

## A FATAL PRECOCITY.

I am a British doctor, and, in the practice of my profession, was for several years connected with the port of Genoa.

One night, after a pleasant hour spent at a concert hall in the Galleria Mazzini, I was proceeding homewards, when a violent fall of rain forced me to take shelter in the open doorway of a small *osteria* or public-house. Possibly the same reason had drawn thither two other persons, for a moment after my arrival, I overheard—though on account of the darkness I could see nobody—the following conversation, spoken low and in pure Italian, very different from the ordinary Genoese dialect:—

"And does he still sink slowly, Maria?" asked one whom, from her voice, I judged to be an old woman.

"Yes, grandmother, his life is ebbing by slow and sure degrees. He would have sent today for a doctor, but I had little difficulty in dissuading him; he still believes, you know, that his own medicine is better than those of the fraternity. How long will it be, grandmother, before the end is reached?"

It was evidently a child that spoke, and something in her voice and utterance hindered me a while from reflecting that I had no right thus to overhear this dialogue.

The person addressed as grandmother replied immediately:

"A couple of months at most, my child. In the meantime still follow implicitly my directions. I thank heaven—she raised her voice and, I felt, lifted her hand emotionally above her head—"that Fate has thrown again in my this faithless husband, this selfish—"

Here somebody opened the public house door, and I, roused from my interest and ashamed of having played so thoughtlessly the eavesdropper left my shelter, probably without being perceived. I can truthfully aver that in the business of the ensuing days I forgot the conversation thus overheard.

A few weeks later, whilst at breakfast, my landlady announced a visitor. He was a young Englishman, of "horsey" appearance, and, though at that time he wore no livery, I identified him easily as a gentleman's servant. On entering my room he touched his hat, and, without any preliminaries, began:

"Doctor, I wish you would come to the Hotel de Londres and have a look at my master, Mr. Roland Lorraine. He's been getting worse these last four months; but, for the life of me, I can't make out what ails him."

Naturally, I asked for a few particulars about Mr. Lorraine. The reply taught me that he was a fellow-countryman, of high position and considerable fortune, who some time before had come on a visit to Italy, and, shortly after his arrival, had been struck down by a strange illness, or, I should rather say, a slow wasting away of vitality. I learned also that he himself, preferring to utilize his own medical knowledge, had not called me in, but that his servant, much frightened at the continued progress of the malady, had taken the responsibility of so doing.

Straightway accompanying my visitor, I found Mr. Lorraine in bed at the Hotel de Londres. He must have been, ordinarily, a handsome, robust man, but his face was now lengthened, his colour hectic, and his body emaciated—symptoms evidently due to a lingering disorder. Unexpected as was my visit, he submitted with good grace to be examined and prescribed for.

But here came the difficulty. I diagnosed him carefully, yet could find no real seat of disorder. I inspected the medicine he had himself prepared; it was a draught composed principally of herbs, utterly innocent if not beneficial. The cause of this mysterious wasting away baffled my closest investigation. I thought it necessary to inquire into his surroundings.

"Have you any friends in Genoa, Mr. Lorraine?" I asked.

"None," was the reply. "I came hither, accompanied by my servant, some six months ago, my object being business of a private family nature. Had I not fallen ill I should doubtless have made friends in pursuit of that very business. My first thought was that the change of air had caused my illness, and, naturally, I took such medicines as I believed capable of fortifying me."

"Then you have nobody with you but your servant? Who is he?"

"Oh, John was born and brought up on my estate. He is the honestest fellow going. But I have another companion besides him—a little Italian maiden named Maria."

"Did she also come over from England?"

"No, no. I met her here, doctor, in quite a romantic way. Hardly had I been a week at this hotel before little Maria called on me. She has recently been left an orphan, you understand, and stated herself to be quite destitute and friendless; she possessed, however, excellent testimonials from the sisters of a convent, and, doubtless thinking that I was married, came to see if I had a place for her in my household. Struck by her quaint, old-fashioned courage and self-reliance, I engaged her forthwith—awaiting my indefinitely determined marriage—and a treasure she has proved herself."

"How old is she, Mr. Lorraine?" I asked.

"Not more than twelve."

Now, I had a reason for putting these questions, a reason which my patient evidently did not fathom. But whatever it was, his answers satisfied me. I prescribed what I imagined would combat the mysterious physical emaciation, and, promising to call again, took my leave of the worthy gentleman.

Next morning I was somewhat startled by a second visit from John, the manservant. I conjectured at first that his master had grown feebler, and when I learned the real motive of his coming, I could almost have wished that such only had been the case.

"Something very strange happened last night at our hotel, doctor," he said. "You heard the governor speak of little Maria; she nurses him, you know, and gives him his medicine. Well, about midnight, thinking I heard him call, I ran to his bedroom. He was asleep, however, and did not hear me enter; but little Maria, who was kneeling down by the cupboard in which the draughts are kept, suddenly started to her feet, and, in evident excitement, dropped, and, smashed to atoms, a phial no longer than my little finger. When I asked what it was, she told me it was one of the bottles purchased yesterday on your

prescription. But, doctor"—and the man drew significantly near me—"I saw the medicine you ordered as they were being brought in, and that phial was not amongst them."

I opened my eyes at this. There certainly should have been no phial.

"Mind you, sir," he continued, "Maria is a good little girl, and I should have seen nothing in her action if she hadn't told me a lie. But those Italians! You never know what they're up to. There's enough mystery already about Mr. Roland's illness without having children of twelve handling queer phials at midnight. I didn't tell the master what I saw, for Maria is so much in his favor he might have pooh-poohed my story and imagined I was getting jealous of her influence. But I determined on telling you."

The honest fellow's manner was very impressive. Clearly he did not speak all he thought, nor did I press him to. We talked the matter over a little longer, and as I could not go immediately to the hotel I wrote a note to Mr. Lorraine, in which, on the simple plea that the nature of the medicines made it dangerous to intrust their administration to a child, I enjoined him strictly to give sole charge of the cupboard to his manservant.

That very day I was unexpectedly called out of the city, and therefore could not see my patient until about the close of the week. When eventually I visited the Hotel de Londres, I found him sitting up and in such good health, comparatively, that I could not but congratulate myself on the success of my prescription. I took this opportunity of advising Mr. Lorraine to leave Genoa and return for the summer to England, mentioning as arguments the certain intense heat and the probable prevalence of cholera.

"My dear doctor," was his reply, "you advise that which to me is impossible. I have a mission in Italy, and cannot find it in my heart to leave without having performed it. I don't mind telling you the particulars. I had a very dear brother, Melville, who was what we call a man of the world. This brother and myself were exactly alike in appearance—in fact, we were twins. Stop! Here is my album, and here is his likeness and mine. You can hardly tell the difference."

Suiting the action to the word, Mr. Lorraine showed me the photographs. I was indeed struck by the vivid resemblance of the brothers. They seemed to be both of the same height, same build, and same expression; and yet, withal, a sufficient disparity obtained to have enabled acquaintances easily to distinguish them. My patient continued:—

"At Melville's death, some twelve months back, I took possession of the estates. We had always believed him a bachelor, but on looking over his private papers I found, to my great surprise, that he had, in early days, married an Italian woman of the lower class, and that he had, for some strange, unexplained reason, married her in my name. One child—a girl—was the issue of their union, which, proving shortly afterwards a wretched one, appears to have made Melville desert his wife under circumstances for which, however much I love his memory, I can find no justification."

"But have you any reason to suppose he was in Genoa?" I asked.

"Every reason," answered Mr. Lorraine. "Though my brother deserted this wife and daughter, he kept an eye upon their movements; and in this way I know that a twelvemonth ago they lived here. Having come hither to seek them, I am determined not to return until I ascertain their present whereabouts. I look upon the rectification of my brother's wrong-doing as a solemn duty. Oh, here's Maria!"

The little Italian girl of whom I had heard so much now entered the room. She was a pretty, diminutive maid, showing in her appearance nothing of that terrible precocity whereof I was soon to learn the existence. When Mr. Lorraine told her my name she looked hard at me for a minute, and then, without withdrawing her eyes, said to him in Italian:

"So this is the gentleman who fears to intrust me with the medicines? I can assure him he need have had no scruple. Whilst my mother lay ill—dying of a far more terrible illness than yours, Mr. Lorraine—the illness of long years of poverty and neglect—I alone attended her, administering with the care of a physician those drugs which both she and I know would never conquer her disorder. But the doctor has doubtless his motives, and I bow to them."

Where had I before heard that voice and that emphasis? I failed to recall when or where; yet I felt sure this was not the first time of hearing them. About midnight I took my leave, but on presently reaching an *osteria*, the sight of its dark doorway fired a train of recollections across my memory. In that very place had I heard, with just such voice and emphasis, the reference to the slowly dying man and the mysterious question as to the coming of the end. There, too, had I heard about the faithless husband and the implied, it unspoken, vow of vengeance. The whole story flashed upon me like lightning. Good heavens! Could it be that, owing to her extraordinary likeness, Mr. Lorraine had been mistaken for his brother by the deceased gentleman's marital relatives? Could it be that he, who so nobly had intended their relief, was destined as a sacrifice to their southern love of revenge? The mother was probably dead, as the little maid had said;

but there still lived the grandmother to whom I had heard her speak. Why should she have stated herself to be destitute and friendless? Why should she have been found tampering (or seemingly so) with the medicine I had ordered for the sick man? What was this sickness that baffled so completely my investigation?

As thought after thought rose confusedly within me, I retraced my steps to the Hotel de Londres. Deeming that my patient might be asleep, I mounted noiselessly the stairs and as noiselessly pushed open the bedroom door.

Horror! Bending over the sleeper, and so engrossed in his plans as not to observe my entry, was the little Italian maid. The lights burned low, but in her uplifted hand I saw the dim gleam of a dagger. To rush forward and stay the impending blow was the work of a moment. At the unwanted noise Mr. Lorraine awoke.

"What, you, Maria?" he cried, as he realized the situation. "You to whom I have been like a father—"

The girl laughed hysterically. "A father who kills his wife and leaves his daughter to poverty and the streets? Ha! I swore at my mother's death bed to rid the world of such a monster."

So my suspicions had been correct. Mr. Roland Lorraine, mistaken for the brother who got married in his name, was the intended victim of this precocious child. She had tried, with partial success, to poison him, and had afterwards, when prevented by my interference from completing that design, determined on sending him to his last account with the aid of steel.

We explained to her the mistake, setting forward the proof of the two portraits, and telling her of her real father's death twelve months previous.

"My father dead!" she cried, throwing on us a look of rage and disappointment which I shall never, never forget; "and I did not kill him!" Then, dropping on her knees as it to implore Mr. Lorraine's pardon, she suddenly seized the dagger, which I had shaken from her hand to the floor, and, with a frenzied movement, plunged it into her breast.

Death was instantaneous. It is not to be wondered at that, after such a terrible scene, the sick man's nerves gave way. For long weeks I nursed him through a terrible fever, and though at length I brought him back into possession of his former health, the remembrance of the fatal precocity of his poor niece, who, under the impression that she was but taking a holy revenge, had almost committed a heinous crime—this remembrance, I say, had a painful and lasting effect. All efforts to trace the miserable woman, presumably her grandmother, and evidently the instigator of the attempted assassination, proved unavailing.

## DR. SMITH'S GHOSTS.

I once knew a Dr. Smith, dead some years, poor fellow, who in a communicative mood told me a story so strange, so incredible, that had I not heard it from his own lips I should, I think, have been loath to believe it. In Dr. Smith's own words, or as nearly so as I can recollect, it ran thus:

I had made my way home from a party, where we had supped not wisely too well, late one night, and somehow remarked as I stood on my doorstep endeavoring to place my latchkey in the lock, that there was something strange about my house. An eerie feeling seized me, against which I struggled with little success. Resolutely entering I walked into my dining-room, where against this sensation of strangeness fell upon my inner consciousness. I felt the presence of something unknown and intangible, and again throwing the thought from me, I sat down and deliberately proceeded to take off my boots. While doing so I suddenly perceived a lady sitting quietly in the chair nearest me. She coughed slightly; then again more severely, upon which I remarked, "You seem, madam, to have come to consult me about a cold?"

"No, doctor," she replied, "my errand is of a different and more delicate nature. Some years ago you attended me for cancer of the throat, and, as you may perhaps recollect, I died. My name was Margaret Brown. If you will excuse my mentioning it, you removed my larynx, kept it for some time in a jar, and eventually buried it in your back garden. I am using at present a borrowed one, which does not fit very well, giving rise, as you may observe, to considerable cough. If it is not asking too much of you, will you kindly return me my own, which a little renovation will, I think, make serviceable? Your kindness in this matter will greatly oblige me, and I will, with the greatest possible pleasure, point out the spot and hold a candle while you dig."

I turned to the lady and said that, as a gallant man, I could not find it in my heart to refuse her request, but that I trusted my compliance in this matter would not be considered a precedent for other inhabitants of the spiritual world to follow. With these words I walked down stairs, unbolted my surgery door, which opened into the garden, and turned to see if my strange visitor was following me. She was not, but an apologetic cough directed my attention outside, upon which I found that the lady was there before me, bringing with her the dining-room lamp and my smoking-cap (attentive creature).

With a spade I then proceeded to dig at

the spot she indicated. The first thing we unearthed was an old pickle jar, which the lady informed me was of no personal interest to her, but that I had better keep it, because a male friend who was waiting outside might want it later on, as it contained his right lung. I dug on, and came to a wooden box. "This," said my visitor, "holds the slaughtered bodies of three kittens;" another pickle-jar, and this was the right one.

The lady seized it, wiped it carefully with the tail of my black coat, kicked in the kittens, some of the loose soil, and then led the way to the dining-room, where I followed humbly with the right lung under my arm. We sat down as before, and the lady asked me if I would mind her poking the fire, as she always felt the cold so when she left home. I was surprised, it being a very warm night, but deemed it wise to make no remark. In a few minutes I ventured to suggest that her friend might like to come in to—ahem!—warm himself and get his lung, which I had still under my arm. She thanked me and gave a peculiar whistle—a moment's interval of silence, then I felt a most unpleasant draught down the back of my neck, and her friend stood before us.

He was a tall, thin young man, very short of breath; he said "good evening" to me, remarking also his lung on the table where I had placed it, and which, he added, "quite reminded him of old times." I handed him the organ in question, which he put carefully into a black bag—brought probably for the purpose—preparatory, as he said, "to passing it over to their official physiologist for renovation." "Physiologist," he said, "is by far the best represented branch of your profession where we come from." I guessed at once, of course, where they had come from, and rejoined that "I would certainly expect that to be so."

He then proposed to write a cheque for my kind services, delicately hinting that when I wanted it cashed it would be necessary for me to present it in person at the bank. As I entertained an uneasy suspicion that the bank in question was situated where I would not care to go, I made a virtue of necessity and asked them to accept the lung and the larynx as a marriage present; a little joke which caused the lady to blush so that she changed from iron gray to almost yellow.

They thanked me with a polite bow—again I felt the draught down the back of my neck, and my visitors had disappeared. I fell at once into a deep sleep, from which I awakened some hours later, with a severe pain in my head, one boot very dirty, and the other nowhere to be found.

In the course of the morning my dog was seen to be playing with something in the garden, and this most strangely turned out to be my missing boot.

Such was the story told me by my poor dead friend Smith, and I would have considered it, from the lips of any other man, as the irresponsible result of an alcoholic orgie.

## A Bad Little Man.

Norwegian sailors believe in a mysterious water goblin who sings their hair while they are asleep, knots ropes and commits all sorts of absurdities. He is a small man, with fiery red hair and green teeth, dressed in yellow breeches, tall boots and a steple crowned hat. He often helps the sailors in their work, but to see him is certain death.

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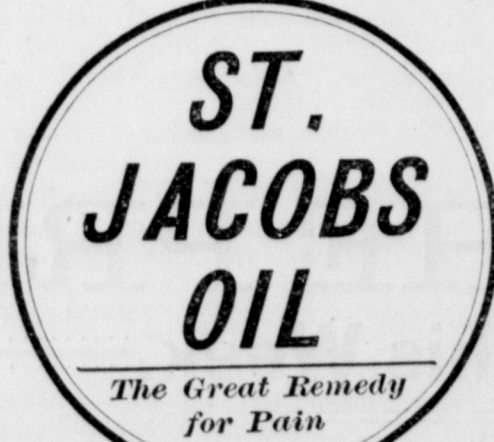
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