

# The New Arabian Nights

By ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON



"Is this a full meeting?" asked the prince.

"Middle!" said the president. "By the way," he added, "if you have any money it is usual to offer some champagne. It keeps up a good spirit and is one of my own little perquisites."

"Hammersmith," said Florizel, "may leave the champagne to you."

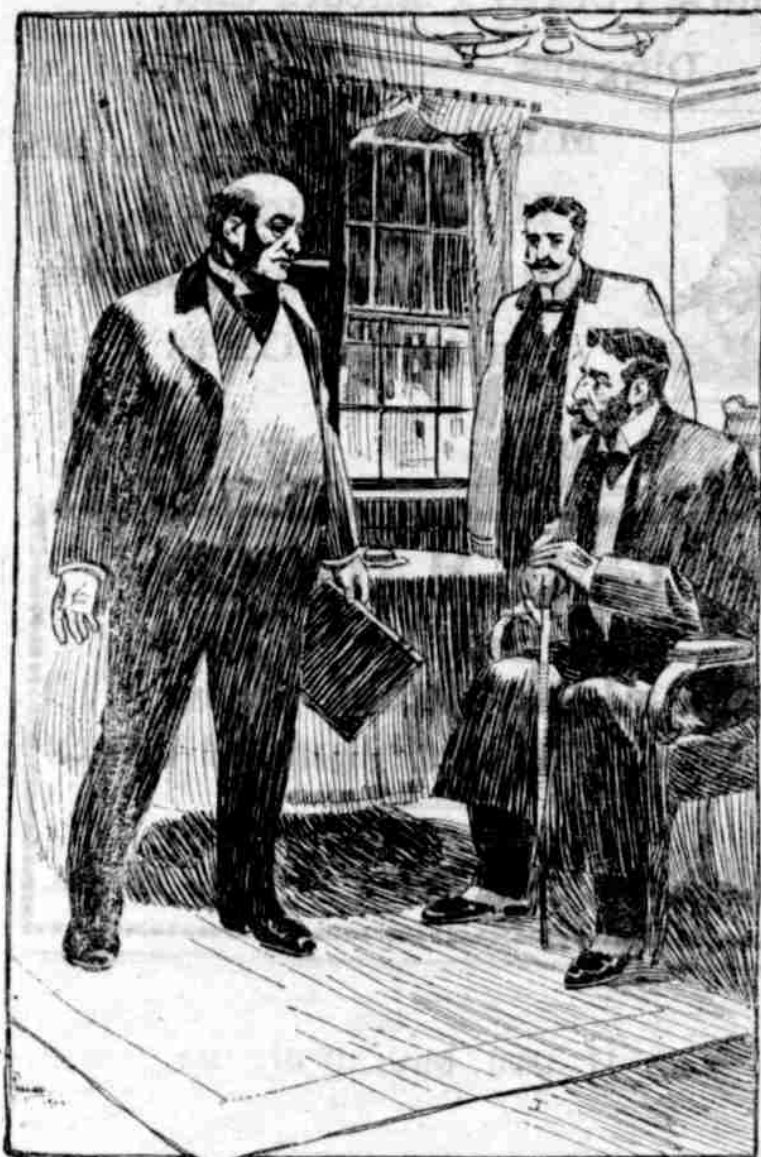
And with that he turned away and began to go round among the guests. Accustomed to play the host in the highest circles, he charmed and dominated all whom he approached. There was something at once winning and extraordinary in his address, and his authoritative coolness gave him yet another distinction in this half-mystical society. As he went from one to another he kept both his eyes and his

"I could not bear," said this remarkable suicide, "to be descended from an ape."

Altogether the prince was disappointed by the bearing and conversation of the members.

"It does not seem to me," he thought, "a matter for so much disturbance. If a man has made up his mind to kill himself, let him do it. In God's name, like a gentleman. This flatter and big talk is out of place."

In the meanwhile Colonel Geraldine was a prey to the blackest apprehensions. The club and its rules were still a mystery, and he looked round the room for some one who should be able to set him right at once. In this survey his eyes lighted on the tall, thin person with the strong spectacles, and, seeing



"THIS IS A PRIVATE HOUSE AND YOU MUST LEAVE INSTANTLY."

ears open and soon began to gain a general idea of the people among whom he found himself. As in all other places of resort, one type predominated—people in the prime of youth, with every show of intelligence and sensibility in their appearance, but with little promise of strength or the quality that makes success. Few were much above thirty, and not a few were still in their teens. They stood, leaning on tables and shifting on their feet; sometimes they smoked extraordinarily fast and sometimes they let their cigars go out; some talked well, but the conversation of others was plainly the result of nervous tension and was equally without wit or purpose. As each new bottle of champagne was opened there was a manifest improvement in gayer.

Only two were seated—one in a chair in the recess of the window, with his head-banging and his hands plunged deep into his trousers pockets, pale, visibly moist with perspiration, saying never a word, a very wreck of soul and body; the other sat on the divan close by the chimney and attracted notice by a trenchant dissimilarity from all the rest. He was probably upward of forty, but he looked fully ten years older, and Florizel thought he had never seen a man more naturally hideous nor one more ravaged by disease and ruinous excitements. He was no more than skin and bone, was partly paralyzed and wore spectacles of such unusual power that his eyes appeared through the glasses greatly magnified and distorted in shape. Except the prince and the president, he was the only person in the room who preserved the composure of ordinary life.

There was little decency among the members of the club. Some boasted of the disgraceful actions, the consequences of which had reduced them to seek refuge in death, and the others listened without disapproval. There was a tacit understanding against moral judgments, and whoever passed the club doors enjoyed already some of the immunities of the tomb. They drank to each other's memories and to those of notable suicides in the past. They compared and developed their different views of death, some declaring that it was no more than blackness and cessation, others full of a hope that that very night they should be scaling the stars and commencing with the mighty dead.

"To the eternal memory of Baron Truck, the type of suicides!" cried one. "He went out of a small coil into a smaller that he might come forth again to freedom."

"For my part," said a second, "I wish no more than a bandage for my eyes and cotton for my ears. Only they have no cotton thick enough in this world."

A third was for reading the mysteries of life in a future state, and a fourth professed that he would never have joined the club if he had not been induced to believe in Mr. Darwin.

"I could not bear," said this remarkable

suicide in a chemist's shop. That was one of the least rich, one of the least racy, of his notions; but, then, how simple, and how safe!"

"You astound me," said the colonel. "Was that unfortunate gentleman one of our members?" he was about to say "times," but, bethinking himself in time, he substituted "members of the club."

In the same flash of thought it occurred to him that Mr. Malthus himself had not at all spoken in the tone of one who was in love with death, and he added hurriedly:

"But I perceive I am still in the dark. You speak of shuffling and dealing. Pray, for what end? And, since you seem rather unwilling to die than otherwise, I must own that I cannot conceive what brings you here at all."

"You say truly that you are in the dark," replied Mr. Malthus, with more animation. "Why, my dear sir, this club is the temple of intoxication. If my exalted health could support the excitement more often, you may depend upon it I should be more often here. It requires all the sense of duty engendered by a long habit of ill health and careful regimen to keep me from excess in this, which is, I may say, all, sir," he went on, laying his hand on Geraldine's arm, "all, without exception, and I declare to you, upon my honor, there is not one of them that has not been grossly and untruthfully overrated. Love is a strong passion. I deny that love is a strong passion. Fear is the strong passion. It is with fear that you must ride if you wish to taste the intensest joys of living. Envy me—envy me, sir," he added, with a chuckle, "I am a coward!"

Geraldine could scarcely repress a movement of repulsion for this deplorable wretch, but he commanded himself with an effort and continued his inquiries.

"How, sir," he asked, "is the excitement so artfully prolonged, and where is there any element of uncertainty?"

"I must tell you how the victim for every evening is selected," returned Mr. Malthus, "and not only the victim, but another member, who is to be the instrument in the club's hands and death's high priest for that occasion."

"Heaven!" said the colonel. "Do they then kill each other?"

"The trouble of suicide is removed in that way," returned Malthus, with a nod.

"Merciful heavens!" ejaculated the colonel. "And may—may I—may I—may I be pitched upon this evening as the slayer of another man's body and immortal spirit? Can such things be possible among men of honor? Oh, infamy of infamies!"

He was about to rise in his horror when he caught the prince's eye. It was fixed upon him from across the room, with a frowning and angry stare. In a moment Geraldine recovered his composure.

"After all," he added, "why not? And since you say the game is interesting, rogue la galere—I follow the club!"

Mr. Malthus had keenly enjoyed the colonel's amazement and disgust. He had the vanity of wickedness, and it pleased him to see another man give way to a generous movement while he felt himself in his entire corruption superior to such emotions.

"You now, after your first moment of surprise," said he, "are in a position to appreciate the delights of our society. You can see how it combines the excitement of a gaming table, a duel and a Roman amphitheater. The pagans did well enough—I cordially admire the refinement of their minds—but it has been reserved for a Christian country to attain this extreme, this quintessence, this absolute poignancy. You will understand how rapid are all amusements to a man who has acquired a taste for this one. The game we play," he continued, "is one of extreme simplicity. A full pack—but I perceive you are about to see the thing in progress. Will you lend me the help of your arm? I am, unfortunately, paralyzed."

Indeed just as Mr. Malthus was beginning his description another pair of folding doors was thrown open, and the whole club began to pass, not without some hurry, into the adjoining room. It was singular in every respect to the one from which it was entered, but somewhat differently furnished. The center was occupied by a long green table, at which the president sat, shuffling a pack of cards with great dexterity. Even with the stick and the colonel's arm Mr. Malthus walked with so much difficulty that every one was seated before this pair and the prince, who had waited for them, entered the apartment, and in consequence the three took seats close together at the lower end of the board.

"It is a pack of fifty-two," whispered Mr. Malthus. "Watch for the ace of spades, which is the sign of death, and the ace of clubs, which designates the official of the night. Happy, happy young men!" he called. "You have good eyes and can follow. You have, alas, I cannot tell an ace from a deuce across the table."

And he proceeded to equip himself with a second pair of spectacles.

"I must at least watch the faces," he explained.

The colonel rapidly informed his friend of all that he had learned from the honorary member and of the horrible alternative that lay before them. The prince was conscious of a deadly chill and a contraction about his heart. He swallowed with difficulty and looked from side to side like a man in a maze.

"One bold stroke," whispered the colonel, "and we may still escape."

But the suggestion recalled the prince's spirits.

"Silence!" said he. "Let me see that you can play like a gentleman for any stake, however serious."

And he looked about him, once more to all appearance at his own, although his heart beat thickly and he was conscious of an unpleasant heat in his bosom. The members were all pale, but none so pale as Mr. Malthus. His eyes protruded. His head kept nodding involuntarily upon his spine. His hands found their way one after the other to his mouth, where they made clucking noises, and when they were withdrawn they were found to be dripping with sweat.

"I have been graciously spared, but I must go at last. Now, he never plays. He shuffles and deals for the club and makes the necessary arrangements. That man, my dear Mr. Hammersmith, is the very soul of ingenuity. For three years he has pursued in London his useful and, I think I may add, his artistic calling, and not so much as a whisper of suspicion has been inspired. I believe him myself to be inspired. You doubtless remember the celebrated case six months ago of the gentleman who was accidentally killed

passing under a man had shown his card. Nearly every one hesitated, and sometimes you would see a player's fingers tremble more than once before he could turn over the momentous slip of pasteboard. As the prince's turn drew nearer he was conscious of a growing and almost suffocating excitement, but he had somewhat of the gambler's nature and recovered almost with astonishment that there was a degree of pleasure in his sensations. The nine of clubs fell to his lot, the three of spades was dealt to Geraldine and the queen of hearts to Mr. Malthus, who was unable to suppress a sob of relief. The young man of the cream tartar almost immediately afterward turned over the ace of clubs and remained frozen with horror, the card still resting on his finger. He had not come there to kill, but to be killed, and the prince in his generous sympathy with his position almost forgot the part that still hung over himself and his friend.

The deal was coming round again, and still death's card had not come out. The players held their breath and only breathed by gasps. The prince received another club. Geraldine had a diamond, but when Mr. Malthus turned up his card a horrible noise, like that of something breaking, issued from his mouth, and he rose from his seat and sat down again, with no sign of his paralysis. It was the ace of spades. The honorary member had trifled once too often with his terror.

Conversation broke out again almost at once. The players relaxed their rigid attitudes and began to rise from the table and stroll back by twos and threes into the smoking room. The president stretched his arms and yawned, like a man who has finished his day's work. But Mr. Malthus sat in his place, with his head in his hands and his hands upon the table, drunk and motionless, a thing stricken down.

The prince and Geraldine made their escape at once. In the cold night air their horror of what they had witnessed was reborn.

"Alas," cried the prince, "to be bound by an oath to such a matter! to allow this wholesale trade in murder to be continued with profit and impunity! If I but dared to forfeit my pledge!"

"That is impossible for your highness," replied the colonel, "whose honor is the honor of Bohemia, but I dare, and may, with propriety, forfeit mine."

"Geraldine," said the prince, "if your honor suffers in any of the adventures into which you follow me, not only will I never pardon you, but what I believe will much more sensibly affect you—I shall never forgive myself."

"I receive your highness' commands," replied the colonel. "Shall we go from this accursed spot?"

"Yes," said the prince. "Call a cab, in heaven's name, and let me try to forget in slumber the memory of this night's disgrace."

But it was noticeable that he carefully read the name of the cab before he left it.

The next morning, as soon as the prince was stirring, Colonel Geraldine brought him a daily newspaper, with the following paragraph marked:

Measles Accident.—This morning about 2 o'clock, Mr. Bartholomew Malthus, of 15 Chepstow place, Westbourne drove on his way home from a party at a friend's house fell over the upper parapet

of the bridge, fracturing his skull and breaking a leg and arm. Death was instantaneous. Mr. Malthus accompanied by a friend was engaged in looking for a cab at the time of the unfortunate occurrence. As Mr. Malthus was paralyzed it is thought that his fall may have been occasioned by another cause. The unhappy gentleman was well known in the most respectable circles, and his loss will be widely and deeply deplored.

"If ever a soul went straight to hell," murmured solemnly, "it was that paralytic man."

The prince buried his face in his hands and remained silent.

"I am almost rejoiced," continued the colonel, "to know that he is dead. But for our young friend of the cream tartar I confess my heart bleeds."

"Geraldine," said the prince, raising his face, "that unhappy man was last night as innocent as you and I are, and this morning the guilt of blood is on his soul. When I think of the president, my heart grows sick within me. I do not know how it shall be done, but I shall have that scandalous act of mercy as there is a God in heaven. What an experience, what a lesson, was that same of cards!"

"One," said the colonel, "never to be repeated."

The prince remained so long without

replying that Geraldine grew alarmed. "You cannot mean to return," he said. "You have suffered too much and seen too much horror already. The duties of your high position forbid the repetition of the hazard."

"There is much in what you say," replied Prince Florizel, "and I am not altogether pleased with my own determination. Alas, in the clothes of the greatest potentate what is there more than a man? I never felt my weakness more acutely than now, Geraldine, but it is stronger than I. Can I cease to interest myself in the fortunes of the unhappy young man who lapped with us some hours ago? Can I leave the president to follow his nefarious career unwatched? Can I begin an adventure so entrancing and not follow it to an end? No, Geraldine; you ask of the prince more than the man is able to perform. Tonight, once more, we take our places at the table of the Suicide club."

Colonel Geraldine fell upon his knees.

"Will your highness take my life?" he cried, "it is his—his freely. But do not, oh, do not, let him ask me to countenance so terrible a risk!"

"Colonel Geraldine," replied the prince, with some laughfulness of manner, "your life is absolutely your own. I only look for obedience, and when that is unwillingly rendered I shall look for that no longer. I add one word for that longer. I add one word for your importunity in this affair has been sufficient."

The master of the house regained his feet at once.

"Your highness," he said, "may I be excused in my attendance this afternoon? I dare not as an honorable man venture a second time into that fatal house until I have perfectly ordered my affairs. Your highness shall meet, I promise him, with no more opposition from the most devoted and grateful of his servants."

"My dear Geraldine," returned Prince Florizel, "I always regret when you oblige me to remember my rank. Dispose of your day as you think fit, but be here before 11 in the same disguise."

The club on this second evening was not so fully attended, and when Geraldine and the prince arrived there were not above half a dozen persons in the smoking room. His highness took the president aside and congratulated him warmly on the demise of Mr. Malthus.

"I like," he said, "to meet with capacity, and certainly find much of it in you. Your profession is of a very delicate nature, but I see you are well qualified to conduct it with success and secrecy."

The president was somewhat affected by these compliments from one of his highness' superior bearing. He acknowledged them almost with humility.

"Poor Malthus!" he added. "I shall hardly know the club without him. The most of my patrons are boys, sir, and poetical boys, who are not much company for me. Not but what Malthus had some poetry, too, but it was of a kind that I could understand."

"I can readily imagine you should find yourself in sympathy with Mr. Malthus," returned the prince. "He struck me as a man of a very original disposition."

To his surprise Geraldine had disappeared. There was no one in the card-room but his destined butcher consulting with the president, and the young man of the cream tarts, who slipped a card to the prince and whispered in his ear:

"I would give a million, if I had it, for your luck."

His highness could not help reflecting as the young man departed that he would have sold his opportunity for a much more moderate sum.

The whispered conference now came to an end. The holder of the ace of clubs left the room with a look of intelligence, and the president, approaching the unfortunate member, proffered him his hand.

"I am pleased to meet you, sir," said he, "and do you this trifling service. At least you cannot complain of delay. On the second evening—what a stroke of luck!"

The prince endeavored in vain to articulate something in response, but his mouth was dry and his tongue seemed paralyzed.

"You feel a little sickish?" asked the president, with some show of solicitude. "Most gentlemen do. Will you take a little brandy?"

The prince signified in the affirmative, and the other immediately poured some of the spirit into a tumbler.

"Poor old Malthus!" ejaculated the president as the prince drained the glass. "He drank near upon a pint, and little enough good it seemed to do him."

"I am more amenable to treatment," said the prince, a good deal revived. "I am my own man again at once, as you perceive. And so, let me ask you, what are my directions?"

"You will proceed along the Strand, in the direction of the city, and on the left hand pavement, until you meet the gentleman who has just left the room. He will continue your instructions and you will have the kindness to obey—the authority of the club is vested in his person for the night. And now," added the president, "I wish you a pleasant walk."

Florizel acknowledged the salutation rather awkwardly and took his leave. He passed through the smoking room, where the bulk of the players were still consuming champagne, some of which he had himself ordered and paid for, and he was surprised to find himself cursing them in his heart. He put on his hat and greatcoat in the cabinet and selected his umbrella from a corner. The familiarity of these acts and the thought that he was about them for the last time betrayed him into a fit of laughter which sounded unpleasantly in his own ears. He conceived a reluctance to leave the cabinet and turned instead to the window. The sight of the lamps and the darkness recalled him to himself.

To be Continued.



IT WAS THE ACE OF SPADES.

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