

of, yet I am willing to do anything that Maubikeck suggest, or answer any questions that you may ask me. My life is in danger, and alone I am unable to combat my unknown enemy.

'You must be told, Signor Wilberton,' said Maubikeck, 'that this is not the first attempt that has been made on Signorina Barlotti's life. Only last night some miscreant cut one of the ropes of the trapeze nearly through, so that the weight of the signorina would break it and precipitate her to certain death. The severed rope was discovered by one of my own attendants, and he rushed to me with the news, knowing that I had the signorina's welfare at heart. I secretly sent word to her, explaining the circumstance, and, as it was too late to replace the rope with a new one, I advised Nita to plead illness and not go on. This she did, and Maligni made her excuses to the audience.'

'I know,' I replied. 'I was there. And did Maligni know what the trouble really was?'

'Not at first,' replied Nita. 'But he stormed and cursed so when it seemed merely my own illness that prevented my appearing as usual, that I was obliged to tell him. Then, of course, he saw how impossible it was for me to act.'

'Then it seems that Maligni, at least, is not a party to the attempt on your life,' I said.

The girl blushed, and shot a look full of meaning at Maubikeck.

'He would not kill the signorina,' said Maubikeck. 'He claims to love her, and when he has made enough money in the show business he intends to marry the signorina and return to Italy to live.'

'Ah!' I said. 'And I take it, from what I see, that Signorina Nita objects to that domestic arrangement.'

'She loves me,' said Maubikeck, simply, 'and I love her.'

This was so exactly a repetition of my own case that my heart went out to these two mysterious people, and I plunged at once into the subject that had brought us there.

'Now, see here,' I said, assuming the authority of a detective, 'I saw something to night which will be of material interest and aid to us in this matter, but to get at it right, I must know all about your life; that is, that part of it that pertains to your father and his death—your education—your mother— Well, tell me all you know, and let us see where we stand.'

My interest in the case greatly pleased both the signorina and Maubikeck.

'Yes,' said the lion tamer. 'That is the first step. Tell Signor Wilberton about yourself, that he may understand the circumstances in which you are now placed, and the harsh tyranny under which you live.'

Nita passed her hand over her brow, and, after a moment spent in thought, began:

'I remember little about my mother,' she said, speaking dreamily and slowly, as if trying to recall the past. 'She was, as I can see her now, an ordinary woman—of course, an Italian. She died when I was, perhaps, seven years of age. I can recollect little of our home life, except that we seemed to be unsettled, moving about from one place to another—probably the same as the family of any other circus performer would do. My father was very kind—more so, I think, than my mother. I dimly recall now that they frequently quarrelled, but, of course, I do not know now, and probably did not even at that time understand what the causes of their dissensions were. When my mother died my father took me to Madame De Long's school, and placed me there as a regular boarding scholar. Madame De Long's school is in Albany. During the time I was at Albany I saw but little of my father. He came seldom to see me, and told me not to tell any of the scholars that he was a circus performer. In later years, when his fame became so great, of course they all knew it, and being the daughter of Barlotti, the famous trapeze king, was not considered the disgrace that it would have been had he remained in obscurity. My life at Madame De Long's was very pleasant. I took considerable interest in my lessons, and advanced rapidly. True, I was not there long enough to acquire a very brilliant education, but what I did learn formed a foundation, to which I have endeavoured to add since by constant reading and study in the hours of leisure allowed me. When I was fourteen, I was suddenly called from Madame De Long's to a hotel in Utica. I remember it well. It stood near the railroad, and I believe they called it Raggs Hotel. Barnum was in Utica on that day, and, as you know, my father was Barnum's principal trapeze performer. Now, let me explain one point in the relations of my father to Barnum, and you will then understand my own position better. My father was not hired directly by Barnum himself. He was under a long contract to Maligni—the same Pacho Maligni who was shot to night. Maligni in turn contracted with Barnum for my father's continued appearance in his circus, and, of the two, Maligni pocketed the most money.

On this day, my father had grown dizzy and had fallen from his trapeze, and had sustained injuries which the surgeon in attendance said must cause his death. Thus it was that I was sent for, and was placed on the train at Albany, in charge of the conductor, who, when we arrived at Utica, took me to the hotel, only a few steps away, and I was taken at once to my father's room. I reached there just one hour before he died. Maligni was with him when I arrived, and my father signified a desire for us to approach together. I had seen Maligni only once before, and was instinctively afraid of him. But my fears were nothing as compared to the terror I have felt since. My father spoke to Maligni in a tongue I did not understand. I spoke and understood pure Italian, but the language used at my father's bedside was a harsher one—yet the same. I have heard the same language since, but cannot recall enough of what was said at that time to translate or to understand. But I saw Maligni's eyes open in astonishment, and he seemed to be more affected by what my father was saying than he was over the prospect of his death. Then my father put my hand in Maligni's and told me in our own language that he was going to die, and that henceforth I was Maligni's. Maligni would take his place and would take care of me. I remember that I sobbed a great deal and kissed my father, and that a surgeon came and other men, and then my father died. Maligni attended to everything, and had my father's body taken to Italy for burial. He took me there also. I never went back to Madame De Long's. We came from Utica right to New York, and sailed for Italy one or two days after. And what a wretched miserable life I have led ever since! Maligni informed me that under the terms of the contract by which he took me, I was to fill the place of my father, and become an actress on the trapeze. Oh, the shame of it nearly killed me. I wept and pleaded with him, but all to no purpose. He was not to be moved by my tears or my prayers, and in the house at which we lived he had one room fitted up as a training-room. Here I was compelled to go through the severest kind of physical training to perfect myself for the trapeze. At first I refused to wear the tights, and was severely flogged. Maligni is a cruel man, and would kill rather than be thwarted. Well, you do not need to be told the details of my hard life. Suffice to say that after nearly four years of severe training, I am before the public in a role that I hate and despise. But what can I do? Maligni is my

absolute master. If I ran away from him, he would capture me and bring me back to my downward life. What can I do? And now some one wants to murder me. I cannot imagine why. I have not, so far as I know, an enemy in this world, unless it be Maligni himself, and I know what his plans are too well to think he is the one.'

Nita paused here, as if she was weary. I had taken a small note-book from my pocket, and was jotting down, as well as I could with burned fingers that were beginning to give me great pain, all the important points of her story. Still, there was nothing in it that shed the slightest ray of light on the mystery in hand.

'Now, signorina,' I said, 'we have got down to the present day—let me ask you a question: Your trapeze is always in the care of the same person, is it not?'

'Not one, but two,' she replied. 'The two attendants are called Sancho and Dambo. They were not brought from Italy, but were employed here by Maligni.'

'Describe Sancho,' I said.

'He is a thin man, with black, piercing eyes, and long, black hair. He usually wears a velvet coat.'

'And Dambo?'

'Dambo is much stouter, and has curly hair. His eyes are small like a snake's and gleam and glitter all the time. His hair is not long, but his mustache is very long and has straight waxed ends.'

'Ha!' I said. 'Dambo is the man we want. He is the fellow who set fire to the ropes.'

'Dambo!' exclaimed Maubikeck. 'Dambo! also exclaimed Nita. 'I have scarcely spoken to Dambo. He could have no reason to hate me and try to kill me.'

'But if he is a snake he could be hired by some one who has,' I replied.

'Dambo! she murmured. 'I can hardly believe it. Did you see him do it, Signor Wilberton?'

'I saw him fire the second rope, after which he disappeared in the crowd and I could not catch him. We will see to Mr Dambo later. Where did you live in Italy, Signorina?'

'In several places,' she replied. 'Maligni spent some time in Naples, Rome, and Genoa, but most of the time we spent in Sardinia. I did not know much about my surroundings, not being allowed to go out much. But I know that we left Genoa in a steamer, and landed at Cagliari. The house we lived in was a large one, and stood in a beautiful country place near Cagliari. It was the property of Maligni's brother, who seemed to be a man of great importance in Cagliari.'

'Cagliari is the southern port of Sardinia,' said Maubikeck. 'There is also a province of the same name.'

'You made no enemies there?' I asked.

'None,' replied the girl. 'I made neither enemies nor friends. Maligni kept me close.'

'I think that our researches must be confined to this city,' I said. 'There seems to be no reason to believe you have enemies from Sardinia. Your enemies are here, and I think we can find them.'

I fancied I saw a look of relief on the face of Maubikeck. It was as if he was gratified at my having dropped Sardinia. But I was so interested in the girl's story that I paid no attention to this.

'Signorina,' I said, 'now think hard for a few minutes. I am going to ask you a strange question.'

She looked at me with a patient smile on her weary countenance.

'You may ask it,' she said.

'Has anything that you can recall in your life—any incident, any word, any look, any act, seemed to indicate that you were not Barlotti's daughter?'

'Signor Wilberton?' she gasped. 'Maubikeck?' The cry was like that of a frightened child, and Maubikeck drew nearer to

her, and placed one of his giant arms around her.

'You understand, I continued, 'that I don't suggest this as being true, but simply ask the question. You have none of the characteristic features of the Italian race. I should judge you to be either English or American. Now, can you think of any incident at the bedside of your father—'

'Stay!' she cried. 'Let me think. On this terrible thought has never come to me before. Not Barlotti's daughter? Not Italian? Then who am I?'

'Now be calm, signorina,' I said. 'Just think of the past. What I am trying to get at is, has any incident ever occurred that would lead you to think that any unknown person felt or should feel an interest in you?'

'Oh, wait!' she cried. 'At my father's bedside—no. I was so confused and frightened and sorrowful that I scarcely saw. No, there could be nothing. My father gave me to Maligni, and the box—'

'Box!' I said, interrupting her. 'You said nothing about a box before.'

'It was a red tin box,' she said, 'locked with a little brass padlock. My father gave it to Maligni, and said something in the tongue I have since learned was Sardinian. I asked Maligni once what the box contained, and he said it contained the contract between him and my father.'

'A contract?' I said. 'Would your father carry a contract in a tin box locked with a padlock?'

'He might. I never knew much about my father's habits.'

'How large a box was it?' I asked.

'About so long and so wide,' she answered, indicating with her hands a foot in length and three or four inches in width.

'I would give much to gain possession of that box,' I said. 'Do you know where Maligni keeps it?'

'No. I have never seen it since the day my father died.'

'No doubt it contained more than the contract,' I said. 'And we must obtain possession of it without Maligni's suspecting that we want it. The box without its contents would be valueless, and if he suspected us, he would remove the contents and leave us the box.'

'But Maligni may be dead,' said Nita, almost hopefully.

'Yes, he may,' I answered. 'If he is, then it will be easy to get the box.'

Just then there was a great stamping of feet in the hall, which stopped at the door opposite. They were, I thought, bringing Maligni home. I opened the door of Nita's room and peeped out. There were three men in handkerchiefs, my old friend, Doctor Dinmore, and Major Simmons. Maligni was walking alone, and did not seem to be greatly distressed by his wound. The doctor and the major went inside with him, but remained only a few minutes. When I heard them come out, I said:

'Signorina, you have already had too much excitement to-night, and you need rest. I see that the physician who attended Maligni is a friend of mine. Maligni is not seriously wounded. We have, I think, got all the facts that you can give us in relation to your peculiar case. The first thing to be done is to find Dambo, which I shall set about as soon as I have my burned hands attended to.'

'Oh, you are too generous and kind,' she said. 'You are suffering on my account. It is too bad.'

'It is nothing to Maubikeck's,' I said. 'Look at his hands.'

She looked at the burned and blistered hands of the lion tamer, and the sight was just what was needed to finish the work of the exciting night.

'Maubikeck, my love! My love!' she cried, and throwing her arms around him, she wept over him and kissed him. And the lion-tamer smiled and kissed her, when I knew that his hands were burned ten times more than mine, and if the pain was ten times greater, it was awful torture. Yet he loved her, and that he forgot his pain, and returned her kiss and smiled as if his hands were not torturing him. Nita fondled his leonine head a few minutes, and grew more excited.

'Come,' I said, 'this will not do. Signorina, you must have rest. We will come to you to-morrow. Now we will see the doctor and have our burns dressed. Come, Maubikeck.'

He followed me out, and I hurried after my friends. I caught them at the door of the hotel.

CHAPTER V.

'An, Wilberton!' exclaimed Major Simmons, when I hailed him and Doctor Dinmore. 'I have been looking for you. Our evening had plenty of excitement, eh? Barlotti's life attempted and also Maligni's! How is the girl?'

'Nita is all right,' I replied. 'How is Maligni?'

'Maligni is more frightened than hurt,' said Doctor Dinmore. 'The bullet was evidently intended for his brain, but missed mark. It pricked his cheek—made a

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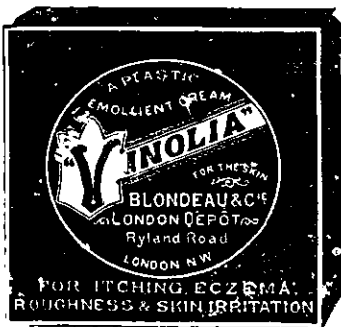
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