

chattering masses of the poor. The section was largely foreign. The patches of color in some Italian shawl, the long coats and peaked headgear of some moujik, the clatter of the dialects seemed all the stranger from the sullen London background of mean shops, dingy lodgings, and low beer-houses. For, in the shadows of that underworld of the great metropolis, sodden faces, guttural oaths, dingy rags, the blow that precedes the word, are the manifestations of the native born.

In a side street the cab drew to a standstill. It was the mortuary, the inspector told me. A young policeman at the door touched his hat, and led the way down a passage to a bare stone chamber. On a slab in the center the body lay with an elderly man in ill-fitting clothes bending over it. He looked up as we entered, and nodded to the inspector.

"You were quite right, Peace," he said cheerfully; "chloroform first, strangling afterwards."

"They took no risks, Dr. Chapple."

"They made a clean job of it," said the elderly man, looking down at the slab with his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. "Never saw neater work since—well, since I was invalided home from India."

"Thugs?"

"Yes; they did it nigh as well as a Thug in regular practice."

The callous brutality of the conversation filled me with disgust. I turned away, leaning against the wall with a feeling of nausea.

"And now, if I may trouble you, Mr. Phillips, will you look at this poor fellow, and see if you can recognize him?" said Peace.

I knew him well enough. The black beard, the thin, hawk nose, the high and noble forehead were not easily forgotten. Talman had introduced me to him at the Art Club's Reception in July, whispering that he was a Pole and a neighbor of his—a deuced queer fish, though a clever one. He had exhibited a bust of Nero at the Academy, which attracted much attention.

"And his name?" asked the inspector.

"Amaroff. I believe him to be from Poland; that is about all I know of him."

"How did you come to meet him?"

I told him of my introduction. Would I, he asked, give him Talman's address? Most certainly—No. 4 Harden place, off the King's road, Chelsea. I had no objection whatever to Talman being roused at one in the morning. By all means let the old rascal be turned out of bed and cross-examined. His language would be a revelation to the police—it would, really.

The inspector left me on the doorstep for a few minutes, while he whispered to two shabbily dressed men who lounged out of the darkness, and disappeared with the same lack of ostentation. Then we entered our cab, which had waited, and trotted westward, the very air growing clearer as it seemed to me, when the underworld of poverty fell away behind us. It was some time before I spoke, and then it was to ask for a solution to certain puzzles that had been forming in my brain.

"You said he had been robbed?" I began.

"Yes, Mr. Phillips. They had gone through his pockets with every attention to detail."

"Then how did you know he was a sculptor?"

"He had been called away in a hurry. There was modelling clay in his fingernails, and a splash of plaster on his right trouser leg. It was quite simple, as you see."

His reply was ingenious, and I liked the inspector the better for it. The man had something more in him than a civil tongue and a pleasing manner.

"Tell me—what else did you learn?"

"That he was murdered in a place with a sanded floor, probably at no great distance from Leman street, seeing that they carried him there on a coster's barrow."

"I am not a reporter," I said. "I do not want guess-work."

"I shall probably be able to prove my words in twenty-four hours."

"And why not now?"

"There are good reasons."

"Oh, very well," I said sulkily; and we drove on through the night in silence.

He left me at my door amid polite assurances that I should not again be troubled in the matter. I told him quite frankly that I was very glad to hear it.

I did not sleep more than eight hours that night, and was quite unfitted for work in the morning. I roamed about my studio with nerves on edge. I cursed Peace and all his doings. Even the papers gave me no further information of this exasperating business, being loaded with the preparations for the Czar's reception in Paris, which was due in two days. In the end I sank so far as to send old Jacob up to the inspector's rooms for the latest news, but he had been out since daybreak.

About twelve I wandered off to the club. The sight of Talman was a very present joy to me. He was engaged in denouncing the police to a select circle, choosing as his text that the Englishman's house is his castle. I offered my sincere sympathy when he told me that he had been invaded at one in the morning by inquiring detectives. I suggested that he should write to the Times about it. He said he had already done so. Incidentally he mentioned that Amaroff's address had been No. 21 Harden place.

I lunched at the little table by the window; but it was in the smoking-room afterwards that the idea occurred to me. I fought against it for some time, but the temptation increased upon consideration. Finally I yielded, and told the waiter to call a cab. I would myself have a look at the dead man's studio.

I dismissed the hansom at the turning off King's road and walked down Harden place on foot. It was an eddy in the rush of London improvement—a pool of silence in its roaring traffic. There were trees in the little gardens. The golds and browns of the withering leaves peeped and rustled over the old brick walls. Several studios I noticed—it was evidently an artists' quarter—before I stopped in front of No. 21.

The studio—a fair-sized barn of modern brick—fronted on the street. The double doors through which a sculptor's larger work may pass were flanked by a little side door painted a staring and most objectionable green. On the right the roof of a red-tiled shed crept up to long windows under the eaves. The side door stood ajar—a most urgent invitation to my curiosity. After all, I argued, a studio remains a place where the strict rules of etiquette may be avoided, even though its owner be dead. And so, without troubling further in the matter, I pushed the door gently open, and walked into a short passage, the further end of which was barred with heavy curtains of faded plush. Beyond them I could hear a whisper of voices. I drew back the edge of a curtain and peeped within.

In the center of the big room was a tall pedestal upon which was set the

bust of Nero, which had won no small measure of fame for poor Amaroff in that year's Academy. Under the proud and merciless features of the Roman Emperor stood Inspector Peace—smoking a cigarette and talking to a big fellow with a thick black beard.

A couple of men kneeling at their feet were replacing a mass of loose papers in the drawers of a roller-top desk that had been pulled some distance from the wall.

I was just about to announce myself, when one of the men knocked over a brass candlestick which stood on the desk, so that it rolled to the further side. With a grunt of annoyance, he stepped leisurely round and dropped on his knees to recover it. Once out of sight of his companions, however, he whipped out a square of wax from his pocket, and with extraordinary rapidity took an impression from a key that he had kept concealed in his hand. It was all over in five seconds, and from the shelter the desk gave to him, no one but myself could have been the wiser. He rose, replaced the candlestick, and continued his work.

Whether the fellow had played his companion a trick or not, I had no desire to be caught acting the spy. So, pulling the curtains aside, I walked into the room. They all turned quickly upon me, the black-bearded man staring hard as in attempting to recall my face. But Peace was the first to speak.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Phillips," he said, as if I were a visitor he had expected. "You are just in time to drive me back. Have you a cab waiting?"

"No," I hesitated.

"It's of no consequence. We can find another at the top of the street. And now, Mr. Nicolin," he continued, turning to the big man, who had never taken his eyes off me, "are you quite satisfied, or do you wish your men to make a further search?"

"No, Mr. Inspector," he answered, with a heavy foreign accent, "we are quite content. Noding more is necessary."

"Shall you be wanting to come again?"

"No—for us it is sufficient. It is for you to continue. Mr. Inspector. You think you will catch these men who kill him, hein?"

"We shall try," said Peace, with a modest droop of the eyes.

"Ach—but where can there be certainty in our lives? Come now, my children, let us be going. Alexandre, you have the door-key of the studio; give him to the Inspector here."

So it was the door-key, thought I, of which Mr. Alexandre obtained a memento behind the roller-top desk! Peace gave a polite good-bye to his companions on the step, locked up the little green door, and then started down the street at my side.

"I had no business to come poking my nose into your affairs," I said, "Anything you say I shall thoroughly deserve."

"Don't apologize," he smiled. "I was pleased to see you."

"And why?"

"You can do better things than remain a wealthy dilettante, Mr. Phillips. You are too broad in the shoulders, too clear in the head, for living in the world that is dead. Such little incidents as these—they drag you out of the shell you are building about you. That is why I was pleased to see you. I have spoken plainly—are you offended?"

"Oh, no," I said, waving my stick to a passing hansom, though I did not refer again to the topic which I foresaw was likely to become personally offensive to me.

He sat back in his corner of the cab, filling his pipe with dextrous fingers, while I watched him out of the corner of my eye. When it was well alight, he began again on a new subject.

"London's a queer place," he said, "though perhaps you have not had the time to find it out. There are foreign colonies, with their own religions and clubs and politics, working their way through life just as if they were in Odessa or Hamburg or Milan. There are refugees—Heaven knows how many, for we do not—that have fled before all the despotisms that succeeded and all the revolutions that failed from Siam to the Argentine. Tolstoi fanatics, dishonest presidents, anarchists, royalists, Armenians, Turks, Carlists, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia—a finer collection than even America itself can show. On the Continent—well, we should be running them in, and they would be throwing bombs. But here no one troubles them so long as they pay rent and taxes, and keep their hands out of each other's pockets or from each other's throats. They understand us, too, and stop playing at assassins and conspirators. But once in a while habit is too strong for them, and something happens."

"As it happened to Amaroff?"

"Yes—as it happened to Amaroff."

"It was a political crime?"

"Yes."

"And the reasons?"

"They have the advantage of simplicity. Amaroff was a member of the Russian secret-service, detailed to mix with and observe the Nihilist refugees. The Czar enters Paris in two days, and when the Czar travels the political police of all the capitals are kept on the run. I suppose Amaroff showed an excess of zeal that made his absence from London desirable. Anyway, he was found dead, and the Russians reasonably conclude it is the Nihilists who killed him."

"Who were those men in the studio?"

"The big fellow was Nicolin, the head of the Russian service over here. I don't know a better man in his profession nor one with fewer scruples. The other two were assistants. They came down to the Yard this morning with a request that they might search the studio for certain private papers which Amaroff had and which belonged to them. So we fixed the appointment into which you have just walked."

"And they finished their search?"

"You heard them say so."

"Exactly; but why, then, did they want an impression of the studio key?"

He turned upon me with a sudden impatience in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I told him of my arrival, and what I had seen from my post behind the curtains of the doorway. He did not speak when I had finished, but sat, puffing at his short pipe, and staring out over the horse's cars. So we arrived at our door.

"If you have further news tonight will you call in before going to bed?" I asked him as we stood on the pavement.

"I cannot promise you that. I have some important inquiries to make in the East End this evening, and I do not know when I shall return."

I suppose I looked depressed at his answer; indeed the prospect of a lonely evening in my rooms with such a mystery in course of solution outside, seemed oddly distasteful to me.

"It is a rough district, as you know," he said, watching me; "but would you care to come along?"

"There is nothing I should like better," I answered simply.

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