon set John Merton up again, and he had collected his wits, which were not quite so scanty as his father seemed to believe. The fact is that the old man was doing all he could to humiliate his son and to retain the former habitual authority over him. He was also trying to discover how much of it was left. The whole of this dramatic scene was arranged to that end. The younger man, however, was a great deal less impressed than he allowed himself to appear to be. He was no fool, and he had had a very serious experience of his father's schemes, and a very serious purpose to serve. With an instinct of natural cunning, he allowed the old man to believe that the former subservience was still alive, and exhibited a sulkiness of demeanour most creditable to his powers of acting.

"Now," said the father, when his son had done with the victuals, "we must have a little talk on business. Have a cigar? These are not

bad." The son accepted one, and the soothing tobacco cleared his head and braced him.

"In the first place," he continued, "I must congratulate you on the way you have carried out my instructions, so far. Oh! yes, of course you will deny it, and you are right. I don't suppose you are quite such a fool as to admit it, even to me, though there is no one listening. That trick is too transparent for old hands like you and me. You have got rid of two of them —you and your lovely sister between you."

"Two!" exclaimed John Merton, with an involuntary start of what looked like horror.

"Excellent, my son!" That was quite dramatic. But I beg you will drop the stage just now. This is business. Your estimable sister removed the girl this afternoon, with the aid of the little bottle you were so careful as to leave with her."

"Phyllis—"

"Yes, that is her name. You made a mistake in getting it from the hospital, however. It was a false economy, for the fact is already well known, and you are in a parlous state,

my son John; so is your sister. There's a high-falutin' prig called Arden, who's di-velling about your sister, and he's got the bottle. Then there's a young ass named Vansittart, who knows he's got it. Altogether the prospects are not exactly blooming for either of you, and that means 'swing,' my son John; it don't mean any less."

"You old devil!" exclaimed the exasperated son.

"Very well. The devil takes care of his own and you can't do better than trust him, now you've gone so far. There's no one else can help such a lame dog as you over this stile. I thought your angel sister was pretty tough, in spite of her being a woman, but, by gad! I rather think she's off her head too, about this blathering Arden. She hardly knows it, but I know the signs better than she does herself. I wasn't born the day before yesterday, before breakfast, you bet, my son John."

"What do you want me to do?" asked the son, who saw the dangerous dilemma he had got into. "What are you telling me all this

for? You say you can pull me out of the coil, which I suppose you have screwed me into. I don't think you're the sort to do it for nothing, though I *am* your son. You've not been much of a father to me, so the less we allude to the relationship the better."

"You are singularly astute, for you, my son—I only call you by that endearing title for convenience—and as you surmise I *do* ask a little service from you, I will put it plainly. You have only carried out part of my dying instructions to you and your sister. All I want is that you should complete them. There are still two items in the way of your riches. For myself, all I demand is, as I told you, to be revenged on my bitter enemy, curse him!" A spasm of savage ferocity passed over the old man's face as he said this. "Then I shall die happy. You needn't snigger. It is true that I have died once, or rather that you were fool enough to jump to that happy conclusion, and to believe your beloved father had left you a sorrowing orphan. Next time I retire to heaven, and to a justly earned repose, it will be a

genuine arrangement. But never mind that. What you have to do is this. The other two items will shortly fall ill. You will be called in professionally. They must not recover. You see, I modify the conditions, and it may quicken your sensibilities a bit if I tell you that it depends on how you carry out my orders whether you shall be hanged or not, and you may include your sister in the invoice."


John Merton sat still, furious, sickened, clenching his jaws together, with a full understanding of his impotence. Behind it was a deep and horrified grief for the death of the girl he liked, if he did not love her, his sister's gentle little friend. The whole infernal plot was so complete, and there was that ghastly old man sitting sneering at him, with his life in his pitiless old hand.

With a quick movement he clutched the bottle at his elbow, and the next moment he found himself lying on his back on the floor quite securely bound.



## CHAPTER XI.

### A Madding Crowd.

 SLIGHT miscalculation, my son John!" sneered the old man. "Your affectionate father is always ready for contingencies. I conclude you reject my offers?"

His son made no reply. At any rate this man was his father and would not do him mortal harm.

"Very well," continued the father. "You can be sulky, if you choose, but I give you a last chance. I educated you for a purpose and you agreed to carry it out. It's a mere matter of business. So much money spent upon you, so much to be repaid to me. I can let you go now, but as sure as you return to that place you will swing. I—I who speak to you have laid the train. A single touch from me will blow you up, you and your sister. You

are just as much in my power anywhere else as you are lying there like a log. Answer me, you ass."

John Merton made no sign. He was not much alarmed. The familiar face of the old man was a sort of company, and he did not really believe in his threats. The force of them he could fully appreciate, but he was tolerably sure they would not be put into action. For one thing it was obvious that, once he was free, there were many ways of escape from the dilemma into which he had been forced, and his father guessed what was in his mind.

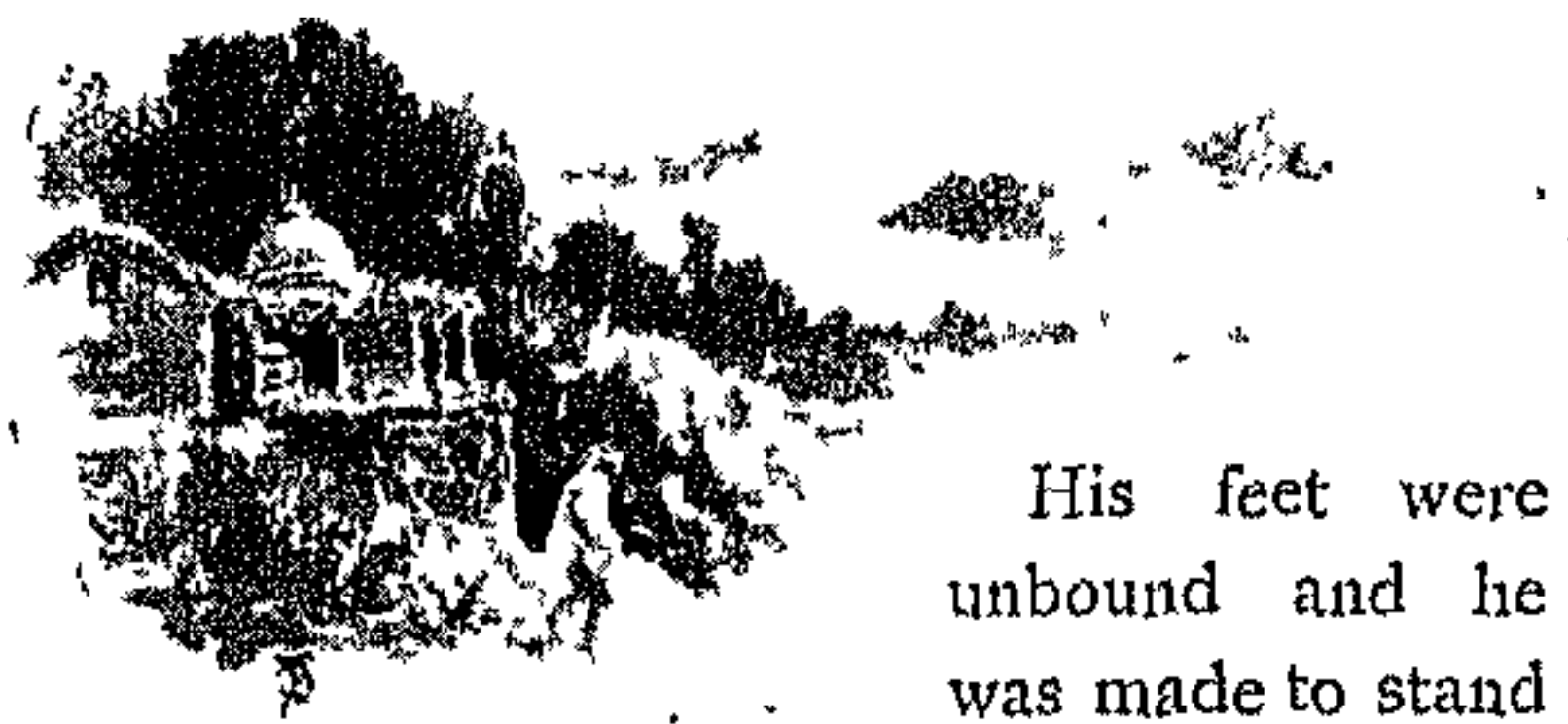
"You think I can't force you to keep to your agreement, if you make one, and that if you don't agree and I let you go, you can evade me. But you make a ghastly mistake, my son John, if you think that! Just reflect a bit, if you are capable of it. How about the removal of those two items—have you never thought of what might have been your own fate? Heart disease? My medical friend, you know it was not that, and you don't know

what it was. At the least sign of disobedience to my orders there would be possibilities. You're only lying on your back there, now, because I want to make use of you. I am your father and therefore I am to be fool enough to put my neck in your noose? I think not. If you don't agree, and what is more, don't do what I tell you, you will go by a perfectly legal and formal road to hell. That doesn't happen to suit my arrangements, and now that I have got you here by your own action, you shall stay here. You shall see something picturesque, I promise you. Freedom, safety and riches, or—? One more chance, my son John. Yes or no?"

"No!" replied John Merton, and it seemed to himself that it was not he that spoke. The voice of another came from his lips, almost in spite of himself. Behind all his thoughts lay the pain and grief of that girl's death, of which he had only just heard.

"The feet of the young men who shall carry you out are at the door," answered his father, with a sign to the natives who had seized and bound him.

In spite of the old man's menaces, he was not much afraid of any serious event. He fully expected that he would be kept in confinement, but for how long he could not guess. With the knowledge of his father's intentions this was to him a sufficient calamity, but there would be always the possibility of escape, and he knew that he would be sought for. Though he had told no one of his destination, his horse would certainly be found, and he himself had been seen to pass through several villages. If only on account of the suspicions concerning him they would search.



His feet were unbound and he was made to stand upright. This time he was not blindfolded, which suggested to him

that they didn't care if he saw his route. The men who guarded him were dressed in ordinary Maratha costume, but the leader of them was a Brahmin. The whole of this adventure from the first had a mediæval air about it, and the rock-cut passages along which he was now led, were suggestive of the Donjon Keep and thumbscrews, with a man-at-arms in iron-plating at the door. In reality, given the circumstances, the thing was natural enough. There was nothing strange in the old man being in hiding, nor in his making himself as comfortable as he could under the conditions. As for the place itself, there are many rock temples in the country, with inner rooms and passages where, no doubt, many a man hid himself in the old days when the country was harried by Pindarries. Neither, after all, was the untimely resurrection of that old man so very astonishing, considering that he had admittedly spent the greater part of his life in the shadiest places. It was only one more swindle.

They marched him along narrow passages, in the manner of a prisoner led to execution,

and it would have been still more solemn if the light carried by the Brahmin, had not been one of those kerosene lamps, which have nothing dramatic about them and don't even burn straight. The Brahmin wore white stockings of the female sex, and one of them had a hole in it, which made it less impressive. At length the procession halted and the lamp was extinguished. A few more steps and Meiton was released and his hands unbound. He saw that he stood in a large open space or vault, of which he could not gauge the limits.

A small brass lamp, one of the little beaked lamps for oil and wick, shed a feeble light on the surroundings, hanging from the invisible roof by a chain. The Virgins had just such others at the Wedding Feast, and the foolish Oriental has been using them ever since. Beyond its tiny radiance lay an impenetrable gloom, and from out it shone the dull glisten of a marble shrine, directly in front of him. He could see, carved upon it, the erect figure of a snake with spreading hood. Not a sound

was audible, and it seemed that those who had escorted him thither disappeared at once into the darkness. As he stood there, in an attitude of doubt and irresolution, an uneasy feeling seized him that he was being watched, but at first he could not tell whence. Then there grew from out the blackness the shape of a man, sitting motionless between him and the marble shrine. He was dressed in the garb of a Brahmin priest, and the soft, white clothes and cream-coloured complexion were almost lost against the grey of the marble behind him. But Merton was instantly startled and attracted by the eyes of the man. His gaze became rapt by them, he could look nowhere but at those wonderful eyes; cold, dull orbs with a vicious glitter in them. They were of a clammy brightness, and had a strange, almost horrible fascination, which held him suddenly motionless, tranced.

Silently the man gazed at him, with a dull stare which seemed to see through him into his very will. Merton tried to look round for a way of escape, but the ghastly attraction of that

man's gaze held him fast to his place, and his feet became as lead. He could not even speak, and though he was in full possession of his senses, yet he could feel that they were, in some sort, paralysed, while at the same time there did not seem to be anything unnatural or even unusual in this helplessness. It was a sort of drowsiness of the will alone, a rapid loss of volition. His previous condition of enforced subordination to the will of others, had probably contributed to the ease with which this man had been able to assume a power over his will, so sudden and so complete.

Suddenly, from out the gloom, there sounded the sonorous clang of a bell, echoing and vibrating through the invisible spaces around him. The old priest began to sway himself gently from side to side. Merton could see all the man did, though he was unable to remove his gaze from those eyes. His perceptions were acute, even exalted, his sight and hearing more strained than usual. Presently he caught the faint gleam of a shining object approaching across the floor, with a sinuous motion, then another and another,



and he became aware that they were snakes! From all sides they came, gliding silently, but for the little whisper of their bodies on the stone.

Soon the floor of the temple was alive with the crawling reptiles, hissing with little spits, twisting and twining in and out among one another. From all sides they seemed to gather out of the patulous gloom, far and around, the dull polish of their bodies faintly flashing, like newly-cut lead. The old man held in his hands one of those gourdlike instruments which snake-charmers use, and he began to play it, its shrill tones amplified and mellowed among the aisled shades, drawn away into invisible distances. The snakes reared themselves up before him as if in adoration, with spreading hoods, swaying to the rhythm of the horrid measure, in time to the movements of his body. Some of them crawled over him, almost as if they loved him, with clammy caresses and kisses of the forked, black tongues; among them two great Hamadryads, most deadly of serpents, which carry "poison under their tongues."

The monotonous lilt of the instrument hastened faster and faster, and to it the swaying of the old man's body marked a quicker measure. The great yellow Hamadryads, the writhing, twisting mass of black cobras twined and flashed in that dance of an awful, frenzied Sabbath. Still the horrid, cold, vicious eyes of the priest never lost hold of his victim. Merton, with a full consciousness of his situation, felt his individuality had gone from him. All the time he retained an entire sense of danger, and understood, now, the reason of his enforced presence in that place. He foresaw what was to happen, yet he felt no fear, and his brain was singularly lucid. Will and the emotions seemed to be absent, but the power of reason remained.

Slowly, a strange feeling of recklessness took possession of him, a humorous sense of the situation, in which there was certainly no humour, like the gaiety of a drunken man. He began, with a mocking consciousness, to parody the movements of the priest, keeping time to the swaying of his body. Gradually

he bent himself lower, darting out his tongue in grotesque but conscious travesty of the snakes. Lower still, as the measure grew quicker, with bent knees and hands outstretched; faster and faster, in time to the strident music, with a sinuous imitation of the serpents. Soon he must throw himself on the floor and writhe to the feet of that man with the fascinating eyes, reckless, because of the fierce desire to be with him, mad with an uncontrollable envy of that wild, lilting dance of death. To him the limitless gloom seemed filled with radiance, sparkling with a jewelled glitter. Everywhere there appeared to be snakes, above, around, on every side, and Merton was conscious of an idea that he must have got *delirium tremens*, a comic notion that amused him. He knew that in another moment he could not choose but join them. He was bent low, swaying from side to side, almost touching the ground, his hands outspread in the attitude of a swimmer preparing to dive.

On a sudden there was a flicker of the little lamp above him, and the priest glanced at it

quickly, with a gesture of alarm. In a flash the spell was at an end, and Merton sprang erect; throwing up his arms in the joy of release, and the return of his identity! As he threw his hand upward and backward, there was a sound of the clang of a bell, and looking round, he perceived that there was one swinging from a chain close to his shoulder. Instantly the vivid certainty of salvation filled his senses. He clutched the chain at almost the same moment he struck it, and swung himself off the ground. One of the snakes happened to be passing over his foot at the time, and was flung almost on to the priest.

Hand over hand with the strength of hope he drew himself up the chain. He had no fear of its breaking,—he did not think of that. The bell clanged with a deep sonorous note as it was agitated by his efforts. At the sound of it the snakes appeared to become frantic. Probably the vibrations reached them through the rocky walls and floor, and it seemed as if they knew the signal. Intent only on escape, Merton soon touched the hook from which

the chain depended. His heart sank as he involuntarily glanced below at the awful danger he had escaped. It would not be possible to hold on for long to the chain with his hands, and if he could get no further, he must soon fall. He raised himself a little, and felt above the hook, with one hand. To his intense joy it was fastened into a wooden beam, and he was able to climb on to it, and was safe!

All this passed in but a few seconds, and, as he seated himself astride the beam, he looked down at the scene below. The little lamp was flickering and he could barely see the face of the priest, but what he was able to see was awful. In the man's eyes was a ghastly vision of death, in his face a hopeless fear. The lamp had flared for a moment, and the scene was vivid with that life that knew its end had come. The priest had ceased to blow the little instrument, but he was still clutching it between his hands mechanically, convulsively, as if there were some chance salvation in it. His cheeks were distended in the half-arrested action of blowing the instrument, a grotesque contrast

with the tense muscles and swollen veins of his forehead and temples. On all sides the writhing snakes were closing round the man, who knew his doom. The only sounds were the phthysical spitting of the reptiles, and the brushing of their bodies on the floor. The shoulders of the priest were heaving now and then, with a panting, convulsive whisper of a sob, for the inevitable end that was so near. •Over his shoulder peered the yellow hood of a Hamadryad, its forked tongue almost caressing his cheek, with rapid flashes. Then the light went out.

It rose again, and flared once more, and Merton saw from above, the great snake strike him on the neck. A little gasp, and the old priest fell forward in a pale heap, with hands outstretched. From the lamp a piece of burning wick dropped to the floor, carelessly, contemptuously, as a man in the street knocks the ashes out of his pipe and moves on when the show is over. It lay there smouldering, with an acrid odour of impure oil smoke.

For the moment Merton had but one thought.


Everything was lost in a sudden revelation which the manner of that man's death had brought him. The mystery of the past few weeks was all at once as plain to him as if it had been printed. The devilish cunning of that old man who was his father, his obvious certainty that no detection was possible, the ingenious methods he had employed, were revealed instantly to the son by the mode of that man's death. The whole chain of events and their explanation was visible to the trained intelligence of the physician, not link by link, but as a revelation. For a few moments his mind dwelt on this matter, and then he turned his full attention to a way of escape.

He could still hear the snakes below, and that way lay death. But from behind his back came a little breath of wind, as if on a level with his face. There must be some opening in that direction, and he slid himself along by his hands as fast as he could.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### The Escape.

HE wooden beam was narrow, and the edges cut his limbs. In the cave there could be no tempering weather to wear away and round off their sharpness. All around him was the soft darkness, like a black wool. It lay upon his faculties and deadened and bewildered them. All sense of position was lost in it. There was no front nor back to the world, there were no points of the compass. The air was black and filled with death. But the desire for escape broke through the gloom, urging him to effort, in what direction he scarcely knew. All he felt was that he must go forward. Suddenly a gentle hand touched him on the head, and a tiny fan-blast of air waved over his face. His heart almost stood still for the moment, and he lay along the beam, clasping it for safety from he knew not what.



Again, that soft touch fell upon him, and he guessed what it was. Nothing but the wing of a wandering bat. The incident brought him back to the commonplace, and his spirits rose. There ensued a kind of reaction. He found himself saying mentally, with an incongruous invasion of the imbecile—"Where was Moses when the candle went out?"—and the answer—"In the dark." It was only darkness after all!

He began to lift himself along, in the attitude of a boy playing leap-frog. His object was to discover if there were any opening at the end of the beam. There was little or no dust on top of it, and this could not be the case if no one ever mounted upon it. Feeling the top with his hands, it seemed as if the centre was a little worn away—it was slightly hollow. This discovery still further raised his hopes.

He had progressed a short distance, when he stopped suddenly. He heard the sound of voices. Looking in the direction of it, the gloom seemed to lighten, a shaded pillar of light appeared, alone in space, and disappeared

instantly. It was the flash of a lamp on one of the rough stone columns of the temple. Again he saw flashes of the light, higher than himself, as it danced across the rugged points of the roof. Lying along the beam he silently watched the approaching light. With a sudden brilliance it flashed round a corner of the rock. It was nothing but a common kerosene hurricane-lamp, but, after the heavy gloom, it dazzled his eyes like the sun. Upon the man who was carrying it and on his two companions, Brahmins all of them—the low-swinging lamp produced an effect of footlights, curiously theatrical. There was not a single snake in the place. Every one of them had disappeared!

The men were coming straight to the shrine, and Merton could plainly see the body of the dead priest lying before it, prostrated, with the hands thrown in front of it. It was kneeling in the attitude of a man in abject adoration, face to the ground. As the lamp came nearer, rising and falling with the steps of the bearer, the shadows cast by the body began to dance, giving it the effect of a grotesque movement,

a convulsive swaying, almost as if in retrospective mockery of the living posturing of the man. When the three men reached the body, they set the lamp on the ground and two of them lifted it up. There was a discussion among them, and then all three looked towards the place where the oil-lamp was swinging from its chain. Merton crouched closer to the beam, with instinctive caution. The part of the beam on which he lay was not far from the chain and his feet were towards it. After a few more words one of the men moved away to the left, as if by the directions of the other two. Merton could not understand what they said, for they spoke in Marathi. The two others waited in silence, gazing toward the chain, Merton watching them anxiously.

Suddenly he felt a slight vibration of the beam. One of the men called out, and an answer came from in front of Merton. He turned his head, and in the dim reflected light thrown back from the roof, he saw a man approaching him along the beam. Evidently the man did not see him. The man walked

confidently as if he were holding on to something and did not fear for his footing. In a few steps he would be on to Merton's body. Merton watched the feet, or rather heard them coming nearer and nearer. He let go his hold with one hand and raised it. The man placed his foot down just in front of his face. Merton seized it by the ankle, and the man fell with a shriek, not to the ground, as Merton expected, but off the beam. He had grasped something with his hands, and hung swinging alongside the beam, kicking out at it and trying to regain his footing in a ludicrous fashion. In his struggles he hit Merton on the head with his foot, and to save his equilibrium, Merton clutched at it as the nearest thing which came to his grasp. He nearly succeeded in regaining his position, when the rope to which the man was clinging gave way, and he fell. Merton hung on for a second and then fell on top of him. The man gave a groan, and lay there, but Merton, whose fall had been soft, rose at once. The other two men had stood quite still, in utter astonishment, for the

incident had happened in a moment, and all they had seen was the sudden appearance of two bodies from above.

Merton saw that, as he did not know the way out of the temple, his only chance was to get hold of the light, and he rushed for it. The man who held it bolted as fast as his legs could carry him, without thought for the other. He evidently imagined that a spirit of some sort had descended from above. What became of the other he did not appear to care. After the man with the light flew Merton, and the Brahmin was a fast sprinter. Round corners, through passages fled the man, always holding on to the lamp. Merton's fear was that he might drop it in his fright, and if he did so there would be little chance of finding his way out of the place. He kept just behind the man, going as noiselessly as he could. Luckily the Brahmin did not look back. After a chase which may have lasted a couple of minutes, but which seemed an hour to Merton, they emerged into an open space, and he felt a wave of the cold, outer air. Then he saw

the stars. He put on a spurt and caught up the man. With a blow he knocked him head over heels, and there was the sound of a loud groan, which did not come from the Brahmin. Instantly Merton was seized, and he hit out in despair. It was useless, for, as he saw, he was surrounded by men. One of them was knocked over, and there were two on the ground already, of whom one had got the other by the throat.

"It's a Sahib!" cried a voice in Hindustani, as he was held by both arms.

"The police!" ejaculated Merton, catching sight of the uniforms for the first time, "Thank God!"

"You may well do that, Sir," replied a young Englishman, the Police Inspector in charge of the party. "But don't speak. We have to get the lot." He spoke in a whisper, "If you're fit enough to come with us, Sir, you might be of some use. The man we want most is an Englishman, and no doubt you saw him. It'll be a swinging matter for him, if we get him, and there's a reward."

"A swinging matter!" thought Merton, "and the man my own father!"

"No, I won't go," he replied.

"As you please, Sir," answered the Inspector, with a touch of contempt in his tone. He thought Merton was afraid. "I must ask you to stay here till we are through with it. I'll leave a couple of my men with you. It won't do for anyone to be seen leaving this place. Take my hat, it's chilly."

"I don't want any men," answered Merton, "but I should be glad of a drink, if you have any. I've had a pretty ragged time of it."

The Inspector produced a small spirit-flask and handed it to him. Merton took a nip of the excellent whisky it contained, and felt better.

"I think I'll leave two or three of my men here," he said, "to act as a stop. The place is so full of bolt-holes that we can't be sure where they may break. I was told you might be here, Sir."

He had scarcely finished the sentence when a couple of men appeared at the entrance

through which Merton had escaped. The police were upon them at once, and there was a sharp struggle. One of them, before the police could prevent him, opened his mouth and yelled, beating his hand against his lips to produce the intermittent call which is the Eastern cry of danger. It was sufficient to alarm the whole country side, and the Inspector gave the word of command to his men, who dashed through the entrance. Excited by the action, Merton followed. They went at speed along the passage, meeting no one at first; the Inspector holding a lantern.

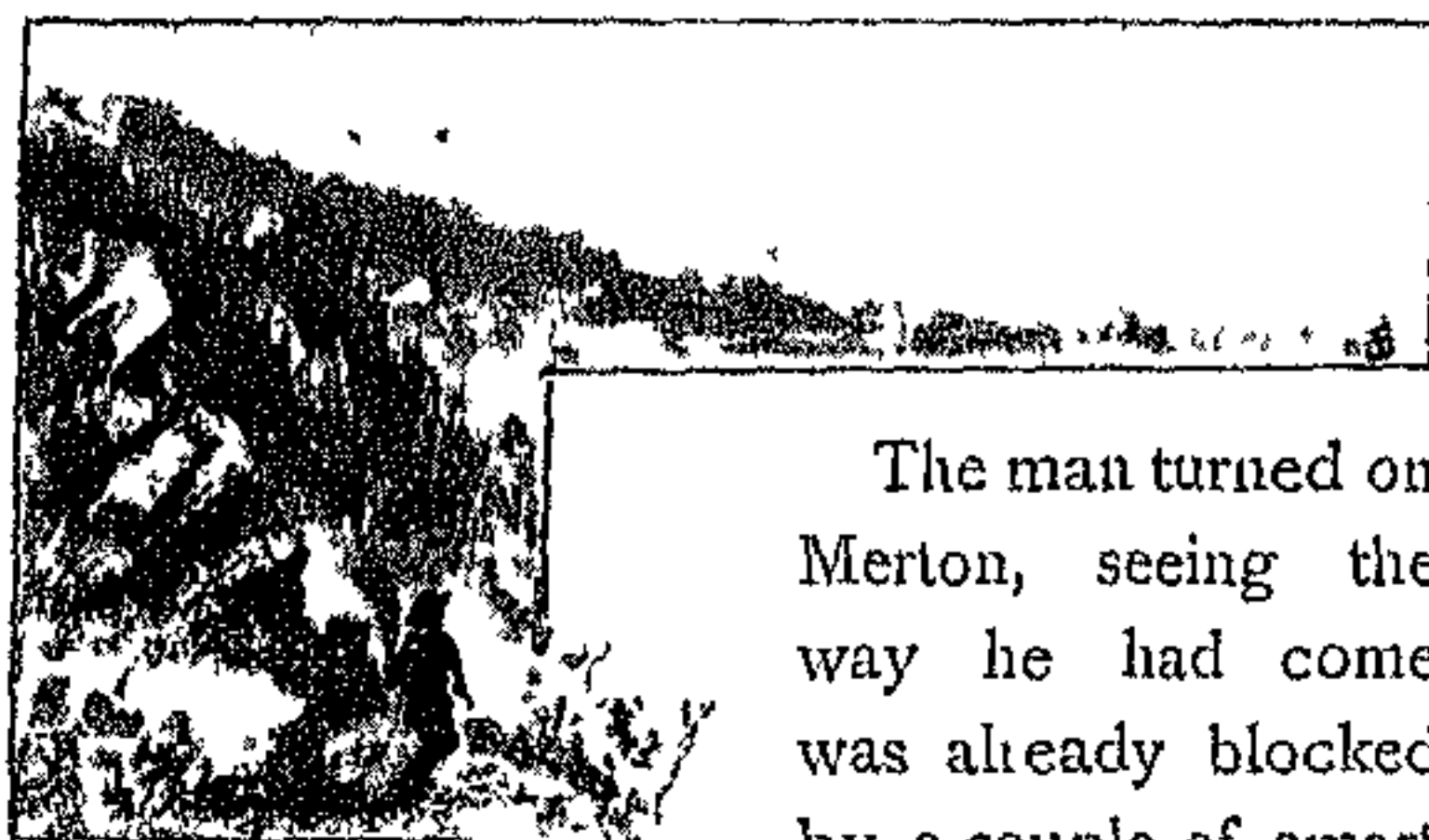
"Left hand!" shouted the Inspector, as they came to a part where the ways forked. The passage suddenly narrowed and the leading man fell headlong. Over him fell another. A large block of stone had been placed in the path. This incident caused a short delay, and the Inspector was fuming.

"Here, let me get ahead," he cried. The men fell back and let him, and Merton after him, to the front. Again they pushed on, and as they arrived at a broad open space, a man



in European costume bolted into it from another passage.

"That's him!" cried the Inspector, and moved so as to cut him off from the exit on the other side.



The man turned on Merton, seeing the way he had come was already blocked by a couple of smart

policemen. He flew at Merton, without a word. Sure that it was his father who had attacked him, Merton was confused, and reluctant to hit out. Not so the other. With a heavy stick he held in his right hand he hit Merton full on the head, and felled him straight.

"That's good!" muttered the Inspector, and knocked the man head over heels, "but I go one better. Pick him up."

Luckily for Merton he had a hat on his head. Otherwise it would have been all up with him. As it was he was only a good deal dazed. He rose, and the Inspector asked him if he was much hurt, while the man was secured.

"It is not a Sahib!" exclaimed one of the men who held the prisoner.

"Damnation!" cried the Inspector, examining him. "The cunning devil has got off!"

Merton felt strangely relieved, for the moment. Then he recollected that the old man was probably free to work some final villany, which he would be tolerably sure to do for his own safety. He moved toward the man, and his foot caught in a small bundle. Stooping down he picked it up. "What's this?"

The Inspector told him to put it in his pocket and to come on.

"We may fetch him yet," he said, and turned his lantern round the open space as if looking for something. "Ha! This is the door."

Sculptured on the rock was the sign of the snake. There were three of them forming three sides of a rectangular figure. The Inspector

consulted a scrap of paper he held, and going to the wall pressed one of the eyes of the figure. A door in the wall, the lines of which were covered by the figures of the snakes, opened outwards, and a ray of light poured from the aperture. There was a report of a fire-arm and the crash of a bullet against the wall across the passage. In answer the Inspector fired from his revolver, and the rattle of a weapon on the stone floor of the inner room told that the assailant had fallen.

"Two fingers powder and one finger lead to anyone who resists," cried the Inspector. Merton pushed forward beside him.

Through the hanging smoke he could see three men, Hindustanis of the fighting class, standing with muskets in their hands. When they saw the face of another Englishman, they laid down their weapons without a word, sullenly.

The two Englishmen entered the room together. Suddenly one of the Hindustanis dashed at Merton, knife in hand, and drove it into his shoulder. Merton had only just time par-

tially to ward off the blow, and to save himself from a stab in a vital place. His assailant plunged through the doorway—he was evidently unaware of the force of men outside—and was secured there. The others made a slight movement, as if to follow suit, but caught sight of the police and stood still. The Inspector covered them with his revolver.

"The first man who moves will fall," he cried, and called to his Jemadar and four of the men to come in. He dared not take his eyes off the enemy to attend to Merton, who had been knocked down, but had risen and was holding a handkerchief to the wound. The men were secured, offering no resistance, as soon as they recognised they were overmatched.

"Are you bad, Sir?" asked the Inspector, turning to Merton.

"Not much," he replied, "only a flesh wound, but I've lost a good deal of blood."

Under Merton's directions the Inspector bandaged the wound as well as could be done, and seated him in a chair. The room was the same in which Merton had met his father.

"Have you got that packet, Sir?" asked the Inspector. "I had better look into it at once. There may be some important information in it, and my instructions were to read any papers I might find. Mr. Trunchinson told me to do so."

"They have fallen out of my pocket," said, Merton, rather feebly and indifferently.

They were found on the floor, and the Inspector opened the packet and began to read the paper.

"I think these concern you, Sir," he said, after a rapid search, "If you are strong enough, I think you had better read them."

Merton took them listlessly and read. His attention soon became fixed.

"Good God!" he cried, starting up. "Then he is not—" He fell back into the chair in a dead faint.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### His own Children I

**T**HE next morning Arden went to the Caverners' with Gurder, and took the girl away, after many protests from her hosts. He had heard that Trunchinson, the Superintendent of police, was going there to make enquiries, acting, very unwillingly, on the persistent assertions of Vansittart. Arden had thought it best to take Gertrude there, for no one but herself could explain the circumstances of the case. It was a most unpleasant duty, but it was better to get it over at once, than to have the dread of it hanging over her head. He had consulted with Gurder about it, and Gurder was of the same opinion.

When the three arrived at the house, they saw that there were already several persons in the verandah, two or three at least. Trunchinson's burly figure was easily recognised,

and the other seemed to be Colonel Milvain and Vansittart. As they ascended the steps, the girl caught hold of Arden's arm.

"They don't believe it?" she whispered, in a trembling alarm. "Not Colonel Milvain, surely."

"Of course not, dear one!" replied he. "The Colonel has only come to see you, you may be sure. Don't fear."

"I'm not afraid," she answered, "not now," and glanced at him with a look which was all to him.

Colonel Milvain saw them coming and turned to meet them. It relieved her instantly to see the greeting on his face. Trunchinson, too, bowed in a friendly manner. Only Vansittart bent his head unwillingly, with a scowl.

"I have come here," said the Colonel to Gertrude, "to bring you over to us. It is your proper place, my child. They would have wished it, too."

"No, they wouldn't!" shouted Vansittart. "He knew—I'm sure he was told—but he wouldn't believe. He was too gone on that—"

that girl there, and she killed him—killed him! I tell you." The young man was in a perfect frenzy.

"That's the end of him, if the Colonel cares to lift that!" remarked Gurder to Arden, *sotto voce*. "Poor young ass!" But the Colonel kindly made as if he didn't hear.

"Shut up, you young fool!" said Trunchinson.

"I don't care a damn! I'm come to show up that—"

"Shut up! I tell you," continued Trunchinson angrily. "Leave it to me. This is going to be a police case and I take command here, now. The affair had better be finished at once. Arden is a magistrate," he added to Vansittart, "and he can take down on oath whatever you have to say. I suppose you know the penalty for bringing a false charge? If you don't prove it up to the hilt you run your chances."

"I accuse Arden too, as *particeps criminis*."

"Let me down easy, Vansittart," remarked Arden. Argument was useless.

"I'm not speaking to you. If Trunchinson intends to make a police case of it, why, that's



exactly what I want. He can take down, himself, what I've got to say. Ask her what her name is."

"Wait a bit," said Trunchinson, as a policeman delivered a packet of papers into his hands, in a large official envelope. "Just let me look at this; it's marked urgent." Trunchinson tore open the packet, and glanced through it rapidly.

"Where's the Inspector?" he asked of the man who had brought it.

"He is sitting there," replied the man.

"Ah! He's a smart man," said Trunchinson, "and he's done a smart piece of work." Then he shifted his stick—a heavy one, which he was in the habit of carrying for the benefit of the village dogs—from under his arm, where he had slipped it while reading the letter, to his right hand, the loaded handle downwards.

"What is it, butler? Has my brother come back?" asked Gertrude of the old servant, who appeared just then with a tray, on which was a cool-looking, sparkling whisky and soda. The silent old man did not answer, probably

thinking the tray sufficiently expressive. He approached the Colonel.

"No, thank you," said he, shaking his head; and the servant was about to pass him, as if to offer it to some other of those present, when Trunchinson leant forward, and raising the stick he held in his hand, brought it down with a powerful blow.

The tray fell with a glittering crash on the floor, and the servant staggered back against the wall, his right arm hanging useless by his side, broken above the elbow. The others stood still, not sure what had happened, staring at the old man in puzzled silence.

"This is the man," said Trunchinson, seizing the wrist of the broken arm and apparently taking something from the hand. "His sting is drawn. I beg your pardon, Miss Merton, but it had to be done."

Gertrude was gazing at the old servant, on whose face there was a stolid look of sullen pain. Unable to comprehend, she turned, with an expression of rather bewildered annoyance, to Trunchinson.

"What's this for? Who is he?" asked the Colonel somewhat angrily, with an Englishman's dislike to a scene, which he could not understand.

Trunchinson blew his whistle, and two policemen in plain clothes ran up.

"Take charge of him," he said in Hindustani. "One is enough. The other go to the hospital and bring the Apothecary. His arm is broken. There is no necessity to hold him. Stand near." Then turning to the Colonel, he said, "I had notice of this yesterday, but I am only sure now. Miss Merton, it would be better if you did not hear what I have to say just now, so suddenly. You shall know all about it later on. It is only men who should hear these things."

"Very well," replied she, leaving the verandah, with a glance at Arden. When she had left Trunchinson continued. The old servant made no sign, though he must have been suffering severe pain.

"Vansittart has come here to expose certain persons. There will be no necessity for him to do so. Will you tell us as briefly as you can,

Colonel, the history of those two whom we knew? Trust me that I don't ask unnecessarily."

The Colonel cleared his throat and drew himself up. A spasm of pain flashed over his face.

"I should like to know a little more, Trunchinson," he said.

"My reasons are good. You shall know them fully presently."

"Who is this man?" asked the Colonel, pointing to the old servant.

"Never mind him for the present, please, Colonel. We shall have to deal with him otherwise than here. You will fully understand my object later on. I assure you I am asking you only what is essential, and that I wouldn't do it if I could help it. I can't put it any stronger."

"George and Phyllis—George and Phyllis," began the Colonel, looking out into the road. Then he turned round and faced Trunchinson and seemed to pull himself together. "They were not my children."

Vansittart started.

"They were not my own children. It is

years ago. Their name was the same—Milvain, but they were the children of a cousin of mine. Will you remove that servant, Trunchinson? He may be some one you have to do with, but I object to his presence."

"Not just yet, if you please, Colonel. I am anxious to hear what you are so good as to tell us, before I leave with the man. I must take him down myself."

"Well, send him out of the verandah."

"You see I must keep him under my eye, and it is not of much importance, if you don't mind my saying so. Please go on."

"That is all. The rest is a family matter. He—my cousin—was a thorough bad lot. Robbed the till, as they say nowadays, and came to grief. I succeeded to his father's money, for the old man cut him off when he heard. But it was all settled on the children, George and Phyllis. They became mine, in fact. When we lost our own two, drowned crossing a river on the march, we were given these. We sought out their mother as soon as we heard of their father's death in prison, and she died in my

wife's arms. No, by the way, it was after his release from prison that he died. No one knew till you seemed to have inkling of it that these two were not our own, and I needn't say—needn't say that we loved them as—Will you remove that old man? Why should you keep the old scoundrel here? I don't understand."

"You shall see."

With a rapid gesture, Trunchinson plucked at the long white beard of the old servant, which had been responsible for so much of his incontestable respectability. It came off with a jerk, the invisible wires that passed over his ears causing them to flap in a manner that was grotesque. At the same time he pulled down the man's white calico coat at the throat, and to the astonishment of them all, they saw that his skin was white?

"Do you recognise him, Colonel?"

The Colonel approached the man, who stood quite still, his eyes fixed and staring, as if his thoughts were far away in some lost world. He had made no sign when Trunchinson had exposed those disguises, had not appeared to

be aware of what had happened. Colonel Milvain scanned him narrowly.

"By the Lord!" cried he suddenly. "It is—By heaven! it is Gerald!"

The old man seemed to wake up, and he nodded his head, fixing his eyes on the Colonel.

"Don't make such a noise about it," he said quite calmly. "Yes, you have found me, Julius. My children, you said, my children. Ah! and you stole their love, yes, their love from me, as you took my inheritance, my name, all I had. You never had the wit to be a liar, Julius. My own children. You don't know what it means."

"You would have been welcome, Gerald," said the Colonel, his utter surprise and astonishment calmed by the quiet, dull tone of the old man. "I don't know how you came here, like this, but—Oh! man, man, it is too late! You would have been proud of them, but it is too late. Heart disease—and you are strong. It was their mother. She died of it. She was happy, Gerald, at the end, and she loved you, by gad! she did."

The old man's mouth was twitching as if with pain, and his eyes were fixed on his cousin's.

"My own children!" he murmured, "my own children!"

"Yes, Gerald. It was not our fault. We loved them. You knew them, my poor fellow, of course you did. This miserable disguise! Don't you suppose we have forgiven all the past? Why, man, you would have been welcome, however you came. You should have been with them, by gad! every day and all day. What for? what for? I can't understand it, Trunchinson."

"My own children," murmured the man. Then he seemed to recover from a stupor, into which he had again fallen.

"My God! My God!" shrieked the godless old wretch, in an agony. He tried to raise his arms, but one only obeyed him. With a strange, hunched gesture, tragically grotesque, the miserable man threw up his hand. "My own children!" he gasped; and with his eyes full of hate and despair, he cried:



"Everything! and now he has taken my revenge from me. You have made me—Oh, you devil! My God! My God! *I have killed my own children!*"

His eyes slowly closed as he sank down in a squalid heap on the floor, sliding along the wall with no more sound than the brushing of a woman's dress over a carpet. The men stood silent, petrified. A squirrel ran down the verandah post and stood listening, as if alarmed at the cessation of voices. A fly-catcher swooped through the porch. From the road outside a woman called anguily to her child, in obscene phrase, every word intensely audible. "A Mortorama," thought Gurder, with a sudden, involuntary recollection of *Père Goriot*. Gertrude had come out at the sound of the old man's cry, drawn by a vague horrible memory. She stood silent like the others, and then in a swift recognition, she knelt down beside him and took his hand in hers, turning round to the men standing by.

"Tell me. Was it he? It must have been he. And he is my father. It was *that* he want-

ed us to do. I see it all now. But he is my father—our father. Neither of us would—how could we?”

Trunchinson was the only one who understood her. The others only saw the lovely, pained, horrified face, with quivering mouth, and beautiful eyes so full of fear. He came forward.

“Take her away, Aiden. She is wrong. She is your daughter, Colonel.”

“What!” cried the Colonel.

“She is your daughter. I can’t explain now, and I didn’t want her to see this. I have all the proofs, but take her away some one. Come, Miss Milvain?”

“Come, Gertrude,” said the Colonel; “come to us, whoever you are. I don’t understand, but come with me. Ah! I was afraid of that. She’s fainted. Go to your house, Vansittart, and report yourself.”

“Yes, Sir,” replied the young man, saluting.

Arden and Gurder had borne the girl to the couch in the next room. Trunchinson was kneeling by the body of the old man. He

had felt his heart which no longer beat, and was examining his right hand. He looked up at Colonel Milvain, who stood beside him about to speak, and said:

"I thought so. This is what did it."

He pointed to a small mark in the palm of the hand, and took from his pocket a large gold ring.

"When I hit him on the arm this ring cut him. I had to do that, though I hoped to manage without it. If I hadn't, you were done for, Colonel."

"I don't understand a word of it, Trunchinson. This was my cousin Gerald, and he seems to have ended as he began; but, on my soul, I am utterly at sea about the rest of what appears to be some ghastly crime. What did he mean by those words?"

"I'll tell you the whole thing, Colonel. Just look at this ring first. You see when I turn it on my finger, a small point appears? Well, the ring is filled with snake poison. It must be concentrated too, for it kills instantaneously if you get it on to the right place. The back of

the neck seems to be the most deadly part. This man would have been killed on the spot, only that the poison had further to go, and perhaps he didn't get a full dose. I don't know about that, but if I had not had the luck to fetch him that time you would have been out of it."

"What for?" asked the Colonel. "What was he to get by this? My God! I see it now! The devil! This was the way he—George and Phyllis, both of them, and his own children too! May God have mercy on his soul! And the poor body lies there, on the spot where—I shall go home. His own children! It was not my fault, Trunchinson. I loved them—the boy and the girl. Gertrude, you say, is my daughter? Ah! I don't comprehend. I think I will go home, Trunchinson. We shall be very glad to see you, any time you can spare. Please tell Miss Merton—you say her name is Milvain, I believe,—the same as my own,—tell her to come to us. Good morning. Very pleasant morning, I'm sure. Thank you."

The Colonel was about to turn away, when

a worn-looking, dishevelled figure appeared from the room, the left arm in an improvised sling. It was Merton, or Milvain as we should call him now. He stood still beside the body of the old man, grave, and seeming too weak to be excited. For a moment he fixed his eyes on the body, and then, across it, he extended his right hand, raising his gaze to Colonel Milvain. The Colonel looked at him for a short space, as if trying to guess the meaning of the action. Then his face brightened, and he grasped the offered hand.

"George," he murmured gently.

The mouth of the young man quivered slightly.

"Yes," he said, "I come through him, my father. Some day, perhaps, for my own sake—the son of an honourable gentleman."

Gertrude appeared at this juncture. She had recovered, and heard her brother's voice. She placed her left hand on his right shoulder and she, too, held out her right to her father, who took it lovingly in his left. The sight of her seemed to revive his memory.

“I have found them again!” he said, “George and Phyllis, but not to forget those—no, no—not to love them less.”

Trunchinson stooped down and lifted the body from between them, and the Colonel took his new-found daughter in his arms. Perhaps there were tears in his eyes, of sorrow and of joy. The two are always near together.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

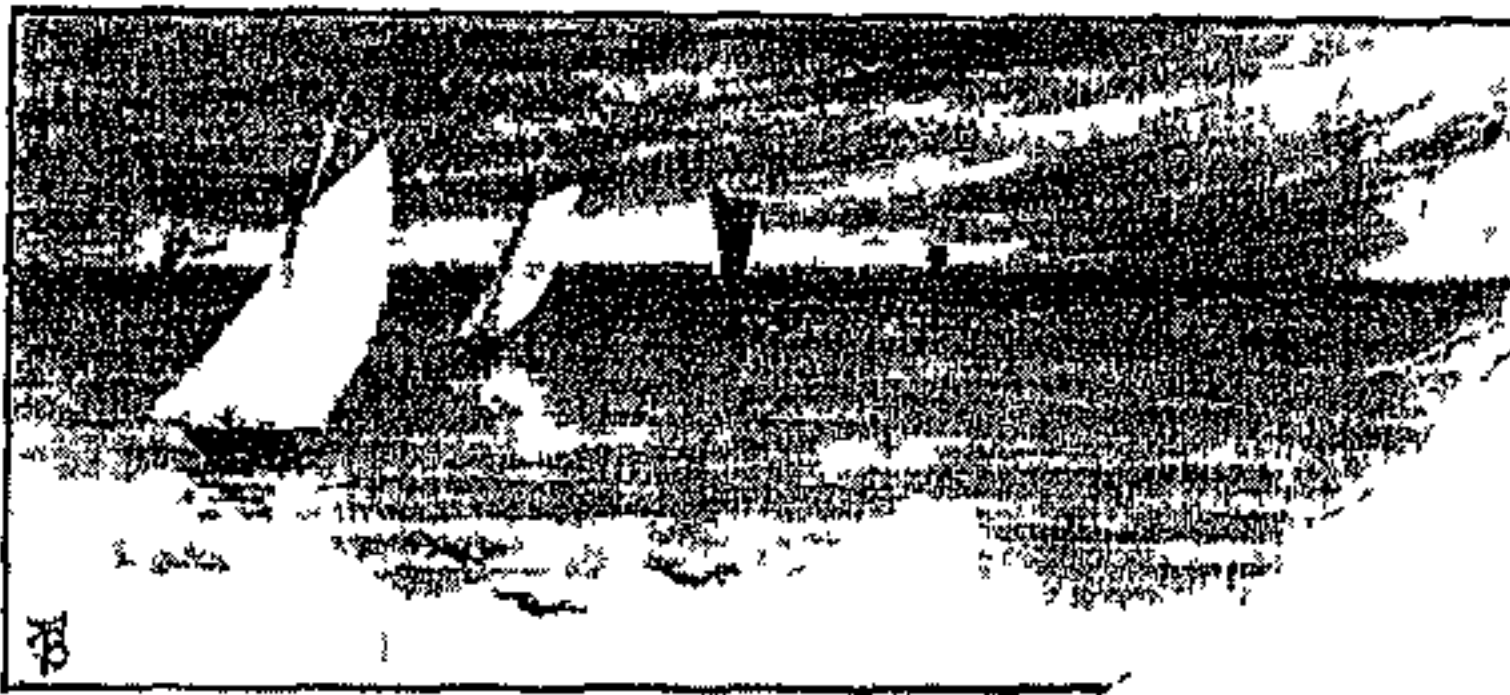
### The Flag of all Nations.



FEW days afterwards Smith said to Jones at Mess:

"Look here, I say; what's the rights of that business up at the Colonel's? Got a new family, all brand new, copper-bottomed. A1 at Lloyds, eh?"

"Poor old Johnny!" replied Jones. "Something in that line. Haven't you heard?"



"How could I? Off on a shoot."

"So you were. Well, as near as I can make

out, it goes like this. Merton turns out to be Milvain, Colonel's son,—long lost business. His sister ditto, only daughter. Seems Merton let on to be going after big game up in the hills, and came across a cave, where he'd been beating for a panther. Found an old Johnny there who used to be his father."

"And another who used to be his mother."

"True bill, man,—fact. Said he was his father, and had brought him up by hand, sister too. Well, this old governor chucks him among a lot of snakes, in a bloomin' dungeon, like they used to do when they had cast-iron breeches to wear, and a tin-pot hat was uniform."

"Let me down gently, my pretty Louise!"

"That's what they told me, anyhow. I'm not responsible for all the lies I hear. I'm telling you what other novelists have told me, and you can believe it or not."

"Don't be shirty, man. Go on."

"Well, he got out of that, along a rafter, climbed up the bell-rope, they say, and got on to a beam in the roof. Anyhow, he got away down a staircase, and when he was



doing it in even time for home, he met the bobbies all in blue, and went back and roped in the whole show, unnatural parent and the rest of the litter. Found a lot of papers in the place, and established his bloomin' identity. Where's a whisky and soda?"

"Well, but how about the old Johnny? Let's hear what they did with him. You dry up just when you're getting interesting."

"The real original, beware of imitations! They got him all right, and he did them proper. Poisoned himself in public, when he saw the other parties had the odd tick."

"Want to know what I think of all that, Jones?"

"No, I don't. Never knew you thought at all. Ta-ta!"

The story told in this artless fashion by Jones, was not no very far from the truth—as near it, probably, as most such accounts of things we know of.

It was quite true that the Mertons were the children of Colonel Milvain and his wife. Among the papers captured at the Temple were doc-

uments which established that fact. The two children of Colonel Milvain, who were supposed to have been drowned, were carried off during a night march, at the crossing of a river. The native nurse, the drivers of the carts, and the men employed at the river-bank to help, were all members of that gang which was captured. Of this, Gerald Milvain had become one of the prominent leaders. They had been dressed as native children, and easily carried away. It was believed that the native nurse had been drowned with them; and, in fact, Colonel Milvain had pensioned her family, in reward for her devotion. She was long dead, and not one of the gang had broken silence on the subject. Swift vengeance would have fallen on any one who had.

All the rest of the story was but a record of the slow revenge of that old man. Had he succeeded in his plans, he would have been the sole heir to the Colonel's property, and to the end that there might be no difficulty in proving this, he had in his possession all the papers necessary to shew, if need should be,

that the so-called Mertons were Colonel Milvain's children. Apart from that, Trunchinson's men, in ways which need not be specified, were able to elicit the whole story from members of the gang, who had been concerned in the capture of the children. The gang was broken up, their methods discovered, and they made the best terms for themselves.

There is little doubt that, had the Mertons carried out the old man's instructions, the plot would have been successful, and that they themselves would have been the last victims. It mattered little to the man whether he took two lives or a dozen. But for accidents, it was almost impossible to discover the mode of death. But he had reckoned on education and neglected nature. The girl did not know there was to be murder in it, and she grew to love those people. Merton, when it came to the point, instinctively revolted, and in the reaction of his feelings, and in those new surroundings where the whole of life was not a question of money, his ideas, his standards, his education, if you will, changed and ex-

panded. Then too, he began to love the sweet girl who he knew was doomed. The death of that young man showed him that there was an unseen hand at work, but he could neither discover the way in which his death had been compassed, nor by whom. His journey to the temple, the locality of which had been detailed to him in the papers given him by his supposed father, was undertaken for the purpose of getting some clue to the mystery. Evidently the old man who had lived all the time in the same house with them, was tired of waiting, and found he could carry out his intentions by himself. To destroy the Mertons before he had disposed of the others would have been to deprive himself of opportunities, which he could not get so well elsewhere as at their house. But it would be safer for himself if he could persuade Merton or force him by threats to complete the scheme; and the information supplied to Vansittart, which incriminated Merton, had been placed in his way by a man in Vansittart's service, also a member of

that gang. Vansittart could have proved nothing; but had the old man succeeded in removing Colonel Milvain and his wife, he had everything prepared to make it certain to a court of justice, down to the very witnesses, that the murders had been committed by the Mertons. There was no contingency for which he was not prepared.

The temple is still a place of pilgrimage, and in high repute. The snakes are fed there as usual, daily, and it is said among the people that they once ate up a Sahib who was so incautious as to laugh at them. They proceeded to the town of Jaffarnagar and dragged him out of his house and carried him off to the Nâg Déwul, where they sacrificed him, with all the formalities, before the shrine. Anyone will tell you this.

"Have you—I mean has she—settled the date yet, Arden?" asked Gurder, one day.

"M'yes, Gurder. That's the worst thing about it. One ought to glide imperceptibly into the blessed state. It's rather brutal to fix it, like a Government Resolution. Of

course you'll be that purple enormity—the best man. I don't see why you shouldn't suffer a bit. You can return thanks for the bridesmaids, Miss Caverner among them. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not a bit."

"Well, Gurder, some day you will fall under the flag of all nations. You remember how I used to search for a soul? I have found it, my friend, and—ah, but the worth of—never mind. One makes one's own values after all, and one is always too low or too high."

"You might as well toss up," replied Gurder, "you never know. The only thing you can be certain of is looks, and, by Jove! some are satisfied with precious little of that."

"We have to take life on speculation, and love too, perhaps. There's another side, Gurder. I am her speculation, and who of us is worthy—"

"Don't philosophise, Arden; it's not a philosophical question. I can't understand how any

human being could be so utterly brutal as that old man."

"Can't you? It is perfectly logical. Self-help is universally admired when it leads to money, and dogged perseverance in the sacred cause of getting what we believe to be dust and ashes, has whole books written about it. The old man's methods differed from the systems of those heroes we applaud, but his desire was the same. Given a perverted moral character, and the result is even admirable if it is success."

"What beastly cynicism!"

"Don't be unfair to the dogs. It is awful enough, that form of human character, but I am sure it is more common than we know. When the restraints are removed we have Jack the Rippers and such, who are even worse, for they have not the excuse of a definite end in view. This man brought the talents of a successful statesman, the foresight, the ability, the cunning of a politician to bear on his designs. He directed them wrong, but he really seemed to think that he was serving the ends

of justice as well as of gain. He was strictly logical within his own limits."

"God save us from such logic!"

"He has—some of us, and as usual, not all the most worthy."



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