

the Black Cat

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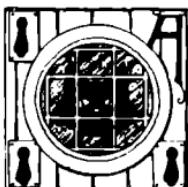
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The Man with the Lucky Eye.

BY JOHN W. HARDING.



ILL. Naples was amusing itself. The tide of gaiety rising throughout the holiday week had reached high-water mark; and to-night, on Christmas Eve, four hundred thousand Neapolitans and five Americans were abroad bent on the pursuit of pleasure. Or if this proportion of Americans is not exact, it is with the doings of these five only, and more especially one of the five, that this narrative concerns itself.

Prof. Rufus Poppleton was that one. The other four were the Hon. Thomas Whipple, solid and sedate; Mrs. Whipple, portly and self-possessed; Miss Whipple, newly "out" and impartially enthusiastic; and Miss Alicia Folsom, aged twenty-three, with an open record of Washington social successes and a secret ambition to study art in the atmosphere of foreign capitals. Trips abroad are, however, not reckoned among the necessities of the daughters of government petty officials, and this unexpected six months spent in Europe as the guest of the Whipples had added to Miss Folsom's charm a dangerous sparkle and expansion that may account for the degree of Professor Poppleton's abandon to the gaiety of the hour. Certainly for once in his life "Old Pop," as he was known to an army of irreverent college men, had for-

gotten that he was the president of a famous American University, and the author of various treatises on comparative philosophies; he had forgotten that his sober silk hat was tipped rakishly to one side and that his coat was sprinkled with tinsel. Indeed, an observer would have said that this dignitary had forgotten everything except that he was abroad on a holiday, that it was Christmas Eve in Naples, that he was a bachelor of barely middle age, and that an uncommonly attractive and companionable girl was clinging to his left arm.

And why remember anything else? The Neapolitans were having a good time, and seemed disposed to share their fun.

Crowds of laughing, chattering, gaily dressed people of all classes and conditions surged through the streets, spread out over the open palazzos, and choked the narrower thoroughfares. Everywhere the bang! bang! of the *tricchi tracche* punctured with exclamation points the hum of happy peasants, and above the snap of firecrackers and the buzz of voices rose the strident notes of bagpipes, played by perambulant Calabrian musicians before the street shrines of the Madonna.

So contagious was the spirit of merriment that the whole party caught the infection, making it merely a subject of jest when from time to time the meeting of two opposing streams of humanity resulted in a temporary deadlock. And it was with much good-humored comment on demoralized headgear and neckties that in one of these blockades they escaped into a shop whose open doors offered a convenient haven. As it happened, it was a curio shop, and after a cursory round of the usual photographs, rosaries, and lava ornaments, the sight of certain quaint prints suddenly awakened the professor's scholarly instincts.

"Exquisite," he murmured, bending over a quaint presentment of a Pompeian feast, "absolutely unique. Ah-h, Miss Folsom," impressively, "I know you will appreciate—" and turning, the professor stopped short with that embarrassment that always follows an address to empty space.

For Miss Folsom was at the other end of the shop, listening to the explanation of the sale of State lottery tickets which the shop-keeper was giving to the rest of the party. Her feminine instinct felt the professor's discomfiture and brought her at once to his side.

"You will make me happy by accepting this as a Christmas present,—a little souvenir of our day at Pompeii," said the professor, with that distinguished urbanity that made one forget his forty-five years.

Indeed it was with quite the air of a comrade that Miss Folsom returned thanks for the holiday gift. "And I have one for you, too," she said, "only I can't divide it yet, and I can give you only half. No, I won't tell you what it is; wait and see,"—with a certain tantalizing drawing down of her eyelids.

By this time they were on the street again and carried along by the crowd through the Villa Nazionale, Naples's most fashionable promenade, towards the Cathedral, whose majestic midnight mass would count half the holiday throng among its worshipers.

Just how it happened Professor Poppleton never knew, but within a block of their destination, where the pressure forced them into single file, a counter current in the throng engulfed him as a wave might, sweeping him away from Miss Folsom and the rest of the party into a black, narrow courtway like a hole in the wall. Before he could catch his breath or look around, another wave seemed to carry him straight through an open doorway into a hall, and thence to a grimy, gaudily decorated little room, where he found himself the center of a group of chattering, laughing, jubilantly enthusiastic Neapolitans.

Evidently, the professor thought, these fun-loving people had singled out the middle-aged foreigner as a target for one of their holiday jokes. It was annoying, but the American fell back on his philosophy and determined while in Naples to do as the Neapolitans do. He therefore beamed back at them and awaited developments. Apparently encouraged by his manner, the jokers—evidently of the peasant class, by their gay jackets and petticoats, and many-colored silk scarfs—crowded around him and began jabbering energetically, with frequent gestures toward their guest. Obviously their remarks concerned his personal appearance, and, taken in connection with the accompanying laughter, they were witty; but as the professor knew no more of the Neapolitan dialect than his hosts did of Greek or Sanscrit, he could only smile—in sickly fashion—and wait until their momentary exuberance should subside and he be released.

When the moments grew to ten, and then twenty, with no change in the situation, the professor determined to resort to that dignified diplomacy that had often served to quell excitement among those other irresponsible creatures—the undergraduates—and, still smiling, but with an air of decision, began to push his way toward the door. In an instant his way was blocked by a swarthy, pockmarked woman, whose eyes shone like hard lumps of coal beneath her headdress of orange silk, and who shook a key at him with would-be playfulness, to show that the door was locked. There was evidently more of the joke to come, and with a feeling of annoyance he turned toward his captors. At once their faces lighted, and several pointed significantly to his eyes.

Now one of the professor's eyes was of glass, and replaced an optic that he had sacrificed on the altar of chemistry. Upon that never-shifting, store-bought eye many a would-be college wit had rung the changes, but always at a safe distance. And here were these Neapolitans laughing in his very face at his affliction. If it was merely one of their "December liberties," it was an unkind one, and the professor's face flushed.

Meantime the chattering among his captors had reached that high pitch that means tense feeling, and their gestures showed that they were urging some action on one of their number. As if in answer to their motions, he presently pushed his way toward the professor, and holding his left hand within a few inches of that dignitary's face, with the forefinger of his left hand began slowly and meaningfully to count the extended fingers.

A light broke upon the professor's mind; undoubtedly this was a hint that he was to buy his way to freedom.

Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he drew out a handful of coins of different denominations, which he placed triumphantly on the table; and then with a confident air turned to the door, only to meet with another repulse. For now a second man had been pushed forward and repeated the process of pointing to the professor's eye and counting his own fingers, while the rest chattered excitedly, by turns at him and each other, exactly like a cageful of angry monkeys.

By this time it had been borne in upon their unwilling guest

that this was no ordinary joke,— indeed, that it was no joke at all. The people had ceased smiling, and were very much in earnest. Several of the men glared at him with faces that bore villain written all over them; and even the women looked capable of wielding the stiletto.

In that second mere annoyance gave way to fear, as it flashed upon him that he had been deliberately kidnapped, on the open streets of the city, by a set little better than brigands, and that he was completely in their power.

Yet what could they want? More money? To think it was to pull out his purse and lay it on the table.

With gestures of impatience, his offering was pushed back, and the sickening pantomime of a moment before repeated, but with greater impressiveness.

And suddenly a frightful thought nearly undermined the professor's self-possession. These people wanted a ransom, and meant that if they did not get it they would put out his eyes. The idea seemed incredible, but it was backed up by long-forgotten stories that immediately flooded the unfortunate man's mind — stories of captured tourists subjected to horrible torture at the hands of Italian brigands. And the fact of his having but one eye made the prospective loss of that seem all the more terrible.

While the professor was by nature a peaceful, law-abiding citizen, who pooh-poohed the idea of carrying arms in a civilized city in the nineteenth century, he was not lacking in fiber — moral and physical. In an instant he assumed an attitude calculated to show that he could not be trifled with.

“I have given you all the money that belongs to me, and I have nothing that belongs to you,” he thundered, “and I insist that you release me at once. Otherwise I shall report this outrage to the American consul.”

But words and attitude alike seemed lost on this motley assembly, who simply looked at each other curiously, chatted in lowered tones, and finally all trooped out, the woman in the orange headdress bringing up in the rear with the single candle.

Then the door closed, the key clinked unpleasantly in the lock, and for the first time in his life the professor knew the meaning of absolute, unrelieved, impenetrable darkness.

Now fifteen years of university professorship had convinced Rufus Poppleton that he knew himself and could possess himself under any circumstances. He was, moreover, a lecturer on the Stoic virtues, and if confronted with such a case as this in the abstract, would have philosophized over the necessity of self-control under all circumstances. But here was a situation undreamed of in his philosophy. Rudely separated from his friends in one of the happiest moments of his life, ridiculed, insulted, browbeaten by a crowd of vicious foreigners, he had finally been locked up in this black, stuffy hole to await he knew not what torture on the morrow. The very blackness seemed to threaten all manner of horrors ; it robbed him of his self-reliance and instilled into his mind a creeping fear that found outlet in the most childish performances.

Angry, panting, he felt his way to the window and pulled frantically at the solid iron bars. He shouted until he was hoarse, he kicked desperately on the unyielding panels, then leaned against the door, listening eagerly for some sign from without. But the silence was as oppressive as the blackness.

Groping carefully about the room, he finally discovered the table, and in a new access of rage and fear hurled it vainly against the door, and when the table was splintered used the pieces to smash the glass in the window. But without was only more blackness, as of a blind courtyard.

Another even more angry and childish assault on door, and window, and even the walls, left him so exhausted that he finally sank limply upon a long chest near the door, and tried to compose himself by sleep, in preparation for the next day's ordeal.

Even in this he was unsuccessful ; for between fear and anger his brain was so inflamed that it persisted in reproducing over and over again the scenes he had just undergone as well as in rehearsing those still awaiting him. And the brief snatches of sleep that came to him brought dreams of such horror that waking was a relief. When finally toward morning exhaustion drugged him to slumber, it seemed that he had hardly closed his eyes when he was roused by the sound of voices,—to find himself once more surrounded by his captors.

At his first movement the woman with the orange headdress was at his side offering him a glass of Chianti, which he indig-

nantly refused. She was still urging upon him the wine and some bread when there was a stir at the door, a ripple of excited conversation among the group of Italians, and a man, evidently of the same nationality but a notch higher in the social scale, pushed his way through the respectful crowd to the captive, and in halting English wished him good morning.

In an instant the professor was on the alert.

"So you speak English, do you?" he said sternly. Then as the other gave a broken affirmative, he continued, "Very well; then tell me in English what this outrage means. As for your friends,"—here the speaker sprang to his feet and delivered his message with a fiery eloquence that he had never known he possessed,—"to them you may say that they have kept me here one night, they may keep me here three hundred and sixty-five nights, but never from a free-born American citizen will they extract five centesimi of ransom money. As for me—"

The last words were lost on the newcomer, who, with an altogether unaccountable smile, had turned to his countrymen, and with many wavings of the arms, and jerks of the head, and countings of the fingers, was apparently translating the professor's message.

And—still more unaccountable—as he progressed, a buzz of delight began to issue from the group around him,—a buzz that swelled with every word, bursting into a roar of joy, interspersed with delighted "bravos" as the interpreter concluded. The next moment the crowd surrounded their prisoner, laughing, beaming, fairly dancing in such an exuberance of joy and gratitude that some of the women actually attempted to kiss his hands.

But the professor's wrath had passed the point where it could be conciliated either by such demonstrations, or by the newcomer's polite invitation to visit his shop and hear all about the affair over some "rich wine."

"I don't want your wine," he said. "I want you to take me to the consul." And to the consul they went, where the ruffled man of letters,—his real eye, usually so pacific and benevolent, glaring almost as fiercely as his glass optic,—told his story.

When, finally, he finished his speech, with an impressive demand that the brigands who kidnapped him be properly punished, the consul looked mystified but conciliatory.

"Of course you know, Dr. Poppleton," he said, with due deference, "we don't have brigands in Italy in this century; and you admit that you were not robbed. Besides, as you know, last night was Christmas Eve, when practical jokes are in order. Still," he added hastily, as he saw an angry flush creeping over his visitor's face, "this certainly was carrying a practical joke too far, and I'll have the matter investigated and report to you this afternoon.

"But who is your companion?"

In a moment the interpreter, so far standing silent in the doorway, was explaining and apologizing all in a breath.

"It is very simple," he said, with a bland smile and a shrug of the shoulders. "I tried to explain in my shop. He refuse, he refuse my wine. He ask me take to consul. I bring him. So.

"Dis a man have de *assistito* — what you call the lucky eye," pointing to the professor's artificial optic. "Da people see dat eye, get him in da house so he can say some numbers for buy da lottery ticket. He no undustand and dey keepa him until I came in da morna. No hurt; no do noddings. Just letta him sleep."

While the man spoke the consul had cast a surreptitious glance at the American's artificial optic, and when the interpreter finished his speech, turned to the professor with a smile of comprehension.

"I see now," he said, "and I don't wonder you found the situation incomprehensible. The fact is you've simply been made the victim of a peculiar Neapolitan superstition." Then he proceeded to explain the difference between the *jettatura*, or evil eye, and the *assistito*, or lucky eye, and their firm belief, strengthened by long inheritance, that any numbers spoken by the possessor of the latter were lucky numbers, and could be used to never-failing advantage in a lottery drawing.

"Your affliction brings you within the *assistito* class," he concluded, "and these people wanted you to give them some lucky numbers for the regular monthly drawing of the State lottery. It's as much a part of their life as their meals are. I suppose they couldn't get an interpreter last night and so kept you until morning. It's too bad you couldn't have understood what they wanted and given them the numbers before the interpreter came. Then you would have been released. But of course in any case," he added "it's an outrage, and they must apologize."

"But, confound it, I gave them no numbers," said the professor, struggling hard to maintain his dignity. "You don't suppose I would encourage such a superstition, do you?"

"How is that?" asked the consul, turning to the interpreter. "Didn't the gentleman give you the numbers?"

"Oh, yes, he do," said the shopkeeper, with a grin of satisfaction. "He say one night, three hundred and sixty-five nights, five centesimi,—thirteen thousand, six hundred and fifty-five. See?" exhibiting a slip of paper on which the number was written. "You play him, you win."

For a moment the professor looked sheepish, as he realized how easily he had been led into doing exactly what he had been expected to do. Even the consul could not suppress a smile.

"This may seem like a joke to some people," said the professor coldly, "but I want you to understand that I am going to prosecute these kidnappers of innocent Americans."

"I wouldn't, doctor," said the consul suavely. "I'm sorry you suffered this indignity, and I'll bring the matter before the foreign office at once. Meantime you have the satisfaction of knowing that every one of your supposed brigands will have pawned his bedding and jewelry to back your involuntary tip."

"It's an iniquitous practise, and a disgraceful business for a government to be in," retorted the other severely.

And though the consul protested that the people were bound to gamble, and that while a private concern would undoubtedly swindle them roundly, the government managed things with strictest honesty, devoting its small percentage of profit to lightening the burden of taxation,—indeed, in spite of all possible conciliations on the other's part, the professor went away only slightly mollified, and with his mind still set on reparation.

To discover on reaching his hotel that, according to previous arrangement, the Whipples and Miss Folsom had gone to Paris, leaving word for him to follow when he had "done Naples," added new fuel to the flames. And when at the consulate that afternoon he learned that he was offered no reparation beyond profuse apologies, his anger was so inflamed that he departed, rumbling out threats of bringing suit against the Italian government immediately upon his return. In fact, during his lonely voyage home—he had

missed the Whipples by a steamer — he went so far as to address a letter to his representative in Congress, asking an interview at the earliest possible date, concerning an important suit of international import that he had under consideration.

To this letter, posted immediately upon his arrival in New York, the professor received an immediate answer, in which the representative promised an interview at the end of three or four days to be given up to important debates.

But as it happened, Professor Poppleton did not wait three days,— indeed, he did not wait one day. And the cause of his haste was another letter, also bearing the Washington postmark, and arriving only one mail later. It read as follows: —

My dear Professor : — My long-cherished visions of art study and life abroad are at last to become realities, and you are the conjuror. This may sound like nonsense, but you'll see that it's anything but nonsense when I recall to you our Christmas Eve in the curio shop at Naples, when we exchanged gifts,— or, rather, one gift and the promise of another. It was those few minutes in the shop that made me acquainted with the Italian lottery system, and it was your present — it's over my desk now — that inspired me to buy the lottery ticket, half of which was to be my present to you.

This I did the next day, putting my money on a number recommended by one of the attendants at the hotel; he said it was sure to draw a prize, as it had been given a friend of his by a man with a lucky eye,—whatever that may be.

Anyway, the American consul at Naples has just cabled me that I have won the capital prize; and now I'm hoping for an opportunity to redeem in person my promise of Christmas Eve.

I write to express my hope that you will soon give me that opportunity.
Gratefully, ALICIA FOLSOM

That was all, but it was enough not only to send the professor to Washington on the next train, but to inspire the note dated at the Arlington, which the amazed representative received only a day later,—a note in which the writer explained that he had decided to drop his proceedings against the Italian government, as he had “a more important suit on hand.”

And curiously enough, though the professor and his wife make their home in Rome and Paris, one of their favorite trips is to an unenlightened place called Naples.