

# The SABLE

By MORACE HAZELTINE

# LORCHA

COPYRIGHT, 1914, A. C. McCLURG &amp; CO.

## CHAPTER I.

## The Vanishing Portrait.

Evelyn Grayson, meeting me on the old Boston Post Road, between Greenwich and Stamford, gave me a message from her uncle. That is the logical beginning of this story; though to make everything quite clear from the start it may be better to hark back a few months, to the day on which Evelyn Grayson and I first met.

Then, as now, we were each driving our own car; she, a great sixty-horsepower machine, all glistening pale yellow, and I, a compact six-cylinder racer, of dull dusty gray. But we were not on any such broad, roomy thoroughfare as the Boston Post Road. On the contrary we were short-cutting through a narrow, rough lane, beset by stone walls and interrupted at intervals by a series of sharp and treacherous angles.

I know I shall never forget the momentary impression I received. Out of the golden sunlight, it seemed to me, there had emerged suddenly a tableau of Queen Titania on a topaz throne—the fairest Queen Titania imaged ever conjured—and I, in my mad, panting speed was about to crash into the gauzy fabric of that dream creation and read it with brutal, torturing onrush of relentless, hard-driven nickel steel. I take no credit to myself for what I did. Volition was absent. My hands acted on an impulse above and beyond all tardy mental guidance. For just a flashing instant the gray nose of my car rose before me, as in strenuous assault it mounted half way to the coping of the roadside wall. I felt my seat dart away from beneath me, was conscious of my body in swift, unsupported aerial flight, and then—but it is idle to attempt to set down the conglomerate sensations of that small fraction of a second. When I regained consciousness, Queen Titania was kneeling in the dust of the road beside me—a very distressed and anxious Queen Titania, with wide, startled eyes, and quivering sympathetic lips—and about us were a half dozen or more of the vicinal country folk.

Between that meeting in mid-May and this meeting on the old Boston Post Road in mid-September, there had been others, of course; for Queen Titania, whose every-day name, as I have said, was Evelyn Grayson, was the niece and ward of my nearest neighbor, Mr. Robert Cameron, a gentleman recently come to reside on what for a century and more had been known as the old Townsbur Estate, extending for quite a mile along the Connecticut shore of Long Island Sound in the neighborhood of Greenwich.

The intervening four months had witnessed the gradual growth of an approach to intimacy between Cameron and myself as was possible considering the manner of man that Cameron was. By which statement I mean to imply naught to my neighbor's discredit. He was in all respects admirable—a gentleman of education and culture, widely traveled, of exalted ideals and noble principles to which he gave rigid adherence. But—I was about to qualify this by describing him as reserved and taciturn. I fear, though, to give a wrong impression. He was scarcely that. There were moments, however, when he was unresponsive, and he was never demonstrative. He had more poise than any man I know. He allowed you to see just so much of him, and no more. At times he was almost stubbornly reticent. And yet, in spite of these qualities, which appeared to be cultivated rather than inherent, he gave repeated evidence of a nature at once so simple and kindly and sympathetic as to command both confidence and affection.

To the progress of my intimacy with Evelyn there had been no such temperamental impediment. She was fearlessly outspoken, with a frankness born of unspiced innocence; barely six weeks having elapsed between her graduation from the tiny French convent of Sainte Barbe near Paris and our perilous encounter in that contracted, treacherous, yet blessed little Connecticut lane. And she possessed, moreover, a multiplicity of additional charms, both of person and disposition—charms too numerous indeed to enumerate, and far too sacred to discuss. From which it may rightly be inferred that we understood each other, Evelyn and I, and that we were already considerably beyond the state or condition of mere formal acquaintanceship.

It was no Queen Titania who now came gliding to a stand beside me on the broad, level, well-oiled highway, under a double row of arching elms. It was no gossamer fairy, but Hebe, the Goddess of Youth, with creamy skin and red lips and a jilting melody of voice.

"Hello, Mr. Philip! We are well," she said, and then she told me that her Uncle Robert had telephoned for me, leaving a message with my man, bidding me come to him at my earliest leisure.

"Why not come for dinner?" she asked, and her eyes gave accent to her words.

"But you?" I queried; for her car was headed in the opposite direction. "I am going alone to Norton. I have a hamper in the tonneau for that poor O'Malley family. I shall be back in time. We dine at half-past seven, you know. You'll come?"

"Of course I'll come," I answered her. I think she must have heard more in my voice than the simple words, for her lids drooped, for just a breath, and the color flamed sudden below her lowered lashes.

But, after all, I saw very little of her that evening. It is true that she sat on my right at table, piquantly, youthfully beautiful in the softly tinted light which filtered through the pink and silver flirree candle-shades, but the atmosphere of the dinner was tinged by a vague, unreasoning constraint as from some ominously brooding yet undefinable influence which overhung the three of us. And when the coffee and liqueurs were served, employing some slender pretext for her going, she bade us good-night, and left us, not to return.

In justice to Cameron, I must add that he appeared least affected by—and certainly in no wise responsible for—the pervading infestivity. He had been, indeed, rather less demure than was often his wont, chatting with almost gayety concerning Evelyn's new role of Lady Bountiful and of her Norton beneficiaries. As for the subject upon which he desired to consult me, it had not been so much as mentioned; so in looking back, it seems impossible that ratters of which neither Evelyn nor I was at the time informed could have exerted an effect, save through Cameron's undetected, subconscious inducement.

Even after his niece had withdrawn, Cameron continued for a time to discuss with me topics of general and public, rather than personal, import. He spoke, I remember, of a series of articles on "The Commercial Resources of the United States," the publication of which had just begun in The Week, of which I am owner and editor; and though I fancied at first that it might be in this connection he wished to consult me, I very soon discerned that he was merely using a statement contained therein as a text for certain views of his own on the conservation and development of the country's timber supply.

I go thus into what may seem uninteresting detail, partly that I may give a hint as to the character of Cameron's mind, but more especially to indicate how lightly he would have had me think he regarded that for which he sought me.

Meanwhile my curiosity grew keener. It was natural, I suppose, that I should fancy Evelyn involved in some way. In fact I then attributed the depression during dinner to her knowledge of what her uncle and guardian purposed to say to me. Likewise I found in this conception the reason for her sudden and unusual desertion. Hitherto when I had dined here Evelyn had remained with us while we smoked our cigarettes, leading us at length to the music room, where for a glad half-hour the rich melody of her youthful sweet contralto voice mingled in pleasing harmony with her own piano accompaniment.

And while I vainly made effort to imagine wherein I might have laid myself open to the disapproval of this most punctilious of guardians—for I expected nothing less than a studiously polite reference to some shortcoming of which I had been unwittingly guilty—I momentarily lost track of my host's discourse. Emerging from my abstraction it was with a measure of relief that I heard him saying:

"I think you told me once, Clyde, that you rather prided yourself on your ability to get a line on one's character from his handwriting. That's why I telephoned for you this afternoon. I have received an anonymous letter."

There was an all too apparent assumption of nonchalance in his manner of expression to deceive even the least observant, of which I am not one. The effect was to augment the seriousness of the revelation. I saw at once that he was more disquieted than he would have me know.

He was leaning forward, a little constrainedly, his left hand gripping the arm of his chair, the fingers of his right hand toying with the stem of his gold-rimmed Bohemian liqueur glass.

"An anonymous letter!" I repeated, with a deprecatory smile. "Anonymous letters should be burned and forgotten. Surely you're not bothering about the writer?"

I wish I could put before you an exact reproduction of Cameron's face as I then saw it; those rugged outlines, the heritage of Scottish ancestry, softened and refined by a brilliant intellectuality; the sturdy chin and square jaw; the heavy underlip meeting the upper in scarcely perceptible curve; the broad, homely nose; the small, but alert, gray eyes, shining through

the round lenses of his spectacles; the high, broad, sloping, white brow and the receding border of dark brown, slightly grizzled hair. That, superficially, was the face. But I saw more than that. In the visage of one naturally brave I saw a battle waged behind a mask—a battle between courage and fear; and I saw fear win.

Then the mask became opaque once more, and Cameron, giving me smile for smile, was replying.

"There are anonymous letters and anonymous letters. Ordinarily, your method is the one I should pursue. Indeed I may say that when, about a month or so ago, I received a communication of that character, I did almost precisely what you now advise. Certainly I followed one-half of your prescription—I forgot the letter; though, for lack of fire in the dog days, I did not burn it, but thrust it into a drawer with an accumulation of advertising circulars."

My apprehension lest Evelyn and I were personally affected had been by now quite dissipated. It was perfectly apparent to me that Cameron alone was involved; yet my anxiety was none the less eager. Already my sympathy and co-operation were enlisted. I could only hope that he had mentally exaggerated the gravity of the situation, yet my judgment of him was that his inclination would be to err in the opposite direction.

"And now something has happened to recall it to your memory?"

"Something happened very shortly after its receipt," he replied. "Something very puzzling. But in spite of that, I was inclined to treat the matter as a bit of clever chicanery, devised for the purpose, probably, of extortion. As such, I again put it from my thoughts; but today I received a second letter, and I admit I am interested. The affair has features which make it, indeed, uncommonly perplexing."

I fear my imagination was sluggish. Although, in spite of his dissemblance, I saw that he was strangely moved by these happenings, I could fancy no very terrifying concomitants of the rather commonplace facts he had narrated. For anonymous letters I had ever held scant respect. An ambushed enemy, I argued, is admittedly a coward. And so I was in danger of growing impatient.

"When the second letter came," he continued, bringing his left hand forward to join his right on the dazzling white ground of the table's damask, "I searched among the circulars for the first, and found it. I want you to see them both. The writing is very curious—I have never seen anything just like it—and the signature, if I may call it that, is still more singular. On the first letter, I took it for a blot. But on the second letter occurs the same black blur or smudge of identical outline."

Of course I thought of the Black Hand. It was the natural corollary, seeing that the newspapers had been giving us a surfeit of Black Hand threats and Black Hand outrages. But, somehow, I did not dare to voice it. To have suggested anything so ordinary to Cameron in his present mood would have been to offer him offense. And when, at the next moment, he drew from an inner pocket of his evening coat two thin, wax-like sheets of paper and passed them to me, I was glad that I had kept silence. For the letters were no rough, rude scrawls of an illiterate Mafia or Camorra. In phraseology as well as in penmanship they were impressively unique.

"If you don't mind," Cameron was saying, "you might read them aloud." He rose and switched on a group of electric wall lights at my back, and I marked for the hundredth time his physique—his towering height, his powerful shoulders, his leanness of hip and sturdy straightness of limb. He did not look the forty years to which he confessed.

One of the long French windows which gave upon the terrace stood ajar, and before resuming his seat Cameron paused to close it, dropping over it the looped curtains of silver gray velvet that matched the walls.

In the succeeding moment the room was ghostly silent; and then, breaking against the stillness, was the sound of my voice, reading:

"That which you have wrought shall in turn be wrought upon you. Take warning therefore of what shall happen on the seventh day hence. As sun follows sun, so follows all that is decreed. The ways of our God are many. On the righteous he showers blessings; on the evil he pours misery."

That was the first letter. The second began with the same sentence:

"That which you have wrought shall in turn be wrought upon you."

But there, though the similarity of tenor continued, the verbal identity ceased. It went on:

"Once more, as earnest of what is decreed, there will be shown unto you a symbol of our power. Precaution cannot avail. Fine words and a smiling countenance make no virtue."

And beneath each letter was the strange silhouette which Cameron had mentioned.

It is difficult for me to convey the most meager idea of the emotional influence which these two brief communications exerted. They seemed to breathe a grim spirit of implacable Nemesis far in excess of anything to be found in the euphemism of the written words.

When I had finished the reading of them aloud, Cameron, leaning far back in his chair, sat silently thoughtful, his eyes narrowed behind his glasses, but fixed apparently upon the lights behind me. And so, reluctant to interrupt his reverie, I started to read them through again slowly, this time to myself, fixing each sentence indelibly in mind as I proceeded. But before I had quite come to the end, my

companion was speaking.

"Well?" he said. And the light cheeriness of his tone was not only in marked contrast with his grave absorption of a moment before, but in jarring discord with my own present mood. "Well? What do you make of them?"

My annoyance found voice in my response.

"Cameron," I begged, "for God's sake be serious. This doesn't seem to me exactly a matter to be merry over. I don't want to alarm you, but somehow I feel that these—and I shook the crackling, wax-like sheets, "that these cannot be utterly ignored."

"But they are anonymous," he retorted, not unjustly. "Anonymous letters should be burned and forgotten."

"There are anonymous letters and anonymous letters," I gave him back, in turn. "These are of an unusually convincing character. Besides, they—"

And then I paused. I wished to tell him of that elusive encompassment of sinister portent which had so impressed me; of that malign foreboding beyond anything warranted by the words; but I stumbled in the effort at expression. "Besides," I started again, and ended lamely, "I don't like the look and the feel of them."

And now he was as serious as I could wish.

"Ah!" he cried, leaning forward again and reaching for the letters. "You have experienced it, too! And you can't explain it, any more than I? It is something that grips you when you read, like an icy hand, hard as steel, in a glove of velvet. It's always between the lines, reaching out, and nothing you can do will stay it. I thought at first I imagined it, but the oftener I have read, the more I have felt its clutch. The letters of themselves are nothing. What do you suppose I care for veiled threats of that sort? I'm big enough to take care of myself, Clyde. I've met peril about every possible guise, in every part of the world, and I've never really known fear. But this—this is different. And the worst of it is, I don't know why. I can't for the life of me make out what it is I'm afraid of."

He had gone very pale, and his strong, capable hands, which toyed with the two letters, quivered and twitched in excess of nervous tension. Then, with a finger pointing to the ink-stain at the bottom of one of the sheets, he asked:

"What does that look like to you?"

I took the letter from him, and scrutinizing the rude figure with concentrated attention for a moment, ventured the suggestion that it somewhat resembled a boat.

"A one-masted vessel, square-rigged," he added, in elucidation.

"Exactly."

"Now turn it upside down."

I did so.

"Now what do you see?"

"The head of a man wearing a helmet." The resemblance was very marked.

"A straw helmet, apparently," he amplified, "such as is worn in the Orient. And yet the profile is not that of an Oriental. Now, look at your vessel again." And once more I reversed the sheet of paper.

"Can it be a Chinese junk?" I asked. "It might be a sailing proa or banca," he returned, "such as they use in the South Pacific. But whatever it is, I can't understand what it has to do with me or I with it."

I was still studying the black daub, when he said:

"But you haven't told me about the handwriting. What can you read of the character of the writer?"

"Nothing," I answered, promptly. "It is curious penmanship, as you say—heavy and regular and upright, with some strangely formed letters; especially the f's and the p's; but it tells me nothing."

"But I thought—" he began.

"That I boasted? So I did. When one writes as one habitually writes it is very easy. These letters, however, are not in the writer's ordinary hand. The writing is as artificial as though you, for example, had printed a note in Roman characters. Were they addressed in the same hand?"

"Precisely."

"What was the post-mark?"

"They bore no post-mark. That is another strange circumstance. Yet they were with my mail. How they came there I have been unable to ascertain. The people at the post office naturally deny that they delivered anything unstamped, as these were; and Barrie, the lad who fetches the letters, has no recollection of these. Nor has Checkabeedy, who sorts the mail here at the house. But each of them lay beside my plate at breakfast—the first on the fourteenth of August; the second, this morning, the fourteenth of September."

"And they were not delivered by messenger?"

"So far as I can learn, no."

"It is very odd," I commented, with feeble banality.

I took the letters from his hands once more, and held them in turn between my vision and the candle-light, hoping, perchance, to discover a watermark in the paper. But I was not rewarded.

"You examined the envelopes carefully, I presume?" was my query as I returned the sheets to the table.

"More than carefully," he answered. "But you shall see them, if you like. I found no trace of any identifying mark."

Thus far he had made no further mention of the "puzzling happening" which followed the receipt of the first letter, and in the interest provoked by the letters themselves I had foreborne to question him; but now as the words "seventh day hence" fell again under my eye, standing out, as it were, from the rest of the script which lay up-

turned on the table before me, I was conscious of a stimulated concern, and so made inquiry.

"I wish you would tell me, first, whether anything really did occur on the seventh day."

"I was coming to that," he replied; but it seemed to me that prompt though his response was, there was a shade of reluctance in his manner; for he relapsed into silence for what must have been the better part of a minute, and with eyes lowered sat seemingly lost in thought.

Then he rose, abruptly, and saying: "Suppose we go into my study, Clyde," led the way from the dining room, across the great, imposing, grained and fretted hall to that comparatively small mahogany and green sash room wherein he was wont to spend most of his indoor hours. It was always a rather gloomy room at night, with its high dark ceiling, its heavy and voluminous olive tapestry hangings, wholly out of keeping, it seemed to me, with the season—and its shaded lights confined to the vicinity of the massive polished, and gilt-ornamented writing table of the period of the First Empire. And it impressed me now, in conjunction with Cameron's promised revelation, as more than ever grim and awesome.

I remember helping myself to a cigar from the humidor which stood on the antique cabinet in the corner near the door. I was in the act of lighting it when Cameron spoke.

"I want you to sit in this chair," he said, indicating one of sumptuous upholstery which stood beside the writing table, facing the low, long book-cases lining the opposite wall.

I did as he bade me, while he remained standing.

"Do you, by any chance," he asked, "remember a portrait which hung above the book-shelves?"

I remembered it very well. It was a painting of himself, done some years back. But now my gaze sought it in vain.

"Certainly," I answered. "It hung there," pointing.

"Quite right. Now I want you to observe the shelf-top. You see how crowded it is."

It was indeed crowded. Bronze busts and statuettes; yachting and golf trophies in silver; framed photographs; a score of odds and ends, souvenirs gathered the world over. There was scarcely an inch of space unoccupied. I had frequently observed this plethora of ornament and resented it. It gave to that part of the room the semblance of a curiosity shop. When I had nodded my assent, he went on:

"On the afternoon of Friday, August twenty-first, seven days after the receipt of that first letter, I was sitting where you are sitting now. I was reading, and deeply interested. I had put the letter, as I told you, entirely out of my mind. I had forgotten it, absolutely. That seventh-day business I had regarded—if I regarded it at all—as idle vaporing. That this was the afternoon of the seventh day did not occur to me until afterwards. I recall that I paused in reading to ponder a paragraph that was not quite clear to me, and that while in contemplation I fixed my eyes upon that portrait. I remember that, because it struck me, then, that the flesh tints of the face had grown muddy and that the thing would be better for a cleaning. I recall, too, that at that moment, the little clock, yonder, struck three. I resumed my reading; but presently, another statement demanding cogitation, I lowered my book, and once more my eyes rested on the portrait. But not on the muddy flesh tints, because—"

he paused and leaned forward, towards me, speaking with impressive emphasis. "Because," he repeated, "there were no flesh tints there. Because there was no head nor face there!"

I sat up suddenly, open-mouthed, speechless. Only my wide eyes made question.

"Cut from the canvas," he went on, in lowered voice, "clean and sharp from crown to collar. And the hands of the clock pointed to twelve minutes past three."

## CHAPTER II.

## Rifle Shots Echo in the Woods.

Of conveying even a tithe of the horror I experienced at Cameron's disclosure I am high hopeless. The more we discussed the occurrence the less susceptible it seemed of explanation. And what is so terrifying as the inexplicable, or so dreadful as the intangible? Here, apparently, was an enemy of calm and cunning malignity, who chose to manifest his power in a manner almost ludicrously perille—save as it pointed with significant finger to some dire and inevitable sequel—yet with such crafty secrecy as completely to mystify and dismay.

Cameron showed me the mutilated portrait. He had taken it down almost immediately, and had hidden it away in a closet of the hall behind an array of raincoats. The cutting had been done, evidently, with an exceedingly keen blade, and very dexterously done. But that it should have been accomplished in twelve minutes, while Cameron sat in the room, not fifteen feet distant, was beyond our comprehension. Absorption in his book was the nearest we came to a solution, and that was scarcely tenable. For there was the crowded top of the book-shelves. To cut the canvas, the vandal must either have stood upon that or have reared a ladder. There was no room for the foot of a child on the shelf-top; and as for the ladder, it was unthinkable. How could a ladder have been carried in and out without Cameron being conscious of it? From every possible angle we viewed the incident, making every conceivable concession, and no half-way plausible answer to the riddle presented itself.

And though our common-sense told us that the time of miracles was long past, that no Gyges' ring nor Albrecht's cloak survived to this day to make invisible their wearers, there persisted, nevertheless, a chill, uncanon sense of the supernatural, quite evident to me in Cameron's hushed voice and furtive manner, and in my own unwonted nervous disquietude.

We sat very late. I wished, if possible, to learn if at any time in my friend's life he had done ought to engender an enemy to which these strange developments could be traced—whether, for instance, in the hot blood of his youth in some far land he had provoked the vengeance of one whose humor it is never to forget. As we talked I came to know Cameron better than I had ever known him before. He bared to me much of his early career; he gave me a clearer view of his temperamental qualities; and yet I could not but feel that he left the vital point untouched, that beneath his seeming frankness there lay hidden, shielded, some one episode, perhaps, which might let the light in upon our darkness. For my question was evaded rather than answered.

Presently, we went back to the letters and dissected them, coldly and critically, sentence by sentence, and while the weird influence which they had exerted upon me at the first reading increased, stimulated possibly by the incident of the portrait, still we reached a certain practical, common-sense view as to their origin; for we came to see in them what we believed to be the hand of a religious fanatic. Certain expressions, we concluded, were quotations. If they were not Biblical, they were certainly of sacred genesis. And the discovery was not reassuring. It lent, indeed, an added prick to the perturbation we already experienced.

Nor did the absence of a specified date for the second promised demonstration of power tend to relieve our uneasiness. In this silence we found the acme of cunning cruelty. Any day, at any hour, some other mystifying, soul-torturing incident was liable to occur.

I tried to argue that the seventh day was implied, inasmuch as the second note was received on the same day of the month as the first, and was a mere continuation of the original threat. But my contention lacked the intrinsic strength which carries conviction, and, as Cameron put it, we could only "watch and wait;" for the communications offered no alternative. They made no demand which being complied with would avert penalty. Only implacable and inevitable retribution, calm, patient, and determined, effused from every line.

But, in spite of Cameron's evident anxiety—and in using that term I am very mildly stating his obvious condition of mind—he sternly refused to consult either the police or the private detectives.

"You may not know," he explained, "that I am largely interested in a certain line of industrial enterprises, the shares of which are listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Should the public become aware that my life is threatened, very serious consequences might ensue in the market. No, Clyde, whatever is done, must be done by ourselves, and by friends whom we can trust absolutely. I can take no risk of this horrid thing getting into the newspapers. Besides," he added, "Evelyn must be kept in ignorance. Not for worlds would I have her troubled by our perplexing enigma."

My suggestion that he should go abroad for a time, or at least spend a few weeks at Newport, was met with similar obstinate refusal.

"I admit that I have been somewhat upset by this extraordinary combination," was the way he expressed it, "but I am not a coward. I am not going to run. Even if I were inclined to do so, what should I gain? If a man be not safe in his own house, where in Heaven's name is he likely to find safety?"

Quite naturally I was led by this expression to inquire whether, perchance, he mistrusted any of the many persons who were employed in the house and about the estate. But, somewhat to my surprise, he was almost gravely offended by the mere suggestion. Nevertheless there were several features of the affair, chief of them received, which caused me to dwell with some mental persistence on this as the most profitable ground for speculation. And when at length, in the morning's small hours, I returned to my home and to my bed, I carried the thought with me.

The sowing of this seed in the subconscious garden of my mind brought forth fruit after its kind. I awoke with a perfectly clear understanding of how that which, the night before, had seemed so impossible of accomplishment was, perhaps, after all, merely a harlequin trick, quite simple when explained.

(To be continued.)

Surpassed Them All. A near race riot happened in a southern town. The negroes gathered in one crowd and the whites in another. The whites fired their revolvers into the air, and the negroes took to their heels. Next day a plantation owner said to one of his men: "Sam, were you in that crowd that gathered last night?" "Yassir." "Did you run like the wind, Sam?" "No sir. I didn't run like the wind, 'deed I didn't. But I passed two niggers that was running like the wind."—Pennsylvania Grit.

Lightning Kills 96 Sheep. During an electrical storm near Cable Cove, Ore., a flash of lightning plowed its way through a huddled herd of sheep and left 96 carcasses in its path.