The Snake's Eye

Strange Experiences in the Life of a Doctor.

By A. T. MEAD

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The Crossthwaites were old friends of mine, and amongst them I had no greater favorite than pretty Pamela. She was an exceptionally beautiful girl, and when first grown up had gone through much trouble owing to an unfortunate love affair. A certain Laurence Carroll had conceived a desperate passion for her and she for him. Carroll came of a good family, but prior to his acquaintance with Pamela he had gained for himself the reputation of being mixed up with a rather fast set. Although there was nothing against Carroll, save one or two boyish adventures that had somehow crept into print, Mr. Crossthwaite frowned upon his suit and forbade him the house. Pamela bowed to her father's decree, but broke down and had a severe illness. In the course of a year, however, she recovered her health, and to outward appearances at least, her usual cheerful spirits. I had been consulted at the time of her illness, and was therefore sincerely glad when the news of Pamela's engagement to the right man reached me.

She had promised to marry Captain Mainwaring, a well-known traveler and veteran soldier who had served through a couple of Indian campaigns in Uncle Sam's army. He had money in plenty and a character without a flaw. He was also twenty years older than his prospective bride, but that fact mattered nothing in the eyes of her parents. At Pamela's earnest request I had promised faithfully to attend her wedding. She was to be married with much ceremony early in February, 1896. The wedding was to take place from the Crossthwaite's town house in Fifth avenue, and the bridegroom arrived home from a long tour in India just one week before the wedding. He was a tall, fine-looking, soldierly man, and brought from the far east for his bride's acceptance a diamond of extraordinary size and brilliancy.

The night after Captain Mainwaring's return from India I dined at the Crossthwaite mansion, and after dinner was permitted to see the famous gem. It reposed on a velvet bed under a glass case which stood on a center table in the room where the other wedding presents were displayed. The diamond presented a strange and almost startling appearance; it was cut in the shape of a cobra's eye, with some scintillating rays in the center, which not inaptly represented the pupil. It was set in a thin gold locket, and looked like an eye of evil and weird import as it glittered on its purple bed. In addition to the value which its queer shape and unique appearance gave it, the stone itself was of great intrinsic worth, as it weighed over thirty carats.

"That diamond has a history," said Captain Mainwaring, coming up to my side when he saw me examining the stone. "It is in reality one of the eyes of an Indian idol. It was given to me by a rajah whose life I had been instrumental in saving. When he presented it to me he made a strange request.

"'It belongs to a tribe with whom I and my people have had a life-long quarrel,' he said. 'It is, as a glance will show you, the eye of a cobra—we call it in Hindustani, Sanp Kee Ankh, which means the Snake's Eye. The money value of this stone is immense, but I run considerable danger by having it in my possession. The gem shall be yours if you will take my servant, Gopinath, as its guardian. I do not wish to have your blood on my head, and you would assuredly never reach America in safety if Gopinath did not take care of the diamond for you. He is a Brahmin, an excellent fellow. He will serve you day and night, and will protect the gem. Take him with you to America. While he is with you the diamond is safe.'

"It happened that I was in need of a servant at the time, and I accepted the guardian with the gift. Gopinath has accompanied me to New York, and is so much attached to me and the Snake's Eye that I do not think we are likely to part for many a long day."

"How do you like the idea of a Brahmin bodyguard?" I asked, turning to Pamela, who came up at that moment.

"Oh, you mean, Gopinath," she replied, with a laugh. "I think he is delightful. Wait till I show him to you."

She ran off, returning in a few moments with the Brahmin, wearing a gorgeous turban and elaborately attired in the rich colors of his country. He gave a low salaam as the young girl introduced him to me. His glittering eyes turned from her face to mine; then I saw them light upon the stone itself with a peculiar expression. A moment later he had vanished. Just then a lady approached and engaged Captain Mainwaring in conversation. At the same instant I saw a tall man, with a pale face and nervous expression, come hastily forward. I knew him at once—he was Pamela's former lover, Laurence Carroll. He went straight to her side and greeted her quietly. Pamela turned pale, but recovered her self-possession quickly. She touched the captain on the arm.

"Let me introduce you to my friend, Laurence Carroll," she said. "Mr. Carroll—Captain Mainwaring."

The captain bowed and favored Carroll with a brief glance; the nervousness left Carroll's eyes and they grew bright and steady. He began to talk eagerly to Pamela, the captain having again turned to the lady with whom he had been conversing. Soon afterward I took my leave, returned home, and went straight to my laboratory. I was engaged in several experiments of an interesting nature, and in particular was anxiously developing some photographs which I had recently taken by means of the Roentgen rays. I had just retired into my dark room when I heard a ring at the hall door. My servant then rapped and informed me that Mr. Carroll had called, and was waiting in my laboratory.

On entering the apartment in question I found Carroll standing where the full rays of the electric light fell on his face. He looked cadaverous, his cheeks were hollow, his eyes had a disturbed and glassy expression. I noticed that he had taken up some proofs of mine which lay on the table. They had been sent to me for correction from the medical paper for which I constantly write. When he heard my step he threw down the sheets and came forward to meet me.

"That is an interesting article, Halifax," he said. "It appears to relate to a strange poison."

"It does," I returned; "one of the most dangerous poisons known. As you have read some of it, I will tell you how I came to write the paper. I am much interested just now in the Roentgen rays, and make many experiments with the new light. A few days ago, while experimenting with ferrocyanide of potassium, I accidentally found that I had evolved as a by-product that most dangerous drug, anhydrous hydrocyanic acid. The article is written with a view to show the danger which anyone unconscious of this fact might unknowingly run. The poison causes instant death by inhalation, and the process of making, without certain precautions, is fatal."

"It is an interesting study," observed Carroll, as he sank into a chair. "And now, doctor, I have taken advantage of our old friendship to pay you a rather late visit, which the importance of my business must excuse. You know all about Pamela and myself. Well, I have determined that she shall not marry Captain Mainwaring. I gave her a letter tonight which will make her think deeply. She loves me, Halifax; she does not love Mainwaring!"

"You are not acting in a manly way," I said, severely. "I know that Pamela was at one time attached to you, but—"

"My mind is made up," interrupted Carroll. "Either the marriage will be prevented, or I shall commit suicide."

"You profess to love the girl," I said, sternly, "and yet you would cast such a terrible shadow over her life?"

"No, I would draw the line at that," he answered. "If she marries Mainwaring she need never know of my fate. I have given her people to understand that I am going abroad. If I cannot effect the object for which I visited you tonight I will allow her to continue in that belief. I want you to do me a favor. You are an old and intimate friend of the family. Will you go to Mr. Crossthwaite tomorrow morning and make a final plea for me?"

"Impossible," I returned. "It would be useless, anyway. If you meant to interfere, why did you wait until the eleventh hour?"

"Because I have been out of America. The news of the engagement reached me in Africa three weeks ago. I took the first boat I could get, and reached New York this afternoon. As you will not interfere, I must go to see Mainwaring. I told Pamela in the letter I gave her tonight of my intention. Mainwaring shall not marry her without first hearing the whole story. If in the face of that he persists in holding to his engagement I shall not live to hear the wedding bells ring. And now I will bid you adieu, for the present."

He shook hands with me and left the house. He had been gone but a few minutes when, approaching the table where the proofs of my article lay, I perceived that page 8 was missing. On this page a careful description of the use to which the deadly acid could be put was given. A cry of alarm escaped me as I saw that a small bottle of the drug itself which had been standing near the manuscript was also missing. I knew what occurred. Carroll had seen the word "poison" in large letters on the label of the bottle, and had evidently slipped it into his pocket before I entered the laboratory.

I put on my hat and rushed out, but had not gone many steps before I remembered that I did not know Carroll's address. He had spoken, however, of visiting Captain Mainwaring. The latter was stopping at the Mowbray Hotel. I went there at once, but found that if Carroll had called, he must have gone away again, as the lights were extinguished in the Captain's apartments, and he had evidently retired for the night. There was nothing else I could do, and I returned home in a very despondent frame of mind.

Early next morning the man I had sought for in vain staggered into my laboratory, his face of a ghastly pallor, and his whole appearance showing that he had received a severe shock.

"Captain Mainwaring is dead," he exclaimed hoarsely.

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"I state a fact. I saw him last night, and told him the story of the relations that had existed between Pamela and myself. At first he was fiercely indignant; then he calmed down and said he would take a night to think the matter over. He told me to call upon him again at eight this morning. I arrived at the Mowbray to find the whole place in consternation—they had discovered the Captain dead in his bed, and a doctor had been summoned who gave it as his opinion that there had been foul play. You can see what this means to me, Halifax. I was the last person with Mainwaring; we parted in anger; the hotel servants will swear to the interview having taken place. I shall be arrested almost immediately, and to make matters worse, there is this in my pocket."

As he spoke, he drew forth the little bottle of anhydrous hydrocyanic acid.

"This lay on your table last night. I was tempted, and appropriated it before you appeared. I was searching for means to take my own life if necessary. Just as you entered I had finished reading a full description of the action of the poison. I slipped page eight also into my pocket. Here is the proof now and here is the bottle."

"Well, at least you can give them back to me—you need not voluntarily throw suspicion on yourself."

"It is too late. When I heard the fatal news at the hotel I staggered and almost fell. Some fiend tempted me to put my hand in my pocket. I pulled out the bottle and stared at it as if I was stupified. A waiter who stood near must have seen the word 'poison' on the label."

He sunk into a chair and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"After I left Mainwaring," he continued, "I went to the Crown Hotel, not far from the Mowbray. When I reached my room I took the bottle out of my pocket. Mainwaring's words had almost maddened me. I saw that he would not relinquish Pamela on any terms, and a horrible desire to take my life possessed me. I broke the seal and removed the cork from the bottle. In another moment I would have inhaled the drug—but in that moment terror, as absolute as my former mad passion, assailed me. I dreaded death as much as I had previously longed for it. I put the cork back and thrust the bottle back into my pocket. That is all, except that I know I was traced to this house by one of the hotel porters. I could see that they all suspected me."

He had scarcely finished speaking, when the hall door bell rang loudly. The next instant a couple of police officers, accompanied by Mr. Crossthwaite, entered the room. One of the men went up to Carroll.

"Is your name Laurence Carroll?" he asked.

"It is."

"Then I have a warrant for your arrest on suspicion of having murdered Captain Mainwaring at the Mowbray Hotel last night."

Carroll simply bowed and held out his hand to me. He did not glance at Crossthwaite, who on his part took not the least notice of the accused man. A moment later Crossthwaite and I were alone.

"That unfortunate young man is innocent," I said. "Carroll has no more committed murder than I have."

Crossthwaite shook his head impatiently. "Well, you can stick to your opinion, Halifax," he responded, "but do not expect me to share it. Pamela is terribly upset and has asked me to bring you to see her. Come with me now."

I complied with his request. In a little while we reached the mansion on Fifth avenue and went straight to the room where Pamela's wedding gifts were still on view. The table with the glass case stood in the center of the room; a purple cushion lay inside the case—but the diamond was gone!

"Ah," said Crossthwaite, noting the direction of my eyes; "poor Mainwaring had a queer fad about that stone. He brought it here every morning, but insisted on taking charge of it at night. By the way, under the circumstances, I had better not leave it at the hotel. I will have it brought here."

A door at the farther end of the room opened, and the Indian servant, Gopinath, glided in. He came forward and threw himself at our feet.

"Sanp Kee Ankh is stolen!" he gasped. "I have found the empty case."

He held up a morocco case in both hands. "The cobra's eye is gone," he repeated. "I found the case empty, as you see it, under my master's pillow. I have brought it here. My master must have been slain by the thief who stole the gem."

"This, indeed, furnishes a motive for the murder," exclaimed Crossthwaite, excitedly. "Gopinath, come with me at once." He left the room with the Indian, and I proceeded to Pamela's boudoir. The girl sprang forward and seized my hands eagerly.

"Dear friend," she said, "you will think it horrible of me, but I am thinking so much of poor Laurence Carroll that I cannot grieve as I ought over Captain Mainwaring's death. They have just told me that Laurence has been arrested on suspicion of having murdered him. A bottle of poison was found in his pocket. Oh, is it possible that he is guilty? I cannot believe it."

"Compose yourself," I said soothingly. "Matters may not be so bad as they look."

I then related in as few words as possible how the dangerous acid had got into Carroll's possession.

"You believe that he took it because he meant to commit suicide?" she queried.

"That was his intention, undoubtedly. Fortunately, when the supreme moment came he had not sufficient strength to carry out his resolve."

"But I fear the worst," she wailed. "He was desperate; the letter he wrote to me told me so. I ought never to have given Laurence up; I never really loved Captain Mainwaring."

"Listen," I said. "If you had seen and spoken with Carroll both last night and this morning, as I did, you would not give way to such suspicions. That he was desperate and despairing, I admit; but he is not a murderer, Pamela. Furthermore, the diamond is missing. Gopinath has just come to the house with the news of the theft. That fact alone helps to prove Carroll's innocence. The person who stole the stone was undoubtedly the one who committed the murder. Now, it was not money that Carroll needed—the diamond had no attraction for him in such a moment of his life."

Pamela listened with flaming cheeks and bright eyes. The fact that the Snake's Eye was missing gave her great consolation, and I could see that her old-time passion for Carroll had lost none of its strength. The inquest was held at an early hour the following morning. I was, of course, obliged to be present. The evidence against Carroll was still overwhelming, in spite of the new turn to the affair given by the disappearance of the diamond. In fact, it was hinted that he might have abstracted the gem with the intention of making it appear that the murder had been committed by some midnight bandits in search of plunder, and a verdict of wilful murder was returned by the coroner's jury. Carroll was locked up to await examination, and I returned home much depressed by the march of events. I was in my library, when the door bell rang, and a few moments later Gopinath, the Indian servant, appeared. He was the bearer of a letter from Pamela which requested me to call and see her the following morning.

While I was perusing the letter, Gopinath stood with folded arms a few feet away from me. I glanced at him, and was at once struck with the great change in his appearance. When I last saw him he was a strikingly handsome specimen of his race—thin and wiry, upright as a dart, with finely formed, supple limbs. Now his face was emaciated, his eyes had the expression of suffering that one sometimes notices in those of a suffering dog, his figure was bowed, and at intervals long, shuddering sighs escaped his lips.

"You are ill, Gopinath," I said abruptly.

"Sahib, I suffer," he replied. He pressed his hand to his right side. "I suffer agony," he said again.

"Give me your hand," I said. I took it in mine. The pulse was throbbing wildly, the man's skin also burned; he was evidently very ill, and I fancied he might have fallen victim to some form of Oriental fever.

"When I breathe, I suffer torture," he said, gasping sharply as he spoke. I motioned him to take a chair, but instead of doing so he seated himself on the floor with his legs doubled up under him.

"Can you relieve me?" he asked, clasping his hands over his right side, while big drops of sweat fell from his forehead.

A sudden thought flashed through my mind. Gopinath's unaccountable grief, the complete change in his appearance, made a wild hope leap within me. No suspicion in connection with the murder had as yet fallen on the East Indian. Suppose, after all, he knew more about it than anyone else? I firmly believed that the person who stole the diamond was the one who committed the murder. Suppose that the temptation to appropriate so valuable a gem had proved too much for Gopinath?

"Stand up," I said to him suddenly. "You suffer pain here?" I touched his side lightly.

"Much, sahib, much," he replied. I saw that he could scarcely pull himself together, his sufferings were so intense.

"I am going to find out what is the matter," I said. "Stay where you are for a moment; I will be back directly."

I hurried to my laboratory, for I felt that the moment had arrived when I could make a good test of the Roentgen rays. Was it possible that they might be the means of discovering crime, and perhaps saving an innocent life? The Crookes vacuum tube was got into the right position, I saw that the rays worked well, and then I returned to Gopinath and brought him into the laboratory. I desired him to strip, and then arranged him in such a position that the rays would pass through my body. I turned off the lights in the room. My electrical battery worked well, the rays playing admirably in the vacuum tube. I removed the cap from the camera, and after an exposure of from seven to ten minutes felt certain that I had taken a careful photograph.

"That will do," I said to the black man. I led him back to the library.

"I have taken a phohograph of you," I said to him, "which may show me the seat of your malady. When I have developed it, I will come back to you."

I returned to my dark room, and quickly developed the plate. When I had finished, and saw what the mysterious X-rays had produced, I uttered a shout of triumph. The skeleton of the wiry Brahmin was distinctly visible, and just below the region of the ileo-caecal valve, a foreign substance about the size of the Snake's Eye was seen. I had not the least doubt that I was looking at the gold socket of the cobra's eye, the diamond itself being probably not impervious to the X rays. Men of Gopinath's nationality had swallowed precious stones before now. This was not the first time in the annals of history that the human body had been made a hiding place for stolen property.

I telephoned at once to Crossthwaite and a clever colleague of mine, one Dr. Symes, to come to the house immediately. They made their appearance in a little while, and I exhibited to their astonished eyes the photograph I had taken, and narrated the history of the case.

"Acute peritonitis, of course," said Symes, after he had examined the well-marked obstruction revealed in the picture. "I agree with you, Halifax, that the Indian's only chance for life is to have that substance, what ever it is, removed at once."

The three of us proceeded to the library, where Gopinath lay flat on the floor, moaning piteously. With Symes' assistance I placed him on a lounge and bent over him.

"Listen to me, Gopinath," I said. "You are very ill, and this gentleman"—indicating Dr. Symes—"and I have decided that your only chance for life is to operate on you and remove the diamond you have swallowed."

His dark eyes, glowing like jewels, were fixed on my face. It did not even occur to him to deny my accusation.

"Is there any hope that I may recover, sahib?" he asked.

"None whatever, unless the diamond is removed. Now, tell us by what means you murdered Captain Mainwaring."

"With a drug known only to my people. On the night that I saw Mainwaring sahib talking to the young Carroll sahib I thought the hour had come, and that suspicion would be cast upon him. I always meant to recover the stone. The Sanp Kee Ankh was the eye of one of our gods, and his curse was on me unless I brought it back. I had furnished myself with a key of the sahib's room, and when I thought he was asleep I entered softly and poured the poison on his pillow. I knew it would kill him quickly. I saw him breathe his last, and when he was quite dead I slipped the case from under his pillow and took the eye. I swallowed it as the best means to prevent it being discovered."

He gave a convulsive shudder, as he finished speaking, and fell back in a dead faint. Dr. Symes and I lost no time in operating, and recovered the diamond, still in its gold setting. Gopinath, however, failed to survive the shock and died at an early hour the following morning.

With his innocence thus established Laurence Carroll was released from custody, and Crossthwaite was one of the first persons to call upon him and congratulate him. The old gentleman's dislike for Carroll had vanished completely, and a few months later I had the pleasure of witnessing the ceremony which united Pamela to her faithful lover.

WEDDINGS IN EARLY DAYS

Festivities Kept Up Sometimes for Weeks on Occasions of Backwoods Ceremonies Long Ago.

For a long time after this country was settled folk married mighty young and at first chance. There was no sort of distinction of rank or state, and yet precious little money or worldly gear. A family backwoods palace cost only a little neighborly help and labor to get it ready for the sure-to-come, healthy, happy brood in those olden, golden days in the south and west a wedding set the whole country circuit for miles around wild with talk, excitement and expectation for frolic.

On wedding day everybody came together at the bridegroom's daddy's house so that all could go in one bunch to the bride's house before dinner (midday). Upon all this jolly lot could not be seen a thing that had ever been inside a store. The gentlemen dressed in moccasins, leather breeches or leggins, coonskin caps and homespun linsey or buckskin hunting shirts. Every whip, stitch and fibre genuine, simon-pure homespun and home-made. Ladies, as peerless as fearless, dressed in linsey petticoats and under all a long linsey or linen bed gown, moccasins, yarn or fine stockings, handkerchiefs, and gauntleted buckskin gloves—if any. If there were any rings, buckles or other jewelry, they were relics from grandparents back beyond the Blue Ridge, on the shores of the sea.

The march, Indian-file, through the woods to the bride's house was often stopped by mischief-makers tying grape-vines across the road. Or suddenly a false Indian ambush was laid and a dozen rifles covered the wedding company with smoke. The horses would rear and jump and cavort, and the girls, riding bareback, would shriek—of course, girl-like. And their sweethearts would get mighty brave and chivalrous and grab them around the waist to keep them from falling even if most of these same girls could break and ride a two-year-old horse or steer.

About a half-mile afore the wild wedding troop got to the bride's house came big times. Two young buddies who wanted to show off before their admiring sweethearts would single out to race to the bride's front door for "Sweet Black Betty," which was handed to the first fellow there. No sort of fox chase, English or Yankee, in point of danger and adventure, could hold a candle to the run of these mad Yonkers. One grand, hellish Indian yell, and away they would go, and the more logs and holes and brush the better. Racing returning, all bets were settled and the bridegroom and his best man took first swig from "Black Betty." Then so on to each pair in succession. Then came the marriage ceremony; then the feast of beef, pork, fowls, venison, bear meat roasted and boiled potatoes and cabbage and corn pones.

After dinner the fiddle was tuned and the dancing started and generally lasted all night until broad daylight. The figures were three and four-handed reels, square sets and jigs. If any tried to stall or sneak away late in the night they were grabbed and paraded on the floor while the fiddler was ordered to play "Hang Out Till Morning." Wedding carrying-ons lasted from two days to two weeks, and some guests stayed while others came and went. Some traveled for days coming and going great distances.

In the course of festivity, if any one wanted to do toasts he would holler "Where is Black Betty?" I want to kiss her sweet lips." "Betty" soon reached him; then holding her up in his right hand he would say, "Here's health to the groom, not forgetting myself, and here's to the bride, thumping luck and big children." This was the soul of the toast, for big children, especially sons, were of great importance, as they were few in number and engaged in wars the end of which no one could foresee. Every big son was therefore a big soldier. And such were the simple and hardy men from which some of the best and meanest folk in the world have sprung.

Little as the simple, innocent backwoodsmen imagined, their marriage ceremonies were only carrying out some of the old, ancient, princely marriages of ancient Europe, particularly of Germany, Britain and Spain.

Dread of Obscurity.

"Do you think it possible to love your enemies?"

"Not exactly," replied Miss Cayenne. "Yet many of us ought to feel rather grateful to our enemies as the only people who take a real interest in us."

Safest Ever.

Purchaser (to street peddler)—Call these safety matches? Why, they won't light at all.

Peddler—Well, wot could yer 'ave afer?—Tit-Bits.