

The New Arabian Nights

By ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON



He lowered his hand, but what it touched was not simply a counterpane—it was a counterpane with something underneath it like the outline of a human leg. Silas withdrew his arm and stood for a moment petrified.

"What, what?" he thought, "can this be?"

He listened intently, but there was no sound of breathing. Once more, with a great effort, he reached out the end of his finger to the spot he had already touched, but this time he leaped back half a yard and stood shivering and fixed with terror. There was something in his bed. What it was he knew not, but there was something there.

It was some seconds before he could

chime. There is naught in life except destiny, and, however you may be circumvented, there is but "at your side who will help you to the last."

Thus encouraged, Silas gathered himself together and, in a broken voice and helped out by the doctor's interrogations, contrived at last to put his finger on the facts. But the conversation between the prince and Geraldine he altogether omitted, as he had understood little of its purport and had no idea that it was in any way related to his own misadventure.

"Alas!" cried Dr. Noel. "I am much abused or you have fallen innocently into the most dangerous hands in Europe. Poor boy! What a pit has been dug for your simplicity! Info what a

extreme anxiety. At last the doctor, his autopsy completed, took a chair and addressed the young American with a smile.

"Since I came into your room," said he, "although my ears and my tongue have been so busy, I have not suffered my eyes to remain idle. I noted a little while ago that you have there in the corner one of those monstrous contrivances which your fellow countrymen carry with them into all quarters of the globe—in a word, a Saratoga trunk. Until this moment I have never been able to conceive the utility of these erections; but then I began to have a glimpse. Whether it was for convenience in the slave trade or to obviate the results of too ready an employment of the bowie knife, I cannot bring myself to decide, but one thing I see plainly—the object of such a box is to contain a human body."

"Surely," cried Silas—"surely this is not a time for jesting!"

"Although I may express myself with some degree of plainness," replied the doctor, "the purport of my words is entirely serious, and the first thing we have to do, my young friend, is to empty your coffer of all that it contains."

Silas, obeying the authority of Dr. Noel, put himself at his disposal. The Saratoga trunk was soon gutted of its contents, which made a considerable litter on the floor, and then Silas taking the heels and the doctor supporting the shoulders, the body of the murdered man was carried from the bed and, after some difficulty, doubled up and inserted whole into the empty box. With an effort on the part of both the lid was forced down upon this unusual baggage, and the trunk was locked and closed by the doctor's own hand, while Silas disposed of what had been taken out between the closet and a chest of drawers.

"Now," said the doctor, "the first step has been taken on the way to your deliverance. Tomorrow, or rather today, it must be your task to rid the suspicions of your porter, paying him all that you owe, while you may trust me to make the arrangements necessary to a safe conclusion. Meantime, follow me to my room, where I caution under which he was left, suffice it to say that I know him ready to serve me in any practicable manner. Now, it was necessary for you to gain London with your trunk unopened. To this the custom house seemed to oppose a fatal difficulty, but I bethought me that the luggage of so considerable a person as the prince is as a matter of course, passed without examination by the officers of custom. I applied to Colonel Geraldine and succeeded in obtaining a favorable answer. Tomorrow, if you go before 6 to the hotel where the prince lodges, your baggage will be passed over as a part of his, and you young man will make the journey as a member of his suit."

"It seems to me as you speak that I have already seen both the prince and Colonel Geraldine. I even overheard some of their conversation the other evening at the Bellier hall."

"It is probable enough, for the prince loves to mix with all societies," replied the doctor. "Once arrived in London, he pursued, 'your task is nearly ended. In this more bulky envelope I have given you a letter which I dare not address, but in the other you will find the designation of the house to which you must carry it along with your box, which will there be taken from you and not trouble you any more.'"

"Alas," said Silas, "I have every wish to believe you, but how is it possible? You open up to me a bright prospect, but I ask you, is my mind capable of receiving so unlikely a solution? Be more generous and let me further understand your meaning."

The doctor seemed painfully impressed.

"Boy," he answered, "you do not know how hard a thing you ask of me. But be it so. I am now insured to humiliation, and it would be strange if I refused you this after having granted you so much. Know, then, that although I now make so quiet an appearance—frugal, solitary, addicted to study—when I was younger my name was once a rallying cry among the most stately and dangerous spirits of London, and while I was outwardly an object for respect and consideration my true power resided in the most secret, terrible and criminal relations. It is to one of the persons who then obeyed me that I now address myself to deliver you from your burden. They were men of many different nations and dexterities, all bound together by a formidable oath and working to the same purposes. The trade of the association was in murder, and I who speak to you, innocent as I appear, was the chief of this revoluble crew."

"What?" cried Silas. "A murderer? And one with whom murder was a trade? Can I take your hand? Ought I so much as to accept your services? Dark and criminal old man, would you take an accomplice of my youth and my distress?"

The doctor bitterly laughed.

"You are difficult to please, Mr. Scoundrel," said he, "but I now offer you your choice of company between the murdered man and the murderer. If your conscience is free, use to accept my aid, say so, and I will immediately leave you. Thenceforward you can deal with your trunk and its belongings as best suits your upright conscience."

"I own myself wrong," replied Silas. "I should have remembered how generously you offered to shield me, even before I had convinced you of my innocence, and I continue to listen to your counsels with gratitude."

"That is well," returned the doctor, "and I perceive you are beginning to learn some of the lessons of experience."

"At the same time," resumed the New Englander, "as you counsel yourself accustomed to this tragical business and the people to whom you recommend me are your own former associates and friends, could you not yourself undertake the transport of the box and rid me at once of this detested presence?"

"Upon my word," replied the doctor, "I admire your candor! If you do not think I have already unduly sullied my heart I think the contrary. Take my services as I offer them and trouble me with no more words of gratitude, for I value your consideration even more highly than I do your detestation. A time will come, if you should be spared to see a number of years in health of mind, when you will think differently of all this and blush for your tonight's behavior."

So saying, the doctor arose from his

small table and a safe and powerful opiate, for whatever you do, you must have rest.

The next day was the longest in Silas' memory. It seemed as if it would never be done. He denied himself to his friends and sat in a corner with his eyes fixed upon the Saratoga trunk in dismal contemplation. His own former indiscretions were now returned upon him in kind, for the doctor's aid had been once more opened, and he was conscious of an almost continual study from Mme. Zephyrine's apartment. So distressing did this become that he was at last obliged to block up the hole from his own side, and when he was thus secured from observation he spent a considerable portion of his time in contrite tears and prayer.

Late in the evening Dr. Noel entered the room carrying in his hand a pair of sealed envelopes without address. One was bulky and the other so slim as to seem without importance.

"Silas," he said, seating himself at the table, "the time has now come for me to explain my plan for your salvation. Tomorrow morning, at an early hour, Prince Florizel of Bohemia returns to London, after having diverted himself for a few days with the Parisian crowd. It was my fortune, a good while ago, to do Colonel Geraldine, his master of the horse, one of those services, so common in my profession, which are never forgotten upon either side. I have no need to explain to you the nature of the obligation, repeated his directions briefly and clearly and departed from the room without permitting Silas any time to answer.

The next morning Silas presented himself at the hotel, where he was politely received by Colonel Geraldine and relieved from that moment of all immediate alarm about his trunk and its grisly contents. The journey passed without much incident, although the young man was horrified to overhear the sailors and railway porters complaining among themselves about the unusual weight of the prince's baggage. Silas traveled in a carriage with the valets, for Prince Florizel chose to be alone with his master of the horse.

The footman who had been driven to his destination. The entrance to Box court was too narrow for the passage of a coach; it was a mere footway between railings, with a post at either end. On one of these posts was seated a man, who at once jumped down and exchanged a friendly sign with the driver, while the footman opened the door and inquired of Silas whether he should take down the Saratoga trunk and to what number it should be carried.

"If you please," said Silas, "to No. 2."

The footman and the man who had been sitting on the post, even with the aid of Silas himself, had hard work to carry in the trunk, and before it was deposited at the door of the house in question the young American was horrified to find a score of loiterers looking on. But he knocked with as good a countenance as he could muster up and presented the other envelope to him who opened.

"He is not at home," said he, "but if you will leave your letter and return tomorrow early I shall be able to inform you whether and when he can receive your visit. Would you like to leave your box?" he added.

"Dearly!" cried Silas. And the next moment he repented his precipitation and declared with equal emphasis that he would rather carry the box along with him to the hotel.

The crowd jeered at his indecision and followed him to the carriage, with insulting remarks, and Silas, covered with shame and terror, implored the servants to conduct him to some quiet and comfortable house of entertainment in the immediate neighborhood.

The prince's equipage deposited Silas at the Craven hotel, in Craven street, and immediately drove away, leaving him alone with the servants of the inn. The only vacant room, it appeared, was a little den up four pairs of stairs and looking toward the back. To this hermitage, with infinite trouble and complaint, a pair of stout porters carried the Saratoga trunk.

It is needless to mention that Silas kept closely at their heels throughout the ascent and had his heart in his mouth at every corner. A single first



"I THOUGHT I HEARD A CRY," BEGAN THE DOCTOR.

move. Then, guided by an instinct, he felt straight upon the matches and, keeping his back toward the bed, lighted a candle. As soon as the flame had kindled, he turned slowly round and looked for what he feared to see. Sure enough, there was the worst of his imaginings realized. The coverlet was drawn carefully up over the pillow, but it molded the outlines of a human body lying motionless, and when he dashed forward and flung aside the sheets he beheld the blond young man he had seen in the Bellier hall the night before, his eyes open and without speculation, his face swollen and blackened, and a thin stream of blood trickling from his nostrils.

Silas uttered a long tremulous wail, dropped the candle and fell on his knees beside the bed. Silas was awakened from the stupor into which his terrible discovery had plunged him by a prolonged but discreet tapping at the door. It took him some seconds to remember his position, and when he hastened to prevent any one from entering it was already too late. Dr. Noel, in a tall nightcap, carrying a lamp which lighted up his long white countenance, shilling in his gait and peering and coking his head like some sort of bird, pushed the door slowly open and advanced into the middle of the room.

"I thought I heard a cry," began the doctor, "and fearing you might be unwell, I did not hesitate to offer this intrusion."

Silas, with a flushed face and a fearful beating heart, kept between the doctor and the bed, but he found no voice to answer.

"You are in the dark," pursued the doctor, "and yet you have not even begun to prepare for rest. You will not easily persuade me against my own eyesight, and your face declares most eloquently that you require either a friend or a physician—which is it to be? Let me feel your pulse, for that is often a just reporter of the heart."

He advanced to Silas, who still retreated before him backward, and sought to take him by the wrist, but the strain on the young American's nerves had become too great for endurance. He avoided the doctor with a feeble movement and, throwing himself upon the floor, burst into a flood of weeping.

As soon as Dr. Noel perceived the dead man in the bed his face darkened, and, hurrying back to the door which he had left ajar, he hastily closed and double locked it.

"Up!" he cried, addressing Silas in a shrill tone. "This is no time for weeping. What have you done? How came this body in your room? Speak freely to one who may be helpful. Do you imagine I would ruin you? Do you think this piece of dead flesh on your pillow can alter in any degree the sympathy with which you have inspired me? Credulous youth, the horror with which blind and unjust law regards an action never attaches to the door in the eyes of those who love him, and if I saw the friend of my heart return to me out of a sea of blood he would be in no way changed in my affection. Raise yourself," he said, "Good and ill are a

dearly paid have your unwary been conducted? This man," he said, "this Englishman, whom you twice saw and whom I suspect to be the soul of the contrivance, can you describe him? Was he young or old, tall or short?"

But Silas, who, for all his curiosity, had not a seeing eye in his head, was able to supply nothing but meager generalities, which it was impossible to recognize.

"I would have it a piece of education in all schools!" cried the doctor angrily. "Where is the use of eyesight and articulate speech if a man cannot observe and recollect the features of his enemy? I, who know all the gangs of Europe, might have identified him and gained new weapons for your defense. Cultivate this art in future, my poor boy. You may find it of momentous service."

"The future," repeated Silas. "What future is there left for me except the gallows?"

"Youth is but a cowardly season," returned the doctor, "and a man's own troubles look blacker than they are. I am old, and yet I never despair."

"Can I tell such a story to the police?" demanded Silas.

"Assuredly not," replied the doctor. "From what I see already of the machinery in which you have been involved your case is desperate upon that side, and for the narrow eye of the authorities you are infallibly the guilty person. And remember that we only know a portion of the plot, and the same infamous contrivers have doubtless arranged many other circumstances which would be elicited by a police inquiry and help to fix the guilt more certainly upon your innocence."

"I am then lost indeed!" cried Silas.

"I have not said so," answered Dr. Noel. "For I am a cautious man."

"But look at this," objected Silas, pointing to the body. "Here is this object in my bed, not to be explained, not to be disposed of, not to be regarded without horror."

"Horror?" replied the doctor. "No. When this sort of clock has run down, it is no more to me than an ingenious piece of mechanism, to be investigated with the history. When blood is once cold and stagnant, it is no longer but man blood. When flesh is once dead, it is no longer the flesh which we desire in our lovers and respect in our friends. The grace, the attraction and the terror have all gone from it with the animating spirit. Accustom yourself to look upon it with equanimity, for if my scheme is practicable you will have to live some days in constant proximity to that which now so greatly horrifies you."

"Your scheme?" cried Silas. "What is that? Tell me speedily, doctor, for I have scarcely courage enough to continue to exist."

Without replying, Dr. Noel turned toward the bed and proceeded to examine the corpse.

"Quite dead," he murmured. "Yes, as I had supposed, the pockets empty; yes, and the name cut off the shirt. Their work has been done thoroughly and well. Fortunately, he is of small stature."

Silas followed these words with an



SILAS KEPT CLOSELY AT THEIR HEELS.

On board the steamer, however, Silas attracted his highest attention by the melancholy of his air and attitude as he stood gazing at the pile of baggage, for he was still full of disquietude about the future.

"There is a young man," observed the prince, "who must have some cause for sorrow."

"That," replied Geraldine, "is the American for whom I obtained permission to travel with your suit."

"You remind me that I have been remiss in courtesy," said Prince Florizel, and, advancing to Silas, he addressed him with the most exquisite condescension in these words:

"I was charmed, young sir, to be able to gratify the desire you made known to me through Colonel Geraldine. Remember, if you please, that I shall be glad at any future time to lay you under a more serious obligation."

And he then put some questions as to the political condition of America, which Silas answered with sense and propriety.

"You are still a young man," said the prince, "but I observe you to be very serious for your years. Perhaps you allow your attention to be too much occupied with grave studies. But perhaps, on the other hand, I am myself indiscreet and touch upon a painful subject."

"I have certainly cause to be the most miserable of men," said Silas. "Never has a more innocent person been more miserably abused."

"I will not ask you for your confidence," returned Prince Florizel. "But do not forget that Colonel Geraldine's recommendation is an unalloyed passport and that I am not only willing, but positively more able than many others, to do you a service."

Silas was delighted with the amiability of this great personage, but his mind soon returned upon its gloomy preoccupations, for not even the favor of a prince to a republican can discharge a brooding spirit of his cares.

The fellow offered to show him to the smoking room when he had done, and, although he would have much preferred to return at once to his perilous treasure, he had not the courage to refuse and was shown downstairs to the black, gaslit cellar which formed, and possibly still forms, the divan of the Craven hotel.

Two very bad betting men were playing billiards, attended by a moist, consumptive marker, and for the moment Silas imagined that these were the only occupants of the apartment. But at the next glance his eye fell upon a person smoking in the farthest corner, with lowered eyes and a most respectable and modest aspect. He knew at once that he had seen the face before, and in spite of the entire change of clothes recognized the man whom he had found seated on a post at the entrance to Box court and who had helped him to carry the trunk to and from the carriage. The New Englander simply turned and ran, nor did he pause until he had locked and bolted himself in his bedroom.

There all night long, a prey to the most terrible imaginations, he watched beside the fatal boxful of dead flesh. The suggestion of the boots that his trunk was full of gold inspired him with all manner of new terrors if he so much as dared to close an eye, and the presence in the smoking room, and under an obvious disguise, of the loiterer from Box court convinced him that he was once more the center of obscure machinations.

Midnight had sounded some time when, impelled by uneasy suspicions, Silas opened his bedroom door and peered into the passage. It was dimly illuminated by a single jet of gas, and some distance off he perceived a man sleeping on the floor in the costume of a hotel servant. Silas drew near the man on tiptoe. He lay partly on his back, partly on his side, and his right forearm concealed his face from recognition. Suddenly, while the American was still bending over him, the sleeper removed his arm and opened his eyes, and Silas found himself once more face to face with the loiterer of Box court.

"Good night, sir," said the man pleasantly.

But Silas was too profoundly moved to find an answer and regained his

place one of the carriages at the young gentleman's disposal and at once to charge the Saratoga trunk upon the dickery, the colonel shook hands and excused himself on account of his occupations in the princely household.

Silas now broke the seal of the envelope containing the address and directed the stately footman to drive him to Box court, opening off the

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