

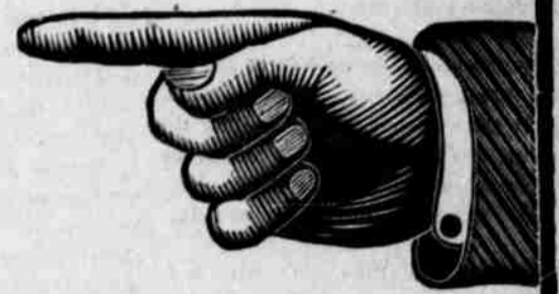
A Midnight Peril.

A MIDNIGHT PERIL.
I had been going to the zoological gardens in a professional capacity for three years when I met Binks. He was a young man of eighteen or twenty and a half wit. He had neither home nor friends, and no one knew where he came from, but he was allowed to hang around the place and assist the keepers for his board. He had been there about a month when I saw him. He was a butt of ridicule, and some of the keepers were treating him harshly. He had been severely cuffed by one of them just before being sent to me and was crying over it like a girl. I sympathized with him and told him to brace up and gave him the first coin he had had in a year, and we two soon got on good terms.

About six weeks after my first meeting with Binks I was sent for to preserve the carcass of a buffalo, and the lad was ordered to assist me. It was in winter time and the weather was very cold. The buffalo had been ailing for a week or two and had died at night in a shed and his body froze as hard as iron. Binks and I had to thaw it out before we could start at real work, and so it occurred that we worked until a late evening hour before I was ready to go. It was after 10 o'clock when I began to wash up, and I looked around to find the boy curled up in some blankets and evidently asleep. As it was a room heated with steam pipes, I decided not to disturb him.

There was a door of communication between the dissecting room and the animal house, but it was never closed. I had briefly examined it on two or three occasions to find it locked. In the animal house the keepers made their rounds every three hours, beginning at 8 o'clock. Between 9 and 10 o'clock I had worked mostly alone, while Binks was in and out of the place four or five times. I had no recollection of seeing him near the locked door, however. He was seemingly asleep, as I said, and I was washing my hands preparatory to taking my departure when a low growl behind me made my hair stand up. I turned to find a male Bengal tiger on the far side of the carcass of the buffalo and between me and the animal house door. The door, as I afterward found out, was a swing door, and opened without noise after being unlocked and shut itself with a spring. No one but Binks could have unlocked it.

The tiger was looking at me full in the eyes as I turned, and it seemed as if I turned to stone. I must have breathed, but I was not conscious of it. The beast had somehow escaped from its cage in the animal house, and the scent of blood had drawn him to my room. He did not have the reputation of being particularly ferocious, but one hasn't got to be connected with a zoo to know that the tiger is always a dangerous animal, particularly when he has the scent of blood under his nose. The beast growled menacingly and switched his tail as I stood there looking at him, and when the blood began to run in my veins again I knew that the chances against me were ten to one—aye, a hundred. There was a fresh carcass under his nose to tempt him, but a wild beast does not sink down and begin to feed off a carcass when there is a living man twenty feet beyond.



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I had read, as everybody else has, that one should look a dangerous beast in the eye. No one ever gave more foolish advice. The tiger not only stared me out of confidence, but the

fact that I was staring at him seemed to anger him. I believe the result would be the same in any case. His tail continued to switch, his eyes to flatten, and his lip dropped down to show his horrible fangs. I realized that in another minute he would spring on me, but to save my life I could not move a foot. The idea of fighting him never occurred to me. If it had I should have had to abandon it the next instant, as there was no weapon at hand. I had forgotten the presence of Binks when a low, menacing growl from the tiger woke the boy.

"I thought it was morning," said the half wit, as he got to his feet and rubbed his eyes.

Then he noticed me staring fixedly at the tiger and turned his face in that direction.

"Hello, Nero! I knew you would come!" he cried to the beast, and, leaping over the carcass of the buffalo, he put his arms around the king of the jungle. The beast whined and licked his face.

I was thoroughly frightened, and how

I carried things off as well as I did has always been a puzzle to me. All the money in the world could not have induced me to approach the beast. He was quiet now, and his eyes no longer blazed out, but what I wanted was to get out of that as soon as possible.

"Binks, I am in a hurry tonight and can't stop," I replied. "I wish you would kneel down in front of Nero and put your arms around his neck. I don't want him to see me when I go."

"Of course I will, but next time you come you must have a romp with us. You have no idea how high Nero can jump, and you ought to see him show his teeth sometimes when I pull his tail too hard."

While the boy shielded me from the tiger's gaze I slipped out of the yard door and locked it behind me.

M. QUAD.

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