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OUR MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

IV.



I heard our visitor give a great scream.

I have often been amused, when reading stories told in the first person, to see how the narrator makes himself out, as a matter of course, to be a perfect and spotless man. All around may have their passions and weaknesses and vices, but he remains a cold and blameless nonentity, running like a colorless thread through the tangled skein of the story. I shall not fall into this error. I see myself as I was in those days, shallow hearted, hot headed and with little principle of any kind. Such I was, and such I depict myself.

From the time that I finally identified our visitor Digby with Achille Wolff, the diamond robber, my resolution was taken. Some might have been squeamish in the matter, and thought that because he had shaken their hand and broken their bread he had earned some sort of grace from them. I was not troubled with sentimentality of this sort. He was a criminal escaping from justice. Some providence had thrown him into our hands, and an enormous reward awaited his betrayers. I never hesitated for a moment as to what was to be done.

The more I thought of it the more I admired the cleverness with which he had managed the whole business. It was clear that he had a vessel ready, manned either by confederates or by unsuspecting fishermen. Hence he would be independent of all those parts where the police would be on the lookout for him. Again, if he had made for England or for America, he could hardly have escaped ultimate capture, but by choosing one of the most desolate and lonely spots in Europe he had thrown them off his track for a time, while the destruction of the brig seemed to destroy the last clew to his whereabouts. At present he was entirely at our mercy, since he could not move from the island without our help. There was no necessity for us to hurry, therefore, and we could mature our plans at our leisure.

But my father and I showed no change in our manner toward our guest, and he himself was as cheery and light hearted as ever. It was pleasant to hear him singing as we mended the nets or calked the boat. His voice was a very high tenor and one of the most melodious I ever listened to. I am convinced that he could have made a name upon the operatic stage, but like most versatile scoundrels he placed small account upon the genuine talents which he possessed, and cultivated the worst portion of his nature. My father used sometimes to eye him sideways in a strange manner, and I thought I knew what he was thinking about—but there I made a mistake.

One day, about a week after our conversation, I was fixing up one of the rails of our fence, which had been snapped in the gale, when my father came along the seashore, plodding heavily among the pebbles, and sat down on a stone at my elbow. I went on knocking in the nails, but looked at him from the corner of my eyes as he pulled away at his short black pipe. I could see that he had something weighty on his mind, for he knitted his brows and his lips projected.

"Dye mind what was in you paper?" he said at last, knocking his ashes out against the stone.

"Yes," I answered shortly.

"Well, what's your opinion?" he asked.

"Why, that we should have the reward, of course!" I replied.

"The reward!" he said with a fierce snarl. "You would tak' the reward. You'd let the stane that's worth thousands an' thousands gang awa' back tae some furrin' Papist, an' a' for the sake o' a few pund that they'd fling till ye, as they fling a bane to a dog when the meat's a' gone. It's a clean flingin' awa' o' the gifts o' Providence."

"Well, father," I said, laying down the hammer, "you must be satisfied with what you can get. You can only have what is offered."

"But if we got the stane itself," whispered my father, with a leer on his face.

"He'd never give it up," I said.

"But if he deed while he's here—if he was suddenly—"

"Drop it, father, drop it!" I cried, for the old man looked like a fiend out of the pit. I saw now what he was aiming at.

"If he deed," he shouted, "wha saw him come, and wha saw speer where he'd ganged till? If an accident happened, if he came by a dud on the heid, or woke some night to find a knife at his thrapple, wua wud be the wiser?"

"You musn't speak so, father," I said, though I was thinking many things at the same time.

"It may as well be oot as in," he answered, and went away rather sulkily, turning around after a few yards and holding up his finger toward me to impress the necessity of caution.

My father did not speak of this matter to me again, but what he said rankled in my mind. I could hardly realize that he meant his words, for he had always, as far as I knew, been an upright, righteous man, hard in his ways and grasping in his nature, but guiltless of any great sin. Perhaps it was that he was removed from temptation, for isothermal lines of crime might be drawn on the map through places where it is hard to walk straight, and there are others where it is as hard to fall. It was easy to be a saint in the Island of Uffa.

One day we were finishing breakfast when our guest asked if the boat was mended (one of the tholepins had been broken). I answered that it was.

"I want you two," he said, "to take me round to Lam-lash to-day. You shall have a couple of sovereigns for the job. I don't know that I may not come back with you—but I may stay."

My eyes met those of my father for a flash. "There's no vera much wind," he said.

"What there is is in the right direction," returned Digby, as I must call him.

"The new foresail has no' been bent," persisted my father.

"There's no use throwing difficulties in the way," said our visitor angrily. "If you won't come, I'll get Tommy Gibbs and his father, but go I shall. Is it a bargain or not?"

"I'll gang," my father replied sullenly, and went down to get the boat ready. I followed, and helped him to bend on the new foresail. I felt nervous and excited.

"What do you intend to do?" I asked.

"I dinna ken," he said irritably. "Gin the worst come to the worst we can gie him up at Lam-lash—but oh, it wud be a peety, an awfu' peety. You're young an' strong, laddie; can we no' master him between us?"

"No," I said, "I'm ready to gie him up, but I'm dammed if I lay a hand on him."

"You're a cowardly, white livered loon!" he cried, but I was not to be moved by taunts; and left him mumbering to himself and picking at the sail with nervous fingers.

It was about two o'clock before the boat was ready, but as there was a slight breeze from the north we reckoned on reaching Lam-lash before nightfall. There was just a pleasant ripple upon the dark blue water, and as we stood on the beach before shoving off we could see the Carlin's Leap and Goatfell bathed in a purple mist, while beyond them along the horizon loomed the long line of the Argyleshire hills. Away to the south the great bald summit of Ailsa Craig glittered in the sun, and a single white fleck showed where a fishing boat was beating up from the Scotch coast. Digby and I stepped into the boat, but my father ran back to where I had been mending the rails and came back with the hatchet in his hand, which he stowed away under the thwarts.

"What d'ye want with the ax?" our visitor asked.

"It's a handy thing to hae about a boat," my father answered with averted eyes, and shoved us off. We set the foresail, jib and mainsail and shot away across the Roost, with the blue water splashing merrily under our bows. Looking back I saw the coast line of our little island extend rapidly on either side. There was Carravoe which we had left, and our own beach of Carracuil, and the steep, brown face of the Combera, and away behind the rugged crests of Beg-na-phail and Beg-na-sacher I could see the red tiles of the byre of our homesteading, and across the moor a thin blue reek in the air which marked the position of Corriemains. My heart warmed toward the place which had been my home since childhood.

We were about half way across the Roost when it fell a dead calm, and the sails flapped against the mast. We were perfectly motionless except for the drift of the current, which runs from north to south. I had been steering and my father managing the sails, while the stranger smoked his eternal cigarettes and admired the scenery; but at his suggestion we now got the sculls out to row. I shall never know how it began, but as I was stooping down to pick up an oar I heard our visitor give a great scream that he was murdered, and looking up I saw him with his face all in a sputter of blood leaning against the mast, while my father made at him with the hatchet. Before I could move hand or foot Digby rushed at the old man and caught him round the waist. "You gray headed devil," he cried in a husky voice, "I feel that you have done for me; but you'll never get what you want. No—never! never! never!"

Nothing can ever erase from my memory the intense and concentrated malice of those words. My father gave a raucous cry, they swayed and balanced for a moment, and then over they went into the sea. I rushed to the side, boathook in hand, but they never came up. As the long rings caused by the splash widened out, however, and left an unruffled space in the center, I saw them once again. The water was very clear, and far, far down I could see the shimmer of two white faces coming and going, faces which seemed to look up at me with an expression of unutterable horror. Slowly they went down, revolving in each other's embrace until they were nothing but a dark loom and

men faced from my view. They shall lie, the Frenchman and the Scot, till the great trumpet shall sound and the sea give up its dead. Storms may rage above them and great ships labor and creak, but their slumber shall be dreamless and unruffled in the silent green depths of the Roost of Uffa. I trust when the great day shall come that they will bring up the cursed stone with them that they may show the sore temptation which the devil had placed in their way as some slight extenuation of their errors while in this mortal flesh.

It was a weary and lonesome journey back to Carravoe. I remember tug-tugging at the oars as though to snap them in trying to relieve the tension of my mind. Toward evening a breeze sprang up and helped me on my way, and before nightfall I was back in the lonely homesteading once more, and all that had passed that spring afternoon lay behind me like some horrible nightmare. I did not remain in Uffa. The craft and the boat were sold by public roup in the market place of Androssan, and the sum realized was sufficient to enable me to continue my medical studies at the university. I fled from the island as from a cursed place, nor did I ever set foot on it again.

Gibbs and his son, and even Minnie Fullarton, too, passed out of my life completely and forever. She missed me for a time no doubt, but I have heard that young McBane, who took the farm, went a-wooing to Corriemains after the white fishing, and as he was a comely fellow enough he may have consoled her for my loss. As for myself, I have settled quietly down into a large middle class practice in Paisley. It has been in the brief intervals of professional work that I have jotted down these reminiscences of the events which lead up to my father's death. Achille Wolff and the Rochville diamond are things of the past now, but there may be some who will care to hear of how they visited the Island of Uffa.—A. Conan Doyle in Temple Bar.

THE END.

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