

ragged little wound that is not serious—in fact of no consequence. But he did kick up a tremendous row. Of all the wild Italians I ever saw, he was the wildest. He cursed and raved, and threatened to annihilate the fellow who fired that shot, and I was compelled sternly to order him to be quiet before I could dress his cheek. He will be well in a few days.

Here I presented the lion tamer to my two friends.

'You are not through your work for tonight, doctor,' I said. 'Maubikeck's hands are badly burned, and mine in less degree. They must be attended to.'

Doctor Dinmore looked at Maubikeck's hands.

'Burned! I should say they were burned. You must come at once to my office. But I tell you, lion tamer, that was a courageous thing you did, to climb that rope and put out the flame of burning oil with your hands. It was the work of a hero.'

Maubikeck shrugged his shoulders. 'I am not a hero,' he said. 'When the only human being that a man loves is in danger, nothing is too great for him to attempt in her behalf.'

The doctor and the major nodded affirmatively. There was evidently no bashfulness about Maubikeck. He was willing that all the world should know that he loved Nita Barloti.

'We got into the carriage that Maubikeck had used to bring us to the hotel, and Doctor Dinmore, at Maubikeck's request, gave the coachman the address of his office. We were soon there.

Maubikeck, being more severely burned than I, was, of course, first taken care of by the physicians. While they were busy I sat down near the major.

'Well,' he said, in a low voice that Maubikeck could not hear, 'what do you think of it all, anyway?'

'I am more than ever convinced that our original suspicions were correct,' I replied.

'I questioned the girl closely, and she told me the whole story of her life. She was given to this fellow Maligni by Barloti, who she believes is her father. There is nothing in her story that sheds any light whatever on the affair. But there certainly is something about her destruction, and it is not Maligni. It is impossible even to say if Maligni's enemy is hers. Everything is clouded in complete mystery. But there are two things to work on. One is a good clue, or at least a step, and may lead to the correct solution of the mystery. I saw an Italian set fire to the second rope.'

'Did you indeed?' repeated the major in surprise.

'Yes, and from the description the girl gave of her attendants, I identify the miscreant as a man they call Dambo. Of course, the first thing to be done is to find him. In the excitement he got away, but he cannot get out of New York. Anyhow, Byrnes can find him.'

'And what is the other clue? You spoke of two.'

'The other is not a clue. It may prove to be nothing at all, but putting our suspicions along with what the girl tells me, I hope to make a seizure and a discovery. It appears that just before Barloti died, he gave the girl to Maligni, and also gave him a red tin box which was locked with a brass padlock. At the same time he spoke to Maligni in the Sardinian dialect, which Nita did not understand, and Maligni was apparently very much excited and surprised at what he said. Later, Nita asked Maligni what was in the box, and he told her it contained the contract under which her father had worked.'

'With Barloti?'

'No, with Maligni.'

Then I explained the system under which the trapeze acrobat had worked, and repeated Nita's story for the major's benefit.

'I agree with you,' he said, 'that the contents of that red box are important. But how to get it?'

Our conversation was interrupted at this point by Dinmore, who, having carefully dressed Mauback's hands, announced himself ready for me. It did not take so long to attend to my burns, for the pain having been allayed by some soothing application, the injury seemed very slight. I was soon ready to go.

Maubikeck with both hands bandaged, he a good-night, and promised to assist me in the morning to find Dambo. He stepped into his carriage and was driven away to his hotel.

The major and I walked to my hotel, where he left me. It was two o'clock in the morning when I reached my room. I was greatly excited over the events of the evening, and seemed to have the means of total annihilation of Ralph Graviacourt almost within my grasp.

To steady my nerves before going to bed I drank a glass of wine, and sat down to meditate on the prospects of success.

Weariness soon overcame me, and I retired to dream of fighting fire and lions and Ralph Graviacourt all at once, and of Elith and Nita and of the lion-tamer, all jumbled together in inexplicable mysteries which I alone must solve. My rest during the first few hours was broken by these fantastic

visions, but toward morning nature asserted itself and I slept soundly.

It seemed to me that I had scarcely slept at all when I was startled from my slumber by a terrific banging at my door. I sat up in bed, and in a half-dazed manner looked around me. It was broad daylight, and the sun was streaming in my windows.

Again the knocking at my door.

'Who is there?' I shouted.

'It is I—Maubikeck!' was the reply; and the voice in which it was uttered was so full of excitement that, unmindful of my scant attire, I sprang to the door to admit my visitor.

At the sight of the lion tamer I fell back, alarmed and startled. His eyes were blood-shot and from them seemed to come a lightning gleam that boded ill to some one. His face was working with passion, and with a stride he was in my room.

'Thy'st gone!' he roared. 'Gone!'

'Gone?' I echoed. 'Who's gone?'

'Signorina Barloti, Maligni, the old woman, Dambo, and all the rest,' he said, panting with excitement.

'Barloti gone! Maligni gone! Gone where?' I asked, nearly as excited as he was.

'Fled! Nobody knows where. I went to their hotel a while ago, and the clerk told me that Maligni and his people—that meant Nita and the hag—left before daylight, and left no information as to where they were going. I did not believe him, and rushed up the stairs and pounded on Nita's door, but got no answer. Then I went to the house where Dambo was staying, and he had gone. Sancho is still here, but he knows nothing about the rest. They've gone—they've gone. That devil Maligni has taken her away—her—my love—my Nita!'

As he ejaculated these words, the lion tamer strode back and forth in my room; and even though the surprise and shock of Maligni's sudden departure were overwhelming, yet I had a thought for this traitor—the traitor of wild beasts—who, with bloodshot eyes and passion distorted face, and his poor, burned hands still clothed in bandages, had been thus deprived of his sanctifier, and whose fears for her welfare nearly drove him frantic. There was a pathos in his grief and rage that touched me even more than my own disappointment did.

'But,' I said, reassuringly, 'they cannot escape us. We will go to Byrnes, Superintendent of Police, and he will catch them for us. Maligni cannot leave New York without being detected.'

'Maligni can!' replied Maubikeck. 'Maligni could wriggle out of hell, and Satan himself could not prevent him.'

I hastily dressed, and as the suddenness of the surprise wore off, I began to feel a horrible fear that Maubikeck was right, and that Maligni might outwit us, with the start he had had. But I resolved to do my best to thwart him, and to that end my first visit should be to the superintendent of police.

Maubikeck and I made our way as quickly as possible to police headquarters and told our story. Superintendent Byrnes was at once interested, and sent out orders to his men to make a thorough search for the party, particularly Dambo, through whom, if caught, we might reasonably expect to bag the principals in the affair, as well as Maligni and his charge.

Leaving the superintendent, a sudden thought rushed upon me, a recollection of what the major had told me about the druggist Tortoni. I hastily told something of this to Maubikeck, and knowing about where the store was located, we hurried there. We found it easily, and rushed in. A woman stood behind the counter.

'I want to see the druggist, Tortoni, at once,' I said, imperatively.

'He is gone away,' she said in broken English. 'He is gone to Europe.'

'When did he go?' I asked in amazement.

'Yesterday he sailed,' was the reply. Believing this to be a lie, I turned to Maubikeck and said:

'It is thicker than we supposed. There are many engaged in the affair.'

He muttered something and seemed to be beside himself.

From Tortoni's drug store we went to the hotel where Maligni and Nita had been stopping.

There they told me just what they had told Maubikeck.

'Have you any objections to opening the rooms?' I asked.

The clerk smiled.

'No,' he replied. 'Here is the key to 111, and this is to 112. You may go up if you want to.'

We mounted the stairs. I opened 111—Maligni's. We found nothing there that belonged to him. We entered number 112. It was bare of everything save the hotel furniture. Just as we were leaving, I happened to see a bit of folded paper on the floor. I picked it up. Reading it, I handed it to Maubikeck. As he read it, his face grew paler and he uttered a fierce curse under his breath. This is what was written on the paper in a pretty, feminine hand:

'Maubikeck! Maubikeck! He is taking me away—I do not know where. He is in a frightful temper. I must obey or he will kill me. Follow us; find us, and rescue me from Maligni. I love you, Maubikeck, and only you. NITA.'

CHAPTER VI.

It would be a useless waste of energy and a needless tax on patience for me to relate in detail the manner in which we passed the days immediately following the disappearance of Maligni and Nita Barloti. We hunted everywhere, and aided as we were by the best detective skill to be had. It did seem as if we must find them sooner or later. But the skill of the pursued was greater than that of the pursuers. Maligni, Nita, Dambo and Tortoni were gone—apparently vanished—completely—as though they had never existed in New York at all. We communicated freely and constantly with other cities, and did everything that could be done to prevent their departure from the United States without detection.

During the first few days Maubikeck and I, of course, spent considerable of our time at the office of Doctor Dinmore. Under his care our burns healed rapidly, and at the end of a week my hands were in as good condition as ever. Maubikeck's, from the severity of the burns, healed more slowly, but in a week they were out of the bandages and he had full use of them. They were somewhat blistered, but Dinmore promised that another week would effect a perfect cure.

The departure of the druggist Tortoni, of course, interested only the major and me. We did not possess enough knowledge of his connection with the case, and were not certain enough of his identity as Doctor C. Sigmotta, to drag the police into his part of the hunt. Neither did they care about Dambo.

But Maligni had fled, leaving untold bills unpaid and contracts unfulfilled.

Among those who suffered most were those who had been in his employ and whose salaries had not been paid. And of these Maubikeck lost the most, for the cost of keeping and feeding his lions was enormous, and had so far been paid by himself, he not having received any pay since the circus had opened in the Garden.

Of course, this made a clamour, and the papers were full of it. Public interest died out in a few days, and the police, seeing nothing but failure, grew listless in a week.

Of course, that portion of the affair in which I was most interested—the suspected identity of Nita Barloti—had not been made public. There was nothing on which a statement could be based, and the major and I counselled with ourselves and decided to lock the matter in our own breasts until we had something tangible to work on. And I was firmly convinced that the something tangible had been contained in the red box that Maligni had received from the dying acrobat, the contents of which he had told Nita were merely a 'contract.'

I plunged into the search so heartily that everything else was forgotten save my love for Elith Broughton. In fact, it was my seemingly hopeless love that spurred me on, in the forlorn hope of making a discovery that would undo my rival. I went to Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago on supposed clues, but discovered nothing.

During this protracted search, with its hopes, disappointments and failure, a peculiar change took place in the lion tamer and myself. When the flight of Maligni was first known, Maubikeck had been like a wild man. His rage, his impetuous ferocity, his uncurbed lion-like nature, made it difficult to keep him within bounds. He grew dishevelled and haggard. He muttered much to himself, like a man demented. His burned fingers twitched nervously, as if they were grasping somebody's throat. On the contrary, I had been calm and collected. I had done most of the planning and scheming. I had led the hunt.

Now, as time had passed, and we had nothing but a series of disheartening failures to look back upon, I was becoming nervous and impatient. I grew irritable. I plunged into foolishly apart after impossible clues that in the early days of the hunt I would not have considered worthy of my attention.

Sharply contrasted with this change in me, this evidence of the strain that had been put upon my nervous system, was the magnificent calmness that had come to Maubikeck. He had settled into a calm man of iron. His eyes were keen and piercing, his mouth firmly set, his brow smooth.

Carefully and slowly he went, step by step, over the case, and drew for himself a mental map of Maligni's operations, plans and desires, and seemed to be tracing his imaginary footsteps up to the present time.

This was the condition of things two weeks after Maligni had disappeared, and I, nervous and fretful, sat one afternoon in the office of the Board of Park Commissioners, of which the major was now pre-

sident, pouring out to him my bitterness of spirit over the failure to trace Maligni.

While I was there, a heavy foot-step was heard outside, and we both looked up knowingly. It was a foot-step that had grown familiar to us, so firmly and squarely did it strike. The door opened and the lion tamer entered.

It was at once evident from the expression of his face that he had learned something.

'Well, lion tamer,' said the major, who had developed a great liking for this mysterious man with the peculiar name, 'what is new to-day?'

'The hunt is ended, so far as this content is concerned,' was the reply of Maubikeck, as he quietly sat down near us.

'Ended?' I exclaimed, excitedly. 'Have you found them?'

'No. But I have traced them,' he said, with a grim sort of satisfaction in his tone. 'Maligni and Nita are on board the steamship La Gasconne, which sailed from this port three days ago. Of course, they are en route to Italy, or, more particularly speaking, to the island of Sardinia, where Maligni intends to make Nita his wife.'

'But this sudden determination,' I said, 'is puzzling. What of his circus? He had no money, had he, except what was invested in his show?'

'Money was what he was after,' replied Maubikeck, looking at me with a far away expression in his eyes. I knew that, though his gaze was directed toward me, he did not see me. His mind was bent on the problem before us.

'There is no doubt a great deal in this affair of which we know absolutely nothing,' said the major. 'The motive for the attempt on Maligni's life is the darkest kind of secret. Yet, occurring at the same time as the attempt to kill the girl, it would seem to bear close connection with it. Certainly Maligni has some strong reason for leaving this country. He has been forced by fear to drop his money-making circus and fly for his life, or it some way he has become possessed of enough money to satisfy him, and he has gone home to enjoy it. But that part of it is not so important. Tell us how you learned this, Maubikeck.'

'I have just left police headquarters,' replied the lion tamer. 'The superintendent was about to send for you and me when I arrived there. The police explain their failure to find Maligni while he was in New York, by saying that he was aided by his fellow countrymen here to outwit all pursuers. Even when he sailed he did so under the name of Luigi Barloti.'

'I gave a start.'

'That is dangerously near to Barloti,' I said.

'Yes. The name was well chosen. The record of passengers, so the superintendent says, shows the names Luigi Barloti and his daughter, Signorina Barloti, and Mariana, the attendant of the signorina. From various descriptions gathered by the police of these people from the company, they concluded at once that they were the

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