

larly, I learned later, as a sort of keeper or watchdog for Maligni. Upon this woman's face there was a look of angry protest, as if she had held forth against the departure of Nita with Maubikeck and myself. But the girl came forward and was met by the lion-tamer, who placed her hand on his arm and led her through a private hall and exit to the street. I had hesitated about accompanying them, but Maubikeck had repeated his request that I should assist him, if possible, to unravel the mystery of the murderous animosity with which the girl was surrounded.

When Maubikeck spoke Nita turned toward me, and said:

"You are the gentleman who assisted in saving my life. I thank you, sir, for the great kindness. Surely, I am in some person's way, and unless the secret is discovered I shall, no doubt, be murdered. If you can help me, you will win my gratitude."

Thus prettily asked I walked beside them, and the old woman came ambling after, muttering to herself things I could not understand, but in which I frequently heard the name Maligni.

Now, there was more than one reason why it seemed perfectly proper for me to accompany Nita and Maubikeck, and lend what assistance I could in this time of need. To begin with, I was much interested in the girl herself—personally—because of her grand beauty, and the romantic interest always attached to a beautiful girl in her position. Now that she was in danger chivalry seemed to direct me to her assistance. I did not feel that this was at all a matter in which I was romantically concerned, for I loved Edith Broughton, and no amount of glamour or other foil could dull that love.

Secondly, I was interested in Nita Barlotti, as has been shown heretofore, because she closely resembled the photograph of Charles Gravicourt's wife, and because in that resemblance there had seemed to be some shadowy hint that Gravicourt was not all that he seemed to be before the world. And in striking at Gravicourt, I was striking a blow for my own love, and this is a motive that will always stir the heart of a man whose love is withheld from him by another's will.

Thirdly, I was interested in the lion-tamer. He impressed me as being no

ordinary individual—very different from the average circus attache, as was Barlotti herself; and in the evidences of love that I had seen pass between these two, I had seemed to see a reflection of my own, and this claimed my interest if nothing else.

Fourthly, I had seen the act of the man who had set fire to the trapeze rope, and was, no doubt, the only human being save himself, who had seen it. It became me, therefore, to aid Maubikeck and Nita by using the knowledge I possessed, and by identifying the miscreant who had fired the rope, ascertain through him his motive, or, if he had been employed to do the thing, the name of his cowardly employer.

One of the facts that I learned by this adventure was that the stars of a circus lived, when away from the glare and the tinsel of their profession, much like other people with plenty of money to spend.

Leaving the Gardens by means of one of the private entrances, Maubikeck hailed a carriage. It was a good one, and was drawn by a team of well-fed, sleek-looking horses, and I thought it was probably the one he used every night for his own conveyance, and we all got into it. Maubikeck and Nita sat together, and the old hag sat with me, with our backs toward the driver. She was not a pleasant carriage companion, and I would gladly have changed places with Maubikeck. The old woman averted her face, moaned, wrung her hands, and spoke fiercely to Maubikeck, who told her with unmistakable emphasis to hold her tongue.

"I will explain this woman's vehemence, Signor Wilberton," said the lion tamer. "Pacho Maligni is a hard master and a jealous man. He allows no one but himself and those hired for the purpose to come near Nita Barlotti. Believe me, this is the first time since we opened in Madison Square Garden that I have accompanied the signorina to her hotel. Maligni keeps her constantly under his care, and this woman is employed by him to prevent others—especially myself—from coming into the presence of the signorina. That we are enabled to be with her now is due solely to the mishap which has befallen Maligni. He may be dead at this moment or seriously wounded. That he is wounded is certain, or he would have been on hand as usual to take Nita to the hotel."

"And where does Maligni live?" I asked.

"At the same hotel."

Maubikeck, who had started from the Garden, had directed the driver to a certain well-known hotel, much frequented by show people, and I knew where we were being taken.

"But what is this Maligni's hold on the signorina?" I asked. "Where does he get his authority over her?"

Nita shuddered and crouched closer to the stalwart frame of Maubikeck.

"He is my master by my father's will," she said in a voice that was touching in its plaintive sweetness.

"And your father was a performer like yourself, was he not, signorina?" I said.

"Yes—I will tell you about his death when we reach my rooms."

This interruption of her reply was caused by the rattling of the carriage up to the curb, the sudden stopping of it, and the opening of the carriage door by the coachman.

We all stepped out, Maubikeck assisting Nita, and I following them, leaving the old Italian woman to clamber down as best she could. Maubikeck turned to the coachman and said:

"Wait for me."

We entered the hotel by a private door, and ascended two flights of stairs. Then traversing for some distance a wide and well lighted hall, we paused before a door. Then Nita uttered a startled little exclamation.

"The key!" she gasped. "Maligni has the key!"

Here was a dilemma. Maubikeck was a stranger at the hotel, having taken up his residence at another, some distance away. Here a happy thought came to me. I was the one to help them out.

Taking the number of the room, which was 112, I went down to the office, and found on duty there a clerk who knew me.

"How do you do, Mr Wilberton?" said this clerk, saucily.

"I am as usual, Mervico," I replied, "and have come for a little assistance. Perhaps you have not heard of the unfortunate mishap that has befallen one of your guests?"

"No. What is it?" he asked, with the expression of a man on guard against any accident that might reflect on the hotel management.

"Maligni, the circus man, has just been

shot at the Garden. I was fortunate enough to be of some assistance to his charge Signorina Barlotti, who has room 112, and with a friend of hers brought her here. She recollects now that Maligni has the key to her room. I want a duplicate, if you have one, so that the signorina can get in. She needs rest, and it may be some time before they bring Maligni here."

Mervico shrugged his shoulders, turned to a drawer in his desk, and handed me therefrom a key to number 112.

"If the fellow who shot Maligni only killed him," he said, "I don't think the world will owe him a grudge."

Without replying to his evident dislike of Maligni I hurried back with the key and soon had the door opened.

One thing was certain: No matter how severe, harsh or tyrannical Maligni might be, he certainly was not niggardly in regard to Nita's comfort. Number 112 was but the first of a suite of four rooms, one of which was a parlour, one a cozy little dressing-room, and the other two, bedrooms, one for Nita and one for the old hag who served her. A door opened from the dressing-room and one of the bedrooms, and I knew from the general plan of the hotel, with which I was familiar, that the suite included a private bath.

"Maligni lives there," said Nita, pointing to number 111, across the hall.

Maubikeck and I sat down in Nita's parlor and she and her leathery-skinned 'maid' disappeared. In a few minutes, however, she reappeared, this time clad in some soft, clinging stuff that set off her figure to perfection. It seemed as if every change she made made her more beautiful.

She stepped rather wearily, I thought, and sank into a chair between Maubikeck and me, resting her head in her hands, as if she felt pain in her temples.

I had taken my card from my card case and handed it to her.

"Signorina," I said, "I have become interested in the mystery that seems to surround you and beg you will allow me to assist you and Maubikeck in your efforts to unravel it. That will tell you who I am."

"Well, Signor Wilberton," she said, twirling the card in her hand, "I sincerely thank you. I am greatly unnerved by what has occurred, and cannot understand it. I cannot understand it. I cannot assist you or Maubikeck in any way that I can think

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