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A CRISIS ON A LINER

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ANYTHING for me?"

It was growing late, and the porter of the so-called Night-Hawk Club started up into wakefulness and stared, confusedly at the speaker.

"I said, anything for me?" was the query, repeated angrily.

"Beg pardon, sir; yes, sir." And a letter was taken from the rack and handed to the addressee, who scowled as he snatched it, turned away, and taking a few steps across the hall, uttered a low "Hah!" as he recognised the handwriting.

Pausing beneath a lamp, he hastily fore open the envelope and hesitated for a few moments, before unfolding the enclosure with trembling fingers, when he uttered an ejaculation of triumph as he caught sight of a cheque for a heavy sum.

Then, glancing at the hastily written note within, he grasped three words only—"the last time"—before quickly thrusting note and cheque back into the envelope, placing them in his breast pocket, and re-buttoning his coat with a low chuckle of satisfaction.

"Last time, eh?" he muttered. "Always is."

He crossed the hall and entered the empty coffee-room, where a sleepy waiter started up.

"What, are you all asleep? Here, soda and B. quickly."

The startled waiter hurried off, and the fresh arrival laughed softly to himself, and began to hum an air from the last new comic opera.

"No, not the last time, dear boy," he said, quietly, with a little laugh. "You have the wrong man to deal with.—Eh?" he added, turning sharply, for the waiter had come behind him silently, and was holding out a tray bearing the sparkling draught. "Oh, yes, thanks."

He took the glass, drained it, set it down upon the table, and walked jauntily out into the street, nodded to the driver of the first cab that he met, and as he threw himself back in the seat he picked up the broken melody that he had begun humming, and lay back with half closed eyes, till the cab was checked at the entrance to one of the West Central Inns and the Judas was thrown open.

"Drive in, sir?"

"No; that will do."

The member of the club sprang out, passed under the grim-looking archway, passed under the grim-looking archway, in a soul, and then stopped short beneath a lamp which badly illuminated a doorway whose sides displayed a couple of columns of names of the occupants.

A sudden thought had occurred to him which made him begin to breathe hard as he tore the letter from his breast; and his hands trembled again as he glanced sharply round, to find that he was quite alone, and quite in silence save for the distant rumble of a vehicle passing the entrance of the Inn.

"Not selling me, is he?" muttered the man, as he opened the envelope and snatched out its contents; and his fingers trembled more than ever as he separated the long partly printed, partly written slip with its stamped end, from the note-paper. And just then the naked flame of the lamp over the door began to turn from dingy yellow to a sickly blue as if

it were going out.

"What the—" he began; and as if startled by the adjuration the lamp flashed up again so that he could see plainly the figures "£200."

"Suspicious fool!" muttered the man, as he hastily replaced the cheque and note in the envelope, thrust it into his breast, nervously buttoned his coat again and gave a sharp slap to the outside of his pocket. "He daren't," he muttered triumphantly. "I've got him fast; and he knows it too."

He turned to enter the dim doorway, and took a couple of steps towards the flight of ill-lit stairs, a gas lamp from high up showing him doorways to right and left; and as he laid his hand upon the iron balustrade and raised one foot to plant it upon the first step, it seemed as if a sudden chill had been communicated to his heart from the icy iron, for he winced, started back, and hurried through the entrance on to the pavement, to look sharply to right and left; and then breathing hard, he snatched off his hat and let the chill night air play through the thin hairs of his partially bald head.

"What the devil's the matter with me?" he muttered. "Was it that S. and B.? Hallo! Puss! Going out?" he said, half laughingly; but the mirth sounded forced, as he stooped to pat a great black cat which had followed him out of the doorway and now rubbed itself against his leg. "Tchah!" he muttered. "I want tone. Not myself. I'll have a bit of advice." And pulling himself together with a jerk, his footsteps went 'pat, pat,' on the stone entry as he walked straight to the foot of the stairs, slowly and thoughtfully, followed by the cat, which seated itself in the first doorway and sat watching the nervous man as he tried to walk firmly, but with trembling knees, and stopped short on the first landing where he began to fumble for his handkerchief, and made a pretence of wiping his eyes.

"Bile," he muttered—"liver, I must be more careful."

Thrusting back his handkerchief, he turned to ascend the second flight of stairs, when the lamp above, which lit two doorways to right and left of the 1st floor, played the same prank as that below, the flame sinking and changing from a dull yellow to blue and affecting the man so that he began to breathe hard again for a few minutes, during which he half turned to descend.

"What the devil—" he muttered. "Bah! Get to bed; and tearing open his coat once more he thrust his fingers into his vest pocket and snatched out a latch key. Now hurrying up the next flight of steps, with his footsteps echoing strangely from the bare walls, he reached the landing, passed the dark doorway to his left and crossed to the one to the right, and as the gas flame began to descend again, he leaned forward, key in hand, and was in the act of thrusting it into the lock when it appeared as if the jet quite expired, and he missed the keyhole consequent upon the darkness which suddenly seemed to blot out everything, making him start so violently that the little steel key escaped from his fingers and fell jingling upon the stone floor.

A faint cry escaped his lips as he made a movement to stoop and pick up the

fallen key, and then dropped face downward with a groan following upon one dull heavy, sickening crash which had come out of the darkness; and then there was nothing but a sharp rustling sound as in the deep shadow of the doorway a quick busy movement was going on, and the naked gas jet burned of a more deep blue, till, after a quick rustling as of paper, light began to illumine the landing, not given by the gas but from some crumpled up paper ignited from the hissing and fluttering jet, which now gave forth a peculiar whistling wail.

Darkness again, the smell of burning paper, a few sparks playing about in tinder; then a fragment that was only half burned was snatched from the floor, and held to the gas jet, with the result that shadowy fingers and a dimly seen face were illumined for a few seconds, before the silence was broken by another deep groan.

Then for a moment there was a hurried movement on the landing, a sound of something heavy being dragged over the stone flags, and then being allowed to fall with a dull sound upon the floor. Then 'thud, thud, thud,' three heavy blows. Silence, and as the gas jet began to rise slowly with a feeble wail and turn from pallid blue into sickly yellow, a dark and blacked figure slowly and steadily descended the stairs, thrusting something into its breast, passed calmly out beneath the dismal lamp at the entrance, crossed the square, showed up plainly for a moment by the porter's lodge, and turned a way to the right, pause for a moment or two in a doorway to strike a match. Then a cigar was lit, and as the dark actor in the scene walked quietly away, a hansom was hailed, and the act was at an end.

Something horrible but welcome, to the evening papers. The contents bills made the most of it; the streets rang with it—The Mysterious Murder in the Silent Inn. Where were the police? Was this to be the last addition to the long roll of undiscovered crimes? Was there to be no end to these tragedies in which even a gentleman returning from his club at night, who, as the inquest showed and witnesses proved, had been driven to the entrance of the Inn, was struck down at the door of his silent chamber, in the full glow of his health and strength, by some deadly enemy? This was not Venice, with bravoos lurking at street corners, stiletto-armed, ready to perpetrate some private vengeance. For it was an enemy that had done this thing. Was no life to be safe, when such a crime could be committed in the very centre of busy London? Where were the police?

Private vengeance! Yes. The charred fragments of paper, scattered about the landing, were eloquent testimony to the accuracy of that idea. But who was the deadly enemy of the quiet occupant of the lonely chambers in the Inn?

He had been struck down from behind the doctor said, evidently by some blunt instrument, most probably by what is known as a life preserver; the blow had evidently stunned the victim, and the "post-mortem" evidence was in favour of the body having been afterwards turned over, and three more fearful blows given upon the temples.

The papers said that careful research

had proved that this was a gentleman who led a quiet, unoffending life, and that it was supposed that he had at one time been connected with the law; but in spite of careful investigation on the part of the detectives, his life had been so blameless that it could not be connected with anything that could have given rise to the catastrophe.

But some people knew more than the police, and these people were of a kind who would be classified as shady.

The deceased Mr. Edgar Brydges, who was evidently not ashamed of his name, for it was painted in black letters on each side of the doorstep at No. 61 in the Inn, and also repeated upon the door of his chambers was looked upon by the authorities of the place as an excellent tenant and was known to live comfortably and well. But he might have had a large holding in Consols or some other gilt-edged security for aught anybody in an ordinary way knew.

It was sufficient for the world that he had an income, and that he paid his way. One, perhaps two, of his intimates could have told tales about something that would have been classed as blackmail; but it was not their business, and it was a subject which, for reasons of their own, they did not care to treat. So after a few weeks the excitement began to die out, literally fading away in the blaze and novelty of the next "cause celebre." The police made no discovery, and quiet, ultra-sensitive John Mildred, a man of wealth, who had been led to do something in his early hot-blooded youth of which he was heartily ashamed and which had been the curse of his otherwise harmless life, stayed on in London, weighted, crushed by remorse. Finally, however, he went away to try and forget, after waiting for what he felt to be inevitable—the arrest for that which he had done when driven to madness by the black-mailing scoundrel who had ruined his life with the threat to publish the old story of shame if his price were not paid.

It had condemned him to a life of celibacy, to the sense of feeling that sooner or later the world must know; and now, to destroy one haunting demon he had created another, and in his despair he had made up his mind to go anywhere so long as it was away from England, away from where he was known, until the fatal time came.

But still in the streets he found that no one looked at him more than at any other passer-by.

The people at the shipping office welcomed him politely, and in due time the guard at Euston found him a corner seat in the Liverpool express, while on the huge liner the purser, taking him, from his ways, to be an invalid, health-seeking in the pure air of the Veldt, was particularly attentive, and arranged at once that he should have a seat for a table in a quiet corner.

So far no one knew, and in the cabin and repose of a pleasant passage something like peace came over his troubled spirit, and with it a certain feeling that it would be better for him that the discovery should not be made until he was at his journey's end.

There were many pleasant people on board the Cape-bound vessel, and more and more the feeling of repose lulled the haunting horror of his life.