

THE SISTER OF DEATH.

"It must be a wonderful country," said Mrs. Brandreth, as her nephew, Stephen Hamerton, finished one of his stories of America.

"I suppose you will be going back there before long?" said pretty Isabel Brandreth, quite innocently, of course.

"I don't intend to return there by myself, that is certain," answered Stephen, as a full and free declaration of love flashed from his eyes.

"It would be the very thing for Tom," said Mrs. Brandreth, who might be suspected of wishing to get rid of the nephew who was not a good lot at the expense of the other, who was one of the best fellows in the world.

"Tom can choose his own chums and his own place of exile," said Tom Brandreth, "when it comes to that."

"I am glad you have so many friends to choose from," said Mrs. Brandreth.

"He could not help wishing that Tom would borrow from them as well, and thus spare her purse a bit."

"Well, I have had a rough time of it out in California, and it I have made my pile, I have had to work hard and to defy danger," said Stephen.

"Tom would be equal to defying danger," said Isabel, laughingly accentuating the final condition of Stephen's past experiences.

"Yes; but sometimes he would find that caution in avoiding danger would be more advantageous than the courage of defying it," said Stephen. "There is a great deal said about the fidelity of an Indian who has eaten salt with you. Well, I dare say he is not worse than the average digger one meets in the gold-fields; but, still, the Indian is quite as crafty as he is courageous."

The speaker took three or four small bulbous roots from his pocket.

"The Indians call that the 'Sister of Death,'" he added. "It is found about Colorado, and it is said that they use it to drug the water which they give to their friends to drink—at least, those guests who are not to be congratulated upon their chances of wanting any further entertainment. For myself, I can remember when — But I need not give you and Isabel the horrors."

"What can you remember, Stephen?" asked his aunt, anxious not to lose the chance of some terrible story, which should also have the dreadful quality of being true. "I remember that my hotel closes early, aunt," he replied, "and I am quite tired enough to sleep through the night without any assistance from the Indians."

"How long would that drug make you sleep?" asked Tom.

"It depends upon the time it is allowed to remain in the water which you drink," explained Stephen. "A few minutes solution would give you three or four hours' unconsciousness; a prolonged immersion would have a result for you that would fairly entitle the bulb to the name which the Indians conferred upon it. Well, good-night, aunt! Good-night, Issy!"—delivered with a little more intention. "Good-night, Tom!"

But Tom was going Stephen's way, and would walk with him.

II

Mrs. Brandreth, who had a small cottage in Cornwall, could not persuade herself that her nephew Tom was quite so bad as other people tried to make her believe; yet she would have been glad to have an ocean or so between him and Isabel until such time as he should show a mended life by a bettered fortune.

But Tom Brandreth did not let his aunt know the extent of his necessities nor the unscrupulousness of his character. He had for some little time been in dalliance about Isabel with the hope that he might induce her to elope with him, feeling perfectly assured that his aunt's fortune would follow in due course. More than that, he knew that his late uncle had made a separate provision for Isabel, and, as she was now of age, she would have the control of it.

So he reckoned on obtaining enough of her fortune to enable him to pay off those debts which were owned by dangerous creditors. Indeed, he had been just persuading himself that Isabel was beginning to yield to his influence, when his cousin Stephen came back from California, a rich, frank, shrewd, bold and handsome man. How welcome his appearance was to Tom may easily be imagined.

"I wish he were dead!" he often exclaimed to himself. "If he fell over the cliff on his way home there would be no one to say he was pushed over."

But then Tom told himself that it was not quite so certain for Stephen to go over the cliff, and the prudent suggestion which preceded itself to him that in a fair struggle Stephen would not prove a man easily beaten.

Meanwhile, time hurried on, and Tom's creditors were in quite as much haste.

"Issy," he said one day, "I want to speak candidly to you. I thought some while ago that you were beginning to care for me."

"Of course I should care for you," she replied. "Are you not papa's nephew?"

"Since Stephen has been here I have noticed a difference in you," he said.

The slightest flush came to her cheek and faded again, but it was quite enough to betray her and to convince her interlocutor.

"You are both my cousins," she answered.

"Yes, I know," he assented; "and I suppose that having only so much of that sort of affection to dispose of, you have had to divide it. I hope you have done so equally. But I have not come to talk about that. I am going off to Melbourne."

"When?" she asked.

"Not immediately," he replied. "My friend Marchmont has lent two or three of us his yacht, and so we thought that aunt and you would join us for a trip. Gilson's wife will be with him."

He did not know that even Gilson was going to join them.

"It is very kind of you," she said; "but my mother is too old for such expeditions, and I should not leave her."

To an expressed moderate disappointment, and soon took his departure.

"I shall have to do it the other way," he said to himself. "I would rather not, but it can't be helped."

Then he went down to the yacht and told the master that he should not want it for a week, so that the men could be sent ashore, and Thomas Brandreth's own man, an old salt, could be left in charge. After that he called upon two gentlemen of the

contraband profession, and ordered them to get on board the yacht that night and to have everything ready for sailing by four in the morning.

"Marchmont will be in a deuce of a rage," he muttered, "but it can't be helped. I have no other way of getting Isabel, and without her I am simply stumped."

III.

The narrative of his cousin about the Indians and the use that they made of the "Sister of Death" had very much impressed itself upon Tom Brandreth's memory. His recollection was still more animated from the accident of Stephen's having, by chance, dropped one of the narcotic bulbs, which the scheming gentleman had surreptitiously picked up and appropriated.

It is said that opportunity makes crime; it would be at least as near the truth to assert that crime finds opportunity. Possessed of that which might render Isabel insensible whenever he should venture to immerse it in the wine or water which she was likely to drink, the idea then came to him that he might carry her off when she was no longer conscious, and at least compromise her name by making people believe she had eloped with him, and thus she would have no choice but to become his wife. To facilitate his possible plans, he made friends with the big watch-dog that guarded the stable and courtyard, and accustomed the animal to his visits at all times in the evening and night.

It was while he was drifting into some scheme that Marchmont put his yacht at his disposal. With this great opportunity came greater plans and more reckless decisions. A rascally fellow is sure to increase his own temptations by knowing other rascally fellows. The men whom he had ordered to take the place of Marchmont's crew were something more than smugglers; they were river poachers, crimps, and when they saw an opportunity and Jack was drunk enough, they were thieves whom poor sailors would have been much wiser to avoid.

Stephen was always hovering about the cottage, and Tom, with a guilty suspicion, told himself that his cousin was watching him.

However, he heard one day that the next evening Stephen would be called away to London. Good!—that must be the time to carry out his plans. He knew Isabel and her mother drank water at their early supper. He had only to be in time to put the bulbous root into the water-bottle and to take it out before the servant laid the supper, and ere midnight Isabel and her aunt would be as insensible as if they were asleep, or, according to the description of Stephen, as if they were dead.

He knew that the servant went to bed as soon as the supper was over, so that there would be no obstacle to his carrying off his cousin, unless the watch-dog should make any objection. This was not very likely; but perhaps he could guard against such a difficulty by tampering with the water in the saucer from which the canine sentinel drank.

"What, Tom!—at this time of night!" exclaimed Mrs. Brandreth, as her nephew stepped from a dog-cart, which he had hired for the occasion.

"Well, he comes very opportunely," remarked Isabel; "he can drive Stephen to the station."

A shadow of disappointment for a moment clouded Tom's face, but the gloom vanished as Stephen spoke.

"No, thank you, Tom," he said. "I know you are a late man, and the mail-train starts at eleven o'clock."

At last he was gone. The simple supper had been partaken of by the trio, and Tom said he would put the horse in the shafts and be jogging.

A few minutes after, as the domestic extinguished her candle, she saw Tom going across the courtyard with his horse and trap as he patted the dog held by a long chain.

Then Tom entered the cottage again and walked nervously into the little dining-room. He need not have stepped so noiselessly; it would have taken a great deal to rouse from their sleep Isabel and her mother, who sat motionless, unconscious, and almost without respiration.

The villain shuddered at the sight of his own work; but the next moment he shook off his apprehension, rushed to the sideboard, poured out and drank half a tumbler of neat whiskey, and then prepared to remove the insensible Isabel to the dog-cart, which should bear her to the harbour, where a rowing-boat was in readiness to transport her to the yacht.

There was panic in the little cottage the next morning, and the terrified servant might have been seen running from the doorway in an absolute paroxysm of grief and horror.

"What is the matter, Lucy?" asked Stephen, whom the girl had just run to meet.

"Miss Isabel has gone, and missis and Mr. Thomas," answered the girl.

"Gone?" exclaimed Stephen.

Then he wondered if Tom's confidential man had only pretended to betray his master, and had invented one plot while Brandreth was arranging another.

"Where are they gone, do you think?" he asked.

"They are all dead," sobbed the girl.

Stephen hurried into the house, to find Isabel just recovering consciousness, while Tom and Mrs. Brandreth were still unconscious.

"What is the matter?" asked Isabel.

"It is only a rascality found out in time," said Hamerton. "Tom had stolen one of the Indian bulbs, and last night drugged the water you drank, intending to carry you off. From what I had been told, I suspected him, and drugged also aunt's Scotch whiskey, of which the gentleman is rather too fond, as it appears. Isabel, become my wife, and this gentleman will be no longer dangerous."

The young lady's glance certainly did not convey a negative; but there was no time for words, as Brandreth, passing his hand over his head, opened his eyes and looked round in wonder.

"Let me explain the situation, Mr. Brandreth," said Stephen. "You drugged your cousin with the intention of carrying her to your friend's yacht while she was unconscious, but I have turned the tables. Now, remain in England twenty-four hours longer, and you will be in a police cell, charged with your offence, and I have evidence to convict you. Go at once."

Brandreth did not wait for any alternative, but, running from the cottage, he found his horse grazing near where he had left him. He jumped into the dog-cart and drove off to the harbor, to find Marchmont calling the spurious crew to account for

their presence on the yacht. The next moment he turned his horse's head and left the town, never to return.

When Mrs. Brandreth recovered from her lethargy the night's events were unknown to her, and it was not till after Isabel was Stephen's wife that he explained the mystery of the "Sister of Death."

SOME THRILLS I HAVE HAD.

Describing a Few Things That Tended to Elevate the Hair.

You may get a very genuine little test of nerve by climbing Helvellyn from Patterdale, by Striding Edge, in a gale and thick mist and rain combined. The writer did it the other day, and was very glad when he was safely at the foot of the mountain, eating a luncheon of corned beef and salad.

The Eiffel Tower seems almost played out. Yet here, too, it exacts a little courage to play the acrobat about the topmost iron. By-and-by there will be an Eiffel Tower near London. People who yearn for thrills will then have a chance of satisfying themselves.

A few months ago I went up in a balloon. That, too, was a strong experience. The bottom of the basket that held us was about half-an-inch thick. One likes to have more substance between oneself and eternity. There was a good deal of wind in the upper air, and occasionally we swayed badly.

It was startling enough to peep over the rim of the car and see villages, and fields, and canals a vertical mile or so below. It was rather more startling to be jerked almost parallel with the earth, and to have to hold on, as it seemed, for dear life, to cords and wicker-work.

Precipices are very well in their way. The one at Myling Head, in the Faroe Islands, is the most trying I have ever faced. The rock is almost 2,200 feet above the sea level, and at the summit beads over, so that you can easily fancy you will slip off and drop down, down, till you splash into the Atlantic. I felt my heart beat as I lay on the heather of Myling Head's summit and looked on the white specks on the water's surface—they were gulls—while the man who was with me kept tight hold of my feet in the rear.

Beachy Head and Horn Head, in England and the North of Ireland respectively, afford agreeable thrills of this kind.

Discover the body of a murdered man in a ditch about the time of the gloaming, and see how you like it. Next to a ghost, this may be said to take rank as a trial of pluck—especially if the murder is an ugly one.

The Morgue at Paris is not a nice spectacle. But neither is it so awful as it might be. Circumstances much mitigate its horrors. Though there are three or four drowned men and women on the slabs in front of you, there are also about a score of chattering French people to keep you company. To these latter the scene is as commonplace as the incidents of a market-hall. Nevertheless, I remember my first visit to the Morgue with great distinctness.

After the first shock of the descent, there is nothing very keen about the sensation of descending a coal mine. Still, your thoughts, as you grope about with perhaps a thousand feet of solid earth above your head, may be sufficiently impressive.

I remember my first bull fight exceedingly well. A friend who was with me half fainting when the second horse was gored, and was afterwards plugged with cotton wool, and spurred and beaten on to be gored again. Disgust and exasperation were the feelings the sight evoked in me. Yet there was a stout thrill here. For one of the men had the narrowest escape of being impaled by a particularly fierce bull while he was clambering over the wooden boundary of the arena. The animal's horn drove hard into the wood by his hip.

Thrills of an unpleasant kind are the lot of men who dabble on the Stock Exchange. Their hair must be firmly rooted to withstand the effects of a panic which robs them of hundreds of pounds in an hour or two. I have proved it, but never again. The telegrams every ten minutes or so from the brokers are so many stabs. You know not what to do—sell out and put up with your loss, or hold on in hope of a recovery. The result is the same in either event, as a rule. You wring your hands and call yourself—"Fool!"

Two other kinds of thrills may be mentioned. They are concerned with important epochs in most men's lives.

Unless you have prepared yourself for it by a long course of expectation, there is vigour in your thoughts as you awake the morning after your marriage and realize that henceforth you have to think and live for two (or more) instead of for yourself alone.

The second of these two thrills is concerned with the last act in existence.

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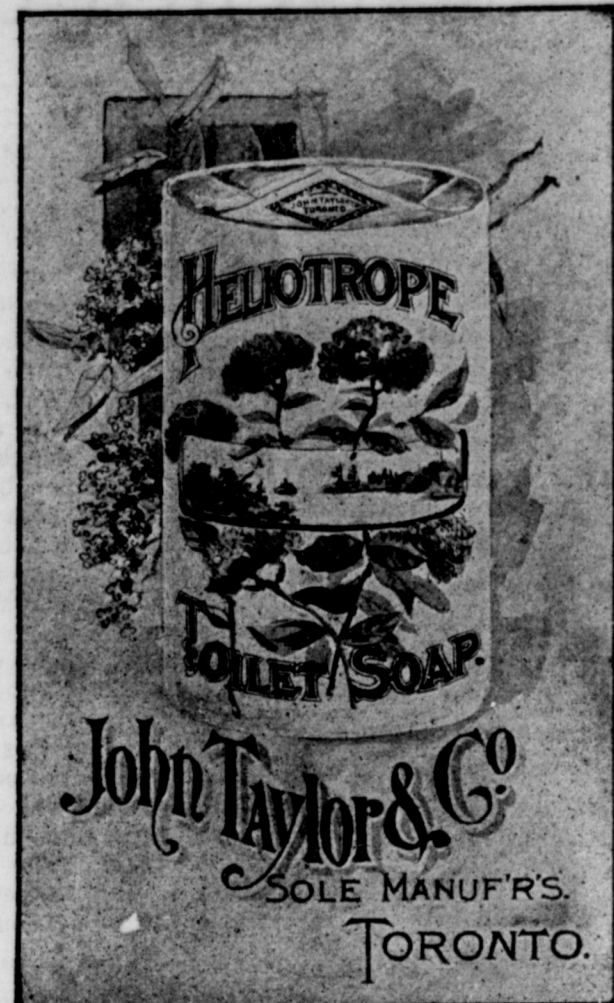
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