

## THE DEVIL'S LEAD

A Thrilling Tale of the Australian Gold Diggings.

Wopple, who had been in Villiers's company on the night of his disappearance.

Mr. Bartley Jasper, however, had not yet departed, so Silvers came to him, and asked him in a casual way to drop into his office and have a drink, with a view of finding out from him all the events of that night.

Bartley was on his way to a lawn-tennis party, and was arrayed in a flannel suit of many colors, with his small, white face nearly hidden under a large straw hat. Being of a social turn of mind, he did not refuse Silvers's invitation, but walked into the dusty office and assisted himself liberally to the whisky.

"Here's fun, old cock!" he said, in a free and easy manner, raising his glass to his lips; "may your shadow never be less."

Silvers hoped devoutly that his shadow never would be less, as that would involve the loss of several other limbs, which he could ill spare, so he honored Mr. Jasper's toast with a rasping little laugh, and prepared to talk.

"It's very kind of you to come and talk to an old chap like me," said Silvers, in an amiable tone as he could command, which was not much. "You're such a gay young fellow."

Mr. Jasper acknowledged modestly that he was gay, but that he owed certain duties to society, and had to be mildly social.

"And so handsome," croaked Silvers. Mr. Jasper decided that Silvers was an unusually disarming person, and worthy to talk to, so prepared to make himself agreeable.

"I wonder what's become of Villiers?" said Silvers, artfully pushing the whisky bottle toward Bartley.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Bartley, in a languid, used-up sort of voice, pouring himself out some more whisky. "I haven't seen him since last Monday week."

"Where did you leave him on that night?" asked Silvers.

"At the corner of Sturt and Lydiard Streets."

"Early in the morning, I suppose?"

"Yes—pretty early—about two o'clock, I think."

"And you never saw him after that?"

"Not a sight of him," replied Bartley; "but, I say, why all this fuss?"

"I'll tell you after we have answered my questions," retorted Silvers, rudely. "I'm not asking out of curiosity—it's business."

Bartley thought that Silvers was very peculiar, but determined to humor him, and to take his leave as early as possible.

"Well, go on," he said, drinking his whisky, "I'll answer."

"Who else was with you and Villiers on that night?" asked Silvers, in a magisterial kind of manner.

"A French fellow called Vandouloup."

"Vandouloup!" echoed Silvers in surprise; "oh, indeed! what the devil was he doing?"

"Enjoying himself," replied Bartley, coolly; "he came into the theatre and Villiers introduced him to me, then Mr. Wopple asked us all to supper."

"You went, of course?"

"Rather, old chap; what do you take us for?"

"What time did Vandouloup leave?" asked Silvers.

"About twenty minutes to twelve."

"Oh! I suppose that was because he had to drive out to the Pactus?"

"Not such a fool, dear boy; he stayed all night in town."

"Oh!" ejaculated Silvers, in an excited manner, drumming on the table with his fingers, "where did he stay?"

"At the Wattle Tree Hotel."

Silvers mentally made a note of this, and determined to go there and find out more in question, for this suspicious old man had now got it into his head that Vandouloup was in some way responsible for Villiers's disappearance.

"Where did Villiers say he was going when he left you?" asked Silvers.

"Straight home."

"Humph! Well, he didn't go home at all."

"Didn't he?" echoed Bartley, in some astonishment. "Then what's become of him? Men don't disappear in this mysterious way without some reason."

"Ah, but there is a reason," replied Silvers.

"Why? what do you think is the reason?" faltered Bartley.

"Murder!" blazed the other through his thin lips; "he's been murdered."

"Lord!" ejaculated Bartley, jumping up from his chair in alarm; "you're going too far, old chap."

"I'm going further," retorted Silvers, rising from his chair and stumping up and down the room; "I'm going to find out who did it, and then I'll grind her to powder; I'll twist her neck off, curse her."

"Is it a woman?" asked Bartley, who now began to think of making a retreat, for Silvers, with one eye blazing, and his cork arm extending rapidly to and fro, was not a pleasant object to contemplate.

This ungoverned remark recalled Silvers to himself.

"That's what I want to find out," he replied, sulkily, going back to his chair. "Have some more whisky?"

"No, thanks," answered Bartley, going to the door; "I'm late as it is for my engagement; ta, ta, old chap, I hope you'll drop on the he or she you're looking for; but you're quite wrong, Villiers has bolted with the nugget, and that's the whole of it. I've got a fine wave of his hand Bartley went out, leaving Silvers in anything but a pleasant temper.

"Bah! you peacock," cried this wicked old man, banging his wooden leg against the table, "you egghead—your brain is as empty as a pumpkin—I'm wrong, am I? Well, see about that, you rag shop!" This last in allusion to Bartley's picturesque garb. "I've found out all I want from him, and I'll track her down, and put her in jail, and hang her—hang her till she's as dead as a dog nail."

Having given vent to this pleasant sentiment, Silvers put on his hat, and, taking his stick, walked out of his office.

with this amiable resolution Silvers resumed his way.

At the Wattle Tree Hotel, he found Miss Twesby seated in the bar, with a decidedly cross face, which argued ill for any one who conversed with her that day, but as Silvers was quite as crabbed as she was, and, moreover, feared neither God nor man—much less a woman—he tackled her at once.

"Where's your father?" he asked, abruptly. "Asleep," snapped that dame, jerking her head in the direction of the parlor; "what do you want?" very disdainfully.

"A little civility in the first place," retorted Silvers rudely.

"You wicked old wretch," said Miss Twesby, viciously, "go along with you, or I'll wake my parrot."

"He won't thank you for doing so," replied Silvers, coolly; "I've called to see him about some new shares just on the market, and if you don't treat me with more respect I'll go, and he'll be out of a good thing."

Now, Miss Twesby knew that Silvers was in the habit of doing business with her parent, and moreover was a power in the share market, so she graciously asked Silvers what he'd be pleased to have.

"Whisky," said Silvers, curtly, leaning his chin on his stick. "I say!"

"Well?" asked Miss Twesby, coming from behind the bar with a glass and a bottle of whisky.

"What do you know?" asked Silvers.

"How should I know?" snapped Martha, angrily; "he comes here to see that friend of his, and then clears out without as much as good-day; a nice sort of friend, indeed."

Worthily, "tripping her nearly two weeks and drunk all the time; he'll be having delirious trappings before he's done."

"Who will?" said Silvers, taking a sip of his whisky and water.

"Why, that other Frenchman?" retorted Martha, going to her place behind the bar.

"Peter something; a low, black wretch, all beard, with no tongue, and a thirst like a hound."

"Oh, the dumb man."

"That's him," she said, triumphantly; "he's been here for the last two weeks."

"Drunk, I think you said?" remarked Silvers, politely.

Martha laughed scornfully, and took out some sewing.

"I should just think so," she retorted, tossing her head; "he does nothing but drink all day, and run after people with that knife."

"Very dangerous," observed Silvers, gravely shaking his head; "why don't you get rid of him?"

"So we are," said Miss Twesby, biting off a bit of cotton, as if she wished it were Pierre's head; "he is going down to Melbourne the day after to-morrow."

Silvers got weary of hearing about Pierre, and plunged right off into the object of his visit.

"That Vandouloup?" he began.

"Well?" said Miss Twesby.

"What time did he come home the night he stopped here?"

"Twelve o'clock."

"Get along with you," said Silvers, in disgust; "you mean three o'clock."

"No, I don't," retorted Martha, indignantly; "you'll be telling me I don't know the time next."

"Did he go out again?"

"No, he went to bed."

This quite upset Silvers's idea.

"Did the other stay?"

"Both in the same room," she answered.

"What time did the dumb chap come in?"

"Half past nine."

Here was another factor for Silvers—as it could not have been Pierre.

"Did he go to bed?"

"Straight."

"Did not leave the house again?"

"Of course not," retorted Miss Twesby, impatiently; "do you think I'm a fool? No one ever goes in or out of this house without my knowing it. The dumb devil went to bed at half past nine, and they neither of them came out of their rooms till next morning."

"How do you know Vandouloup was in at twelve?" asked Silvers, still unconvinced.

"Drat the man, what's he worryin' about!" rejoined Miss Twesby, snappishly; "I let him in myself."

This clearly closed the subject, and Silvers arose to his feet in great disgust, upsetting Billy on the floor.

"Devil!" shrieked Billy, as he dropped.

"Oh, my precious mother. Devil—devil—devil—you're a liar—you're a liar—Bendigo and Ballarat—Ballarat and Bendigo—Pickle!"

"A nice pair you are," muttered Martha, grimly. "I wish I had the thrashing of you. Won't you stay and see par?" she called out as Silvers departed.

"I'll come to-morrow," answered Silvers, angrily.

He stumped home in silence, thinking all the time; and it was only when he arrived back in his office that he gave utterance to his thought.

"It couldn't have been either of the Frenchmen," he said, lighting his pipe. "She must have done it herself."

## CHAPTER XVI.

MCINTOSH SPEAKS HIS MIND.

IT was some time before Mrs. Villiers recovered from the shock caused by her encounter with her husband. The blow he had struck her on the side of the head turned out to be more serious than at first anticipated, and Selma deemed it advisable that a doctor should be called in. So Archie went into Ballarat, and returned to the Pactus with Dr. Gollipke, an eccentric medical practitioner, whose peculiarities were the talk of the city.

Dr. Gollipke was tall and lank, with an unfinished look about him, as if Nature in some sudden freak had seized an incomplete skeleton from a museum and hastily covered it with parchment. He dressed in a rusty black, worn dingy, cotton gloves, carried a large, white umbrella, and surveyed the world through the medium of a pair of huge spectacles. His clothes were constantly coming undone, and he was always scratching his hands. He spoke very little, and was engaged in composing an erudite work on "The Art of Poisoning, from Borgia to Brinvilliers."

One result of Madame's illness was that M. Vandouloup had met Dr. Gollipke, and the two, though apparently dissimilar in both character and appearance, had been attracted to one another by a liking which they had in common. This was the study of toxicology, a science at which the eccentric old man had spent a life-time. He found in Vandouloup a congenial spirit, for the young Frenchman had a wonderful liking for the uncanny subject; but there was a difference in the aims of both men, Gollipke being drawn to the study of poisons from a pure love of the subject, whereas Vandouloup wanted to find out the secrets of toxicology for his own ends, which were anything but disinterested.

Wearied of the dull routine of the office work, Vandouloup was taking a walk in the meadows which surrounded the Pactus, when he saw Dr. Gollipke strolling along the dusty, white road, from the railway station.

"Good-day, Monsieur le Medecin," said Vandouloup, gayly, as he came up to the old man; "are you going to see our mutual friend?"

Gollipke, ever sparing of words, nodded in reply, and trudged on in silence, but as the Frenchman, being used to the eccentricities of his companion, was in nowise offended at his silence, he went on talking in an animated manner.

"Ah, my dear friend," he said, pushing his straw hat back on his fair head; "how goes on the great work?"

"Capitally," returned the doctor, with a complacent smile; "just finished 'Catherine de Medici'—wonderful woman, sir—quite a mistress of the art of poisoning."

"Humph!" returned Vandouloup, thoughtfully, lighting a cigarette. "I do not agree with you there; it was her son, the astrologer, Ruggieri, who prepared all her potions. Catherine possessed the science—a very fair division of labor for getting rid of people, I must say—but what have you got there?"

Gollipke carried under his arm.

"For you," answered the other, taking the book slowly from under his arm, and then by causing another button to fly off, "quite new—work on toxicology."

"Thank you," said Vandouloup, taking the heavy volume and looking at the title; "French, I see! I'm sure it will be pleasant reading."

The title of the book was "Les Empoisonneurs d'Aujourd'hui, par MM. Prevost et Lebrun," and it had only been published the previous year; so as he turned over the leaves curiously, M. Vandouloup caught sight of a name which he knew.

"I shall enjoy this book immensely," he said, touching the volume. Dr. Gollipke nodded and chuckled in a hoarse, rattling kind of way.

"So I should think," he answered, with another sharp look, "you are a very clever young man, my friend."

Vandouloup acknowledged the compliment with a bow, and wondered mentally what this old man meant. Gaston, however, was never without an answer, so he turned to his handsome lips.

"So kind of you to think well of me," he said, coolly flicking the ash off the end of his cigarette with his little finger; "but why do you pay me such a compliment?"

Gollipke answered the question by asking another.

"Why are you so fond of toxicology?" he said, abruptly.

Vandouloup shrugged his shoulders.

"To pass the time," he said, carelessly, "that's all; even office work, as it becomes wearisome, so I must take up some subject to amuse myself."

"Curious taste for a young man," remarked the doctor, dryly.

"Nature," said M. Vandouloup, "does not form men all on the same pattern, and my taste for toxicology has at least the charm of novelty."

Gollipke looked at the young man again in a sharp manner.

"I hope you'll enjoy the book," he said.

When he was gone, the mocking smile so habitual to Vandouloup's countenance faded away, and his face assumed a dark, stern expression. He opened the book and turned over the leaves rapidly, but without finding what he was in search of. With an uneasy laugh he shut the volume with a snap, and put it under his arm again.

"He's an enigma," he thought, referring to the doctor; "but he cannot suspect anything. The case may be in this book, but I doubt if even this man with the barbarous name can connect Gaston Vandouloup, of Ballarat, with Octave Braulard, of Paris."

His face resumed its usual gay look, and throwing away the half smoked cigarette, he walked into the house and found Mme. Midas seated in her arm-chair near the window looking pale and ill.

"Good-day, Madame," said the Frenchman, advancing to the table and putting his hat and the book down on it. "How are you to-day?"

"Better, much better, thank you," said Madame, with a faint smile; "the doctor assures me I shall be quite well in a week."

"With perfect rest and quiet, of course," interposed Gollipke.

"Which Madame does not seem likely to get," observed Vandouloup, dryly.

"On my word," said Madame, looking in front of Vandouloup, with a fine expression of scorn. "I can well 'tis me ye are glowerin' at—did ye no ken what's the matter wi' me?"

"Not being in your confidence," replied Gaston, smoothly, taking a seat, "I can hardly say that I do."

"It's just that Peter o' yours," said Archie, with a snort; "a pur wicked uneducated child o' Satan!"

"Archie!" interposed Madame, with some severity.

"Your pardon's begged, mem," said Archie, soberly, turning to her; "but as for the Peter body, the Lord keep me tongue frae swearin', an' my hand from itchin' to gie him an on the lug, when I think o' him."

"What's he been doing?" asked Vandouloup, coolly. "I am quite prepared to hear anything about him in his present state."

"It's just this," burst forth Archie wrathfully. "I went into the town to the hotel, to tell the body he must come back to the Pactus, and I find him no in a fit state for a Christian to speak to."

"Therefore," interposed Vandouloup, in his even voice, without lifting his eyes, "it was a pity you did speak to him."

"I gang t' the room," went on Archie, excitedly, without paying any attention to Vandouloup's remark; "an' the dell dew on me wi' a dirk, and wud have split my weasand, but I had the sense to bang the dog into the key in the lock. D'y'ce that conduct for a civilized body?"

"The fact is, Monsieur Vandouloup," said Madame, quietly, "Archie is so annoyed at his conduct that he does not want Lemaire to come back to work."

"Of course, I should just think so, cried McIntosh, rubbing his head with his handkerchief. "Fancy an imp of Beelzebub like you in the bowls o' the earth. Losh! but it makes my blood run cold when I think o' the blud-thirsty gae!"

"Aren't you rather hard on him?" he said coolly, leaning back in his chair; "he is simply drunk, and will be all right soon."

"I tell ye I'll no have him back," said Archie, firmly; "he's ain o' the forein bodies full o' revolution, an' confusion o' tongue, and I'd no feel safe o' the mine if I kenned that dell was down below wi' his dirk."

"I really think he ought to go," said Madame, looking rather anxiously at Vandouloup; "unless, Monsieur Vandouloup, you do not want to part with your assistant."

"Oh, I don't want him," said Vandouloup, hastily. "As I told you, he was only one of the sailors on board the ship I was wrecked in, and he followed me up here because I was the only friend he had; but now he has got money—or at least, his wages must come to a good amount."

"Forty pounds," interposed Archie.

"So I think the best thing he can do is to go to Melbourne, and see if he can get back to France."

seen if I don't think it would be worth while to return."

"Never go back when you have once put your hand to the plow," observed Selma, opportunely, upon which Vandouloup bowed to her.

"Mademoiselle," he said, quietly, with a charming smile, "has put the matter into the shell of a nut; Australia is my plow, and I do not take my hand away until I have finished with it."

"But that dell o' a Peter," said Archie, impatiently.

"If you will permit me, Madame," said Vandouloup, "I will write out a check for the amount of money due to him, and you will sign it. I will go into Ballarat to-morrow, and get him away to Melbourne. I propose to buy him a box and some clothes, as he certainly is not capable of getting them himself."

"You have a kind heart, Monsieur Vandouloup," said Madame, as she assented with a nod.

A stifled laugh came from the doctor, but as he was such an extremely eccentric individual no one minded him.

"Come, Monsieur," said Vandouloup, going to the door, "let us be off to the office and see how much is due to my friend," and with a bow to Madame, he went out.

"A brave sort o' friend," muttered Archie, as he followed.

"Quite good enough for him," retorted Dr. Gollipke, who overheard him.

Archie looked at him approvingly, nodded his head, and went out after the Frenchman; but Madame, being a woman of wit and courage, asked the doctor what he meant.

His reply was peculiar.

"Our friend," he said, putting his handkerchief in his pocket and seizing his greasy old hat, "our friend believes in the greatest number."

"And what is the greatest number?" asked Madame, innocently.

"Number one," retorted the doctor, and took his leave abruptly, leaving two buttons and several pins on the floor as traces of his visit.

## CHAPTER XVII.

THE BEST OF FRIENDS MUST PART.

HERE is strength in union; and if Dr. Gollipke had only met Silvers and revealed his true opinion on the subject of toxicology, he would have found himself somewhat embarrassed as a great deal of a

man's past history can be found out by the simple plan of putting two and two together. Fortunately, however, for Gaston, these two resemblances the appearance of this young man had to that of a criminal described in the "Les Empoisonneurs d'Aujourd'hui," as having been transported to New Caledonia for the crime of poisoning his mistress. Everything, however, was vague and uncertain; so Dr. Gollipke, when he arrived home, came to the above-named conclusion that he could see nothing to blame in Vandouloup's conduct, though he certainly mistrusted him, and determined mentally to keep an eye on his movements.

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