

THE SHROUDED WATCHER.

It is many years since the following remarkable incident in my life took place. For the ordinary commonplace details of every day experience my memory is generally held to be indifferent, but the circumstances in this case were such that they have indelibly fixed themselves in my recollection, as though they had occurred yesterday.

At the time I allude to I was a very raw young ensign, scarcely done with the goose-step. My regiment was quartered in the — Barracks, situated in a suburb of the capital of that well-known island-fortress which stands warden over the blue waters of the Mediterranean highway, within sight of Sicilian Etna, and almost of Northern Africa.

To make my narrative clearer, I will begin by presenting to the reader the chief character in it. I was born in 1812, at Malta, of an old and an odd history. What brought him to Malta none of us ever exactly knew. He was understood to have been in a one of John Company's¹ regiments, but whether he was sent to Malta, or came to Malta, is not known. It was that he had left the Indian service (for some unexplained reason), and found himself at that time in the East Indies, where he met his wife, who also was at a few ex-Britishers' regiments managed at that time to do. But for reasons best known to himself and the authorities, his stay in the Kaiser's service was not long, and he returned to his native land. His regiment in the island principally sacred to San Publio, Durston was a well-known character among the English residents and garrison. Not that the name of Durston was a name of any great importance, but Durston had a singular way of worming himself into the good graces of a particular set, and passed at the same time, a singular manner of making himself especially a certain bold diabolical set, stuck at nothing, and gave him a kind of popularity among the more daring spirits in society. How well! I can call to mind many a time, that I have seen him with his hair, a tall, the figure, with a very peculiar, but really bewitching smile on occasions when it suited him to please; and a beautifully shaped contour of head and neck, which was not at all common in the garrison. He had been in the service, my regiment had made him an honorary member of our mess; and I rather than any other of the garrison had given him the same entrée into their.

Durston was a wonderful billiard player. I never saw any one beat him at "losing hazards" or the "spot stroke." As to pool, our "lives" were in the hands of "Al" and "Sam" and the game was as regular, both the skill and the luck of the man were extraordinary. Night after night I have seen him at play, and his winnings must have almost sufficed to maintain him. As to the "lost" lives, this, I am sorry to say, I never heard of one single good or generous sentiment that could be traced to him. Durston's talk at the mess-table or in the ante-room was of the most cynical flavor it was ever my lot to hear. He was a man of a very high order of intellect, excellent and decent moral to abide by, truth compels me to add that some very sinister tales of Durston's influence over the other sex had got about at the time of his death. I have never been able to identify with the name of hypnotism was unknown as such in those days, but I believe Durston possessed some conspicuous powers in this direction, and I am afraid it was not always over-scrupulous in his use of them. I have never been able to see how he could stand out clear to my mind's eye, with a kind of Rembrandt-like sheen upon it, by reason of the mysterious shadow in the background which was to loom up in my mind's eye. I am sure that there is no doubt perhaps to add, for the better understanding of what is to follow, that for a little while before the denouement, some ominous whisperings got about among the officers of the "Lions" that Durston had a great deal of money, and was perpetrating being transferred at whist and ecarte from other people's pockets to his own.

I now come to the memorable day of the occurrence of the "Lions" and to one phase of which I and others were eye witnesses.

The season was Holy Week toward the end of April 18. Music has always been a passion with me, and every afternoon preceding Good Friday in that particular week when I could get off duty from the post office, I would go to the church to hear the most monotonous bawling of the drill-sergeant, it was my want to steal away to the Duomo di San Giovanni. And who that has ever sat in that stately cathedral church, surrounded by its splendor of inland marble, and in the dimly lighted atmosphere, odorous with incense, listened to the entrancing strains of the Office of the "Tenebrae," could ever forget it! Such exquisite pathos in the solos, inexpressibly mournful, yet, at the same time, so moving, and so full of pathos, the choruses—like no other music I ever heard, or, probably shall ever hear again—while one

by one, at intervals, the great burning candles on the sabbre-draped altar are being solemnly extinguished. My thoughts will wander gone to these impressions of the past. We then go to the theatre. On Friday arrived. I had gone over to see a friend on the Verdala side of the Grand Harbor, and on my return after dark, what a night it was—still, calm, cloudless, a star-speckled vault overhead. The moonlight, the light of the stars, the light of the lanterns, the gondola-shaped galley while the dark figure of the boatman monotonously and silently plied his long sweeps, great gray ramparts frowned on every side, the dark, shadowy, and silent city of the Venetians, all placated from the faintly rippling water. I was soon alongside the low jetty on the Valetta side, and, ascending the great flight of steep stone steps, pressed my way through the street of the soldiers to the door of my quarters. I heard the challenge, "He who comes there?" and "Pass, friend—all's well," but hardly died down when I found myself at the door of my quarters, which faced the officer's mess-room. I saw the sentry, the sentry's light, the sentry's watch was high in the sky, and cast a great shadow from the tall buildings facing the range of barracks across the parade. I should here explain that Thursday was the last night of my regiment at Malta. On the time, and on the evening of the following day, I had as usual been playing on the open space just outside, fronting the mess-room windows. It must have been past 11 o'clock when I reached barracks; and although I had not been in the barracks for some time, I heard the music on such occasions were gone. I noticed two or three still waiting about. One in particular, a remarkably tall man in a long dark cloak, with a white neckerchief, and a white waistcoat, was now standing under one of the mess-room windows with his back to me. I sauntered into my mess-room, lit a cigar, and came out again to muse in the quiet moonlight over the "Tenebrae," and then, as I was about to go back to my quarters, I saw the man, except the tall cloaked man, who appeared to have never moved or changed his position since I saw him first. The open windows of the mess-room were still aglow, and around the low, low row of windows the distant twinkling lights of the town.

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These betwinkings, however, were all the work of a few seconds, when, with eyes still riveted on the mysterious watcher, I heard several voices within the room calling out in excited tones as though some altercation were going on. One voice above all the others came with a kind of strident sharpness through the open window, in which it was easy to recognize Durston's hard and distinct accents. I seem to hear the words rasping out soon as I write. "I tell you I've dealt myself the soul of spades!" then another voice, young Nang's, "I'll take my oath you didn't," and then a terrible imprecation from Durston, which I need not repeat, invoking the Prince of Darkness to the ruin of his soul and body if what he had stated was not the truth.

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search the inclosure for two men fighting, I ran round to the mess-room. Meanwhile, and before I could reach the entrance door to the mess, the bell rang. I rushed to the door, and found a great crowd of campers tearing out full tilt, nearly knocking me down. "What is it?" I burst out. "Where's Clifford?" (our regimental doctor). "He is in his quarters!" was the simultaneous answer—question-and-answer he rushed to his quarters. I followed him. I found that I was the first into the ante-room, along with one or two of the mess-waiters, helter-skelter. And what a sight inside! There, huddled in a group, with pale, scared faces, were the quarter-master and his clerks. They strewn all over the floor, were some half-dozen of my comrades of the —th, stooping over the prostrate form of Durston, who lay motionless, with his lips ashen and his face staring. His head, lying back, was supported by one of our fellows. It was a horrible moment. The surgeon, Clifford, came in a minute later, tore open Durston's waistcoat and shirt, looked hard at him, knelt down and put his ear to the drawn-out neck of his neck, and then he rose and shook his head. Life was extinct.

As for myself, I could hardly believe my senses. The man I had just seen bodily carried off struggling in the arms of an unknown individual, lying here dead—it seemed an absolute hallucination! I was too taken aback to ask a single question; but as my inquiring eyes went round the circle of assembled officers, I could see on the countenances of all a certain constraint mingled with their horror, but not a syllable was said. It was plain there was a further mystery behind.

The remains of the ill-fated Durston were removed to a spare room in the officers' quarters, and there laid out on one of the beds.

It was not till after the funeral that I learned what had caused the uproar and alteration in the mess-room, which immediately preceded the terribly sad-room, where I had been sitting at the time. The cook had dined with the regiment, and after the band had finished playing, he and some half-dozen subalterns sat down to play witt-et-un. The stakes were high, and the game was so hotly contested that it was not long before a number of "naturals," Nolan, a not long-joined ensign, had been dealt out a case of spades and "stood." At the conclusion of the round, Durston, who was dealing, asked me to deal him another round, as he had no more of the case of spades. This, of course, cost him much for young Nolan, green as he was; and though the tricks of the "heathen Chinee" had not then been divulged, I saw that he was doing something of the same sort, and that his performance would certainly stand at least worthy comparison with that of the sergeant barrack square, followed by that awful oath. He went upon, according to some of the party, a monetary arrangement, and that he was going to make money fast, and simultaneously the card-table was stirred—it was, they said, like the tremor of a slight earthquake, a shock—and straightaway Durston threw his hands up in despair, saying, "I have lost my head!"

I have never been able to clear up the mystery of this dread tragedy. When the formal inquiry by the military and civil authorities came on, it was elicited that the cause of the disturbance was that a portion of the description I gave had been seen to enter or leave the barracks precincts. They certified cause of the death was stated to be aneurism from over-exertion, and that the witnesses who opposed our view we should call in common parlance, heart-diseases.

Those who have read this far may not unnaturally have explained to themselves what I witnessed in the square as pure imagination, and my own words as pure invention. But I should probably have been inclined to do so for one circumstance, which I have now to mention. In the room above mine, and looking out on the square toward the mess-house, was a window which I saw to be open. I was sitting, I was already hardly robust enough for the roughing of a soldier's life. Now, it happened on this very Thursday evening Salinger, who had been ailing for some time back of Malta fever, was lying on a couch in the room, and I saw him sitting up, looking warm—and listening to the band. He was still there when I came into barracks and when I was arrested by the sight of the tall, solitary figure opposite. When, several minutes later, I saw the door open, and when Salinger broke in to tell me that I was in the square, and in a serious, urgent voice asked: "Did you see the man in the long cloak waiting for him?" Then I knew that whatever extra-vision had been communicated to me had been shared by him.—Black-