

A DIFFICULT SIGNATURE.

It almost seemed as if the criminal classes had a grudge against Lord Beausarris: within four years of his succession to the barony and the immense wealth of his house nearly twenty attempts to rob him in some way or other had been made, though in all cases but one unsuccessfully. The explanation may have been that certain rogues believed that his lordship's huge fortune, his youth, and easy-going ways would make him careless of treasures. Whether the belief was originally sound or not it is hard to say, but certainly the repeated attempts made to rob Lord Beausarris caused that gentleman to be very careful.

He was a man who would rather have given £1,000 away for no consideration than have been cheated or robbed of a tin sixpence. Consequently, no sooner was a vain attempt made by some burglars to rob his lordship of his famous collection of jewels than he sent the entire lot to his bankers for safe custody; and immediately after a man had succeeded in cashing a cheque purporting to have been signed by the wealthy baron, his lordship set himself the task of inventing a signature which would defy forgers; moreover, he made it a rule never to sign a cheque for less than £100, which considerably reduced the number of his cheques circulated, and hence the facilities for evil-doers to acquaint themselves of the nature of his signature.

It was due to these precautions that more than seven men found their way into prison for divers attempts to forge Lord Beausarris's name to cheques and bills, and that a gang of expert jewel thieves who broke into his lordship's town residence, after weeks of careful planning how to obtain the Beausarris diamonds, got off with nothing more valuable than some plate.

It thus became a point of honour with scientific thieves that Beausarris should be shown that, despite his precautions, he was no match for the ingenuity of men who had devoted themselves to the study of criminal science; he was to be beaten on the very ground where he had entrenched himself, or the higher classes of criminals would have their confidence in themselves very rudely shaken.

Beausarris was taking a quiet, lonely lunch one April noon, previous to paying a round of "duty calls," when the postman brought him a letter from a lady with whom rumour said his lordship contemplated matrimony; at least, the letter implied that it emanated from the Hon. Clarice Marston, and Beausarris accepted it as such, since it was signed in her name and written in her calligraphy.

"Dearest," it ran, "we have postponed our departure until to-morrow. I should be pleased to see you this afternoon.—Your Clarice."

Beausarris was annoyed by finding that his lady-love was still in town and he had missed four days' opportunities of seeing her by crediting the report that she and her parents had gone to Monte Carlo for the spring. Beausarris had heard from Clarice herself a week ago that they were to leave London in a few days' time, and he had quite satisfied himself that she had gone, because he understood that Lord Marston's house had been let for the period of the family's absence. Beausarris was too annoyed to have any doubts of his own mistake. He fell into the trap as a duck waddles into a pond. He could hardly have suspected that anyone possessed of evil designs would rent the town residence of a peer, however inpecunious that peer happened to be.

An hour after lunch his lordship stepped into a smart hansom and set out for Lord Marston's house in South Kensington.

Twenty minutes quick drive put him in front of his lordship's mansion. He paid the cabman, mounted the steps, and knocked at the door.

"Miss Marston at home?" he inquired of the footman who answered his knock.

The man bowed as he opened the door wider. Beausarris glanced casually at the man, and it did strike him as strange that the Marstons should have engaged a new man-servant within a few days of their leaving for abroad. But he did not attach any suspicion to the matter. He followed the man to the small drawing room at the back of the house without the shadow of an idea that anything unusual was in the air.

Without a word the man ushered Beausarris into the unoccupied drawing room and withdrew. The door had hardly closed before it opened again and two men entered.

They were both slightly above the average height: one was dark, stout, and wore gold-rimmed eye-glasses; the other, who seemed to depend upon his companion for guidance, was fair, with a frank, honest face, a thick fair beard, and slightly foreign general appearance.

Beausarris bowed in his cold, stiff fashion in acknowledgement of the profound obeisances, but before he had time to wonder who they were the dark man, who looked the elder of the two, inquired with some servility:—

"You desire to see Miss Marston?"

"That is the object of my visit," Beausarris replied, easily. "May—"

"I regret to have to inform you that she is at Monte Carlo," said the dark man, with another bow, which seemed a trifle mocking. "What? Pray pardon my surprise, but it was only this morning I received from her a note asking me to call here this afternoon. Am I to understand that the letter was delayed in the post, and that I am intruding upon the gentleman to whom Lord Marston has let this house?"

"I am Baron Steinheiser—the sub-tenant of this house," replied the dark man. "To that extent your presumption is correct. But the letter was written by friend here, Monsieur Paul Panier," indicating the fair man, who drew his heels together and bowed.

Beausarris realized immediately that he had been trapped for the purpose of some elaborate fraud.

"And may I inquire the reason for which you have drawn me here by means of a forged letter?" he asked, sternly, looking the men up and down angrily.

"For an object we have in view," said the baron. "I may add the object is one which—now that you are safely here—cannot fail to prove to you that all your elaborate precautions to guard your jewels and immense wealth are inadequate to protect you against men of our ingenuity. It has long been the desire of my friends and myself that you should have a nasty fall; you have declared a kind of war between yourself and those who desire to acquire parts of that fortune you can never spend, and—I flatter myself I may regard your fall as having taken place.

The insolence of this speech quite staggered Beausarris. He started at the men in amazement.

"And, now I am here, what do you intend to do with me—assuming you can do what you like?" he asked, after a pause.

"Do you really wish to know?" queried the fair man, speaking for the first time.

"Paul, Paul!" exclaimed the baron. "The knowledge will cause his lordship sufficient pain if he learns for himself. Spare him until then."

Beausarris, who had only asked the question to gain time in which to consider his situation, took two long strides up to them and, with the skill for which he had been famed at college, knocked the baron's head against the wall and sent M. Panier sprawling over the back of an arm-chair. He rushed to the door, but found it locked on the outside, and before he could wreck the lock, the baron and Panier collected themselves and grappled him.

It was a brief struggle, and ended in Beausarris being rendered insensible by a heavy fall.

"Here's a pickle!" murmured his lordship, as he awoke to consciousness some time later. "Good——!" He glanced round in astonishment at finding himself in a whitewashed cellar. "This comes of falling in love with the daughter of a man who has to let his house to help defray the cost of an expensive visit to Monte Carlo." He laughed lightly to himself. "Marston's wine-cellar, of all unholy places! . . . They're a pretty set, upon my word; but if daring will do what they want, they'll succeed without a doubt. . . . I wonder what on earth they're up to?"

He rose and examined every nook and corner of the cellar by the light of the lamp hanging upon one of the walls. In one corner stood a small camp-bed, and beside it a washstand.

"I'm evidently invited for the night," he said, reflectively. "Hang it, they might have given me a jug with a handle. I wonder how the excellent baron got the references old Marston would, of course, expect. Probably in the same way as he obtained the letter I had from Clarice. Beastly scoundrels! It just shows the risk of letting one's house in this way. What on earth is there to prevent these people going off with that water-jug, for instance? . . . I've got a racking headache." He looked at his watch. "Six o'clock. I must have been here, then, over two hours."

Hearing a slight sound in the direction of the door he turned and beheld a woman, who was softly closing the door, the key of which she held in her hand. She was tall, young, elegantly dressed, and unquestionably beautiful.

"Hush," she whispered, "they are gone out."

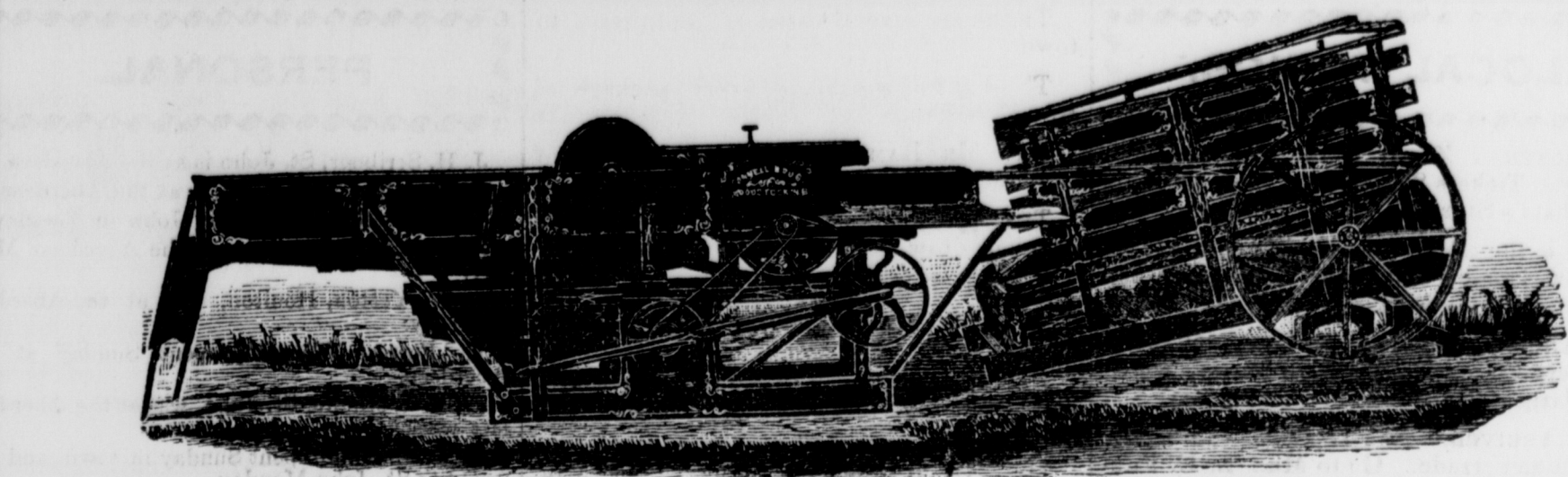
"Really," thought Beausarris, who was not prejudiced by being in love, "this is the most interesting feature of the affair. The Baroness Steinheiser, I presume?" he said, aloud.

"Ah, no," she replied, sadly. "Madame Panier. Don't speak above a whisper, or we may be heard. No one knows I have come here. I want to help you if I can."

"Of course you can, if you will," he said, eagerly; "you have the key of the cellar! But tell me first why your gang has played this trick upon me."

"I dare not—dare not tell you," she whispered, wildly. "I am running vast danger—dey would kill me!—in being here. But I saw your beautiful face when dey carried you, and—oh! I want to save you from dem!" "Nothing is more easy," he replied. "Give me the key." "Ah, no," she smiled sadly at him. "Dere is Charles—de man who let you in. He would not let you go, although he has no heart in dis deir barbarous scheme."

"Do you imagine they can keep me here any length of time?" he asked scornfully. "By midnight I shall be missed, by to-morrow half London will be looking for me; and then they will be caught."



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She shook her head slowly. "Dey do not make plans like dat," she said. "You are in peril—peril such as you cannot imagine. Oh, dink of some way I can save you while dey are away!" "Let me out of this; I'll undertake to settle with Charles if he's the only one between me and the street." You do not understand. But——"she stopped, and an expression of relief lit up her beautiful face, "we might buy Charles. He is only in dis wickedness for money." "What would he want? I haven't ten—no, not five pounds on me." She looked disappointed. "Would he take my watch—it's worth fifty pounds?" "No, it might betray him. Can you no make money—make a cheque—so much?" "Of course I could, if I had paper and ink. But would he accept that?" "I'll dry him, and if he will—oh, he must, he shall. Oh, my beautiful gentleman, I will save you."

She seized his hand and pressed it tenderly between hers. "Women of my race love quickly," she said, with flashing eyes, "but dey love no less well!"

Swiftly she left the cellar, closing and locking the door after her. Beausarris heard the key grate in the lock as she withdrew it.

He stared at the door in silence, pondering. He was trying to get some tangible idea out of the extraordinary affair to conceive the object for which he had been tricked and trapped. He was not altogether satisfied that the passion he had inspired in Madame Panier's heart was as genuine as it was sudden, although he was conscious that he possessed an unusually attractive personality.

In a few minutes Madame Panier returned. She brought pen, ink, and a single sheet of paper.

"Ouil!" she exclaimed, darting into the cellar. "He is willing. Be quick, for we may have some small time."

"But supposing your husband and the baron return before I get away, what then?" "Don't waste time!" she replied. "With Charles on our side, we can succeed."

"How much does he want?" he asked, trying the point of the pen upon his thumb nail. It was a broad nib, such as he generally used. "Five hundred pound only. Quick! I dare not be caught here."

Beausarris sat down on the end of the bed and, laying the sheet of note-paper upon the washstand, carefully wrote out a cheque upon his bank for £500. He signed it, and with the utmost apparent indifference dotted the "i" in "Beausarris."

Madame Panier snatched it up the moment it was complete and flew out of the cellar. But she was met at the door by the baron and her husband. The latter took from her the cheque and went up the stairs, laughing lightly. The baron, beaming with smiles, entered the cellar and bowed to Beausarris, who had started up from the bed and stood gazing after Madame Panier.

"My Lord," said the baron, with a mocking chuckle, "Charles is deeply sensible of your generosity. Five hundred pounds to a man in his position is a fortune, and with the aid of my talented friend, Panier, we shall be able to make it more than £60,000. When you make your signature so peculiar that even a man like Panier dared not attempt to copy it, did it strike you that you would ever be induced to give a genuine signature to anyone who could make a large fortune by it?"

(CONCLUDED ON SIXTH PAGE.)

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Things don't turn up in this world until somebody turns them up.—Garfield.

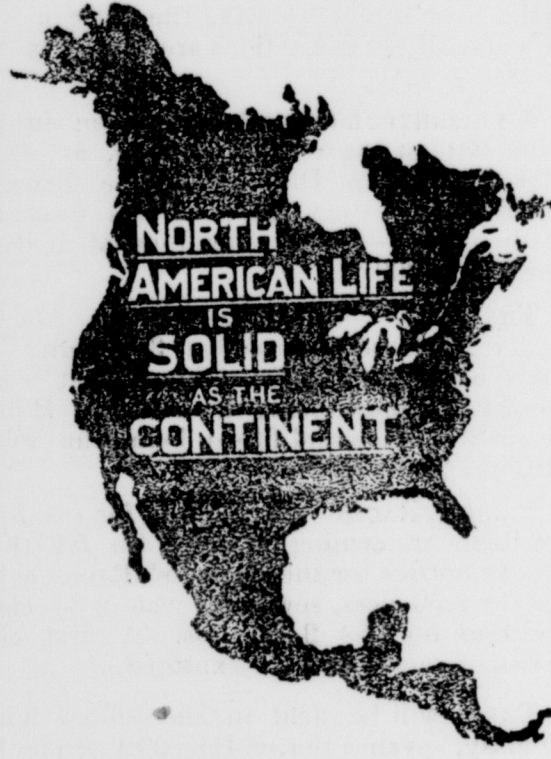
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