A STRANGE TALE FROM ROME.

By John McNaught.

THERE are many strange stories in the records of Rome—many wild tales in those wonderful records of myth and of mystery that have come down to us through so many ages, but among them all is none stranger or wilder than that which (according to a writer, whose veracity we shall not vouch for) in February last started the whole city and rendered the sensitive among her people half hysterical with the dread of a new and unheard-of terror.

The first portion of the story came from the custodian of the catacombs. On the afternoon of that day two guides and a party of sightseers came rushing up from the catacombs frantic with terror to tell a tale such as has not been heard in Rome since the superstitious days of the middle ages. The affrighted guides asserted that when far down in the subterranean passages they had seen the glimmer of an unwonted light in one of the most distant, dangerous and unfrequented recesses of the tombs. From a desire to find out the cause of the strange light the guides and their party turned into the side path and had followed it some distance, when a sudden opening disclosed a sight that at first held them spellbound with amazement and then sent them shrieking and terror-stricken to seek safety in flight. When they came into the sunlight their ghastly faces half terrified those who saw them.

'We saw,' said the guides, 'an awful, walless, vaultless, limitless space open before us in the depths of the tombs. It was lighted by fire from hell. Such a light was never seen by man on earth before. In the midst of the floorless space, in the glare of the hellish light, we saw skeletons moving. They danced together without harmony and swung their bony arms about with frantic motion. We heard them gibber and laugh and scream. We knew they were wicked fiends and we fled.'

The strangers who were with the guides virtually confirmed their story. Being persons of a more intellectual character and less given to superstition, they did not assert that the light came from hell, nor that the horrid skeletons were fiends; but they did affirm the main elements of the tale, and showed a terror as great as that of the guides themselves.

While the talk of the town was still busy with the story and a thousand theories in regard to it were being discussed, it was made known that four of the most promising students of the university were missing from their accustomed places, and also that one of the workmen in the physical laboratory had not appeared that morning. Later in the day it was told that the students, the workman and four young women had entered the catacombs early on Sunday without a guide, having obtained permission to do so on the plea of a desire to make some experiments in photography among the tombs. As none of the party had been seen to return it was evident they were still in the catacombs, and the fear arose that they also had seen the vision of horror which had so affrighted the other visitors on that day and had been too terror-stricken to escape.

Several parties of guides thoroughly familiar with all the labyrinths of the catacombs were at once sent out to search for the missing ones. Before Tuesday morning one of the searching parties returned, bringing the workman with them, but up to this time the students and their companions have not yet been found. The workman when discovered was wandering about chattering in a delirium, and when brought to the surface was unable to talk intelligently. A strong soporific was given him, which threw him into a profound sleep, from which he did not awaken for many hours. When he revived, however, his senses were completely restored and he was able to tell the physician and some professors of the university a story which explains the whole of this latest mystery of Rome.

The story can be best told in the words of the workman himself. It runs in this way: Ever since the commencement of the discovery of a means of photographing the bones within the body the students in the physical department of the university have been working night and day to accomplish some greater wonder in that direction. They said that while a German had led the way, it should be an Italian who would complete the victory. I am not a scientific man, and know nothing of the X ray, or cathode ray, as some people call it, but I listen to the talk of the students and know, of course, what they are aiming at. One of the most ardent of them, Signor Valmi, told me it was his intention to generate a new ray of such a degree of power that it would be possible for the naked eye to see the bones within the flesh directly and without having to resort to photography.

When I expressed some doubt of his ability to accomplish the feat he said: 'There are stars in the heavens which cannot be seen even through the most powerful telescope, but which register themselves on a gelatine plate. The light from those stars is not essentially different from that of the stars which are plainly visible. In the one case the light is weak while in the other it is strong. That is all the difference. Röntgen's ray can be made visible only by photography. I will generate one which will enable you to see the bones within the man exactly as you now see the clothes he wears or the hat on his head. Nothing is lacking but force, and the force will be found.

Last Friday Signor Valmi and three friends, who were working with him, came out of their laboratory together in great excitement, declaring they had solved the problem. They were disputing eagerly among themselves as to the best way of announcing their discovery to the world when I interrupted them. I had an idea on that subject myself. It had occurred to me that a light of that kind would be of great service in searching for hidden treasure among the older buildings or the catacombs of Rome, and that whoever invented it might find a fortune if he would use it in such researches before he made it known to others. I urged the young men, therefore, to make a test of the ray in searching out whatever might be hidden in the catacombs before it was made public. The idea caught their fancy. 'On Sunday we'll do it,' they cried. 'We have worked hard and now for a frolic.'

It was agreed that the affair should be kept a secret among us, but when did young men, flushed with a new success, ever keep a secret? The four students met their sweethearts on the Corso on Saturday, dined with them and went to the theatre with them in the evening, and when I met them by agreement with the instruments from the laboratory on Sunday, I found the girls with them. It had been arranged to make a frolic of it in every respect and the girls, with a basket of lunch, were to be taken along.

After going some distance along the frequented ways of the catacombs we went off into a passage where we were not likely to be interrupted by guides and sightseers, and began to make preparations for the experiment. Everything was soon in readiness for the work and we had only to press the key of the battery to turn on the powerful ray, when it was suggested to have luncheon first. We were all very willing to favour the proposal, for the journey had been long and we were tired and hungry from the exertion. It was an excited luncheon party. All of us were more or less nervous, and though we drank little our talk and actions were like those of persons half intoxicated. One of the girls sprang up and began to dance. Two of the students followed her, and then the other girls joined them. Suddenly there was a whirl of skirts, a flutter of a breeze in the air, and instantly all the candles which had been massed together to light the feast were blown out at once.

The accident was greeted with shouts of laughter. The girls screamed in pretended fright and the students began loudly challenging ghosts to come forth and show themselves. After a little of this amusement I began searching for a match and discovered to my surprise that I had none. A request made to the others of the party brought forth the startling truth. There was not a match in the party. We were in the farthest recesses of the catacombs, without a light, without the means of procuring one, and too far from the frequented passages to be found by the usual parties of sightseers. If we had been too merry before we were sober enough now, and began to wonder how we could grope our way back to the main paths of these underground tombs.

I turned instinctively to find in the darkness the instruments belonging to the university which were in my charge, nor did I make a move to follow the others until I had found the apparatus and mounted it safely on my back. When I turned to go I heard the party groping their way along and easily followed them.

Suddenly Signor Valmi spoke. 'Fools that we are,' he cried, 'to grope our way in darkness when we have with us the greatest light known to man—the supreme light of science—the marvellous ray which ourselves have perfected.' His voice vibrated with confidence, and we all brightened up and began railing at one another for so stupidly forgetting the very thing we had come to the tombs to try.

We were all very joyous then as I lifted from my shoulders the strap that upheld the box containing the apparatus. No sooner had I touched the key than there leaped forth a light that was not as other lights are. It beat upon the eyeballs like flashes of fierce lightning following one another with inconceivable rapidity. The roof, the walls, the floor, seemed penetrated by it, and as I glared around in amazement I appeared to be in the midst of an illimitable space whose atmosphere was agitated by incessant flashes of electricity and whose light was rendered terrible by shifting shadows of an awful and terrifying blackness.

Before I could recover from the amazement caused by this astounding glare, I heard from behind me the most appalling shrieks. I turned quickly and beheld a sight that shall be with me as terror by day and by night until death takes me. I saw before me eight skeletons that started back from one another with uplifted hands of horror. I saw four other trembling skeletons stoop to lift up those that fell. Then I heard the voice of Signor Valmi, but oh! how different was it from the confident voice that had spoken but a moment ago.

'Friends,' he said, and faltered, for his voice was husky and hoarse as a raven's croak, 'friends,' he repeated, 'do not be alarmed. The skeletons we see are ourselves. It is in the light of the cathode ray that we behold one another. Let us be firm.'

There was enough of confidence in these words to encourage the students and I saw them set about reviving the girls from the swoon in which they had fallen at the first shock of the terror. I cannot say that my courage came back, though my mind was clear enough to understand the meaning of what had happened. I crouched low on the floor and watched what was going on with eyes that burned in my head. I saw the fallen skeletons rise up. I heard the hasty frightened words that were whispered for encouragement by those who, themselves, had little courage. Suddenly the strain became too great. Men and girls alike went mad. They began to shout, to dance, to leap, to scream. I saw them even as I saw the skeletons of the tombs amidst them. In that infernal ray the youth and the beauty of life were all as hideous as the dead of a thousand years. Then my brain began to give way and I fled lest I should become a maniac there and then.

How far I fled or how long I wandered I know not. When next my senses returned I was in this bed and you gentlemen were around me. Of the students and the girls I can tell you nothing more. They went forth on a frolic in search of treasure and they found what I have tried to tell, but what I cannot describe and you cannot imagine. I left them between science and death, and God alone knows which has them now.

'THE GREATEST THING IN THE WORLD.'

By Florence McCallen.

IT was the week of the county fair. Margaret and Susie Adams were chatting over their work, choosing to go about together performing their various tasks rather than to divide the work and be separated. The dining-room where they were at work had been enlarged by throwing two large rooms into one. One could catch a glimpse of a yellow-floored kitchen across a narrow passage—for no Missouri woman likes her kitchen to open directly into her dining room—and farther on, rows of milk vessels set against the wall of a vine-draped, stone milk house. There were flagged walks outside and the shade of walnut trees.

The deep closets in the wall of the dining-room had been newly 'straightened,' and Susie, who had done the work, now stood back from it and studied the effect.

'Margaret, don't you think this room is rather nice for two girls to have tinkered up out of almost nothing?'

'Yes, indeed. I seem to hear father now: "Go ahead, girls, but no painting rolling pins and shovels! Everything to be useable.'

'When we came back from school I thought I should die, everything was so dreadful! All the nice china, so dear to all of us, was being smashed to bits. Do you remember how Leda used to set the screens open because she wanted "blenty air alretty?" And mother as helpless among it all as a baby! Mother's a dear, but she can't do anything but love us, and say "don't worry" about everything. But she's beautiful; I am glad father married for beauty, aren't you?'

Susie peeped into the strip of mirror at the back of the sideboard, and made the motion with her head known as 'bridling.'

'I should say so! Fancy being as ugly as Miss Perkins. She was called *plain*, but I think she was actually trimmed with ugliness. How we girls hated her when she used to lecture us! "Deportment, young ladies, is of more importance than mere beauty." Poor old thing! She couldn't sound the letter "p" to save her life, her teeth stuck out so.'

The room referred to was eighteen feet by twenty-six in size, low-ceiled, with a