

The SABLE LORCHA

By HORACE HAZELTINE

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"Possibly," I asked "that he has been feigning since the first?"

"No," was his answer. "I don't think so. He may have exaggerated his symptoms, when conscious, to gain time; but if he had been able to think clearly he would have secured that letter before last night. You may rest assured that that was the first opportunity he had, after regaining the power of thought continuity. And still," he continued, "I am not entirely convinced that he is not Robert Cameron. If it is merely a resemblance, as you claim, then it is the most remarkable case of likeness that I have ever encountered. Moreover, there is one thing we must not lose sight of. His abductors, as has been demonstrated by everything they have done, are an unusually clever and cunning lot of men. To counterfeit such a far as the tattoo mark is concerned, is not so difficult as you might imagine; and I should have to see the scar before admitting that it is not of recent origin. The letter might have been a forgery, or a real letter, secured and placed in Cameron's pocket for this very purpose. And hypnotic suggestion would easily explain his desire to secure and destroy it. The use of a foreign tongue in his dementia even, could be accounted for in the same way."

It was natural that Dr. Massey should exert his ingenuity to reconcile these divergent points. To him it seemed, as it had to me, that a mistake as to the identity of the patient was incredible. But now I simply shook my head in negation.

"Wait until you see him again, doctor," I requested. "Wait until you read his face, not for what is on the surface but for what is behind it."

The motor, drawing a swift diagonal to the curb, came creeping to a halt before the Cameron house. As I was about to alight, Dr. Massey laid a detaining hand on my arm.

"If your conclusion is correct, Clyde," he said, gravely, "what course do you propose to take? Do you realize what is involved? Don't you see that your conviction and mine is one thing, but that to convince the public is an entirely different matter? Can we afford to give this man up on his crimes until we have as Cameron actually here to prove that it is not he who was thus involved sixteen years ago?"

In the recent result of developments I had not thought of that. But I saw now that it presented a problem no less perplexing than some of those which had just been solved.

CHAPTER XXV.

Enemies Face to Face.

An event shaped themselves the problem presented by Dr. Massey found a speedy solution. Had I been compelled to grapple with it unaided I am not yet sure what course I should have pursued. Of my own volition I must have hesitated to take a step which could not fail to throw suspicion—at least among the only partially informed—upon my absent and defenseless friend. But all choice in the matter was denied me.

I arranged with Dr. Massey that he should go unaccompanied to his patient's room, and, without so much as a hint that he was cognizant of what had transpired on the previous night, make whatever examination he deemed necessary to a definite conclusion.

In the meantime, having learned from Checkbeedy that Evelyn was in the breakfast room, I joined her there. Her curiosity had ripened by a night's suppression; and having dismissed the footman who was serving her, she at once demanded the fulfillment of my promise to tell her everything.

"It's another case where you have the right to say, 'I told you so!' I began, as I took a chair next to her.

In her wide blue eyes I read that she divined my meaning.

"Yes," I went on, "the man upstairs is not your uncle. We have been nursing a viper, it seems, who promises to give us a deal of trouble before we are through with him."

There was no need for her to question me. Rapidly, succinctly, I told her the story I had learned from Yup Sing; told her, too, of the scene in the bedroom, after I had left her on the previous night; and showed her the letter from McNish's poor old Scotch mother.

"There, there," I soothed, as in silence but with quivering lips and eyes over-looking, she started to read the truthfully penned sentences a second time. "I'm sorry for the dear old creature, too, but—"

"Billie," she interrupted me, her face lit with a gleam of pleading. "Let me read that back to her!"

"I'll do it," I promised in

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cab, give him enough money for his passage and send him, at once? There's a steamer sailing this morning, isn't there?"

For just a moment I was on the point of yielding. Seldom has a villain had a more puissant advocate than had McNish in this enthusiastic, resolute girl, spurred to his salvation by the pathetic appeal of that maternal yearning which breathed from every line of the letter before her. The unselfish purity of her cause illumined and transfigured her. Her beauty was radiant.

"Answer me!" she insisted, impatient at my silence. "Isn't it possible? Isn't it really the very best way out of a difficulty? It will never do to admit that we have had that man here in mistake for Uncle Robert, you know."

"But there is something you have forgotten, my dear child," I objected, with all the mildness I could bestow upon the words. "In your wish to give joy to this poor old mother—and in that I am with you heart and soul—you have quite overlooked the fact that we are still with scarcely a scintilla of information concerning the present whereabouts of your uncle."

"Oh, no, I haven't," was her prompt rejoinder. "but I don't see what that has to do with it, except that it makes it all the more necessary to pretend that we still believe this McNish is he. How will sending McNish abroad hinder—?" And she broke off, suddenly, as I had rather expected she would, knowing what a keen brain she had and how once she got a clear perspective on the situation, she must see again the very point she had suggested once herself, and which I had still in mind.

"You mean," she began again, speaking very slowly now, as she mentally focused the conditions, "that we must hold McNish as a hostage, and only give him up when they return Uncle Robert to us?"

"Exactly," I agreed. "Just as two armies do that are at war—exchange prisoners."

"Isn't there any other way?" she asked, frowning. "Oh, there must be. I don't care a straw, you know, for that wicked man; but, Philip, think of his poor old mother!"

"I do think," I told her. "I've been thinking, ever since I read her letter, and if it were possible, Evelyn, I'd give the reprobate his chance for her sake, little as he deserves it. But I've been thinking of Cameron, too. He may be somewhere on the high seas, as Miss Clement's note implied, or he may be a prisoner in some underground dungeon of Chinatown. Wherever he is, we are safe in concluding he is neither comfortable nor happy. Why, then, should we consider, to come right down to practicalities, this old Scotch mother of an infamous son, when the safety—the life even—of one we both love so dearly may at this moment be at stake?"

I flattered myself there was no getting away from this argument. It seemed to me conclusive, but the letter had stirred the sentimental depths of the girl's nature, and she refused to yield without one last effort.

"I know, Philip. I appreciate every word of what you have said; but couldn't we find out what we want to know through Miss Clement? She must have a lot more information than she put in that little hurriedly written note. Or, couldn't O'Hara find out for us?"

Before I could answer her, Checkbeedy stood in the doorway.

"Dr. Massey has just come down, Mr. Clyde," he said, "and would you spare him a moment in the reception room?"

I turned to Evelyn.

"Shall we have him in here?" I asked. And at her consent, Checkbeedy, a moment later, led the doctor to us—a very changed doctor, a very decidedly less cocksure doctor than I had encountered earlier that morning in his Fifty-sixth street office.

Even in his bow to Evelyn I detected the shamefaced humiliation he was suffering.

"We take off our hats to your perspicacity, Miss Grayson," he said, confirming my reading. "I had never thought such a modern real-life instance of Lesurques and Dubosc possible."

"Then you admit?" I asked, smiling. "Candidly. There is no question. Yet I could have sworn yesterday that I was attending Mr. Cameron. It is the most remarkable resemblance I have ever seen."

Evelyn asked him to be seated and I drew out a chair for him.

"And how do you find the patient?" I inquired, when he had sat down.

"Quite normal in every respect save one. He is in a highly nervous state. He is endeavoring to maintain the fiction that he is the gentleman we supposed he was. He evidently learned his lesson from Mr. Bryan, before we suspected anything. It is really wonderful how well he does it, considering that he never saw the man he is trying to impersonate."

"But he must know that he has been trying to impersonate," I pointed out.

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this letter."

"A desperate man will battle against the most overwhelming odds," Dr. Massey observed, "and he is a desperate man."

"You gave no sign that you knew?" Evelyn asked.

"Not the slightest. I pretended that I believed him Mr. Cameron."

"But Mr. Bryan must have—" I began.

"On the contrary," said the doctor, "Mr. Bryan knows him only as the Mr. Cameron he has nursed from the first. He would be the last man to indicate to his patient a knowledge of anything untoward."

"Miss Grayson and I were just discussing a course of action when you arrived, Doctor," I explained, "but had reached no conclusion. Last night I arranged with Yup Sing, who is probably the most prominent and best educated Chinaman in New York, and his friend the Chinese Vice Consul to meet me here today at noon. The chances are they will bring a United States deputy marshal with them, with a warrant for McNish's arrest. Now if we give him up, what will be the result? He will still maintain that he is Cameron in spite of our knowledge to the contrary. Yup Sing and his clan will insist that he is right and that we are wrong, and our chances of finding Cameron will dwindle. It isn't reasonable to expect that those engaged in the abduction plot will confess to their error and inform us as to Cameron's place of detention, is it?"

Dr. Massey knitted his brow behind the bow of his glasses and pursed his thin lips.

"We are certainly confronted by a very trying complication," he admitted with characteristic gravity.

"Miss Grayson has suggested that we send McNish abroad—at once, on a steamer sailing this morning."

"Mr. Bryan could go with him," Evelyn volunteered.

"If the United States authorities have a warrant for him," the physician argued, "that would only delay matters. They would arrest him on landing."

There was no question as to the accuracy of this deduction.

"And the newspapers," I added, "would be sure to publish columns of speculation. . . . If we could only write an admission from McNish it would simplify matters."

"Isn't there some one you could confront him with?" Dr. Massey asked, and hope rose within me at the suggestion.

"As far as I can make out, from what O'Hara tells me," was my rejoinder, "the police have in custody now the Eurasian cook who, I believe, has been McNish's Nemesis these sixteen years. If we could bring those two miscreants face to face, McNish would be sure to betray himself."

"Then arrange it by all means," urged the doctor.

"Have McNish taken there, you mean?"

"Or have the Eurasian brought here."

And so, ultimately through the offices of O'Hara, who all this time had been awaiting me in the tonneau of my car which still stood at the door, John Soy, accompanied by two plain clothes men from the Detective Bureau, was brought from the Tombs to that sumptuous home on upper Fifth avenue.

I say "ultimately" because his coming was delayed beyond all patience. Hour after hour passed. The morning dragged by with periodic telephone excuses from O'Hara. The hearing was in progress before the police magistrate. . . . Soy had been held for the grand jury. . . . The magistrate would have to sign a permit and he could not be approached until he came off the bench. . . . Soy had gone to the Tombs. . . . The warden was at luncheon and could not be seen for half an hour.

Meanwhile Dr. Massey, impelled by the necessities of his practice, had departed, and Yup Sing and the vice consul, Chen Mok, had arrived and been relegated to the reception room. To my relief, Checkbeedy reported that they were unaccompanied. Meanwhile, too, Evelyn had received a call from Miss Clement and had learned with some dismay that the missionary's ill-fated informant had left with her no more definite information regarding Cameron's transportation than that which she had already conveyed to us.

"We're just starting in a taxicab," came at length from O'Hara over the wire. "We'll be there in less than half an hour."

And in less than half an hour they came, an ignoble, vulgar quartette against a stately, pompous background.

I met them in the great hall, standing before the broad, sculptured chimney-piece.

The three detectives were more or less of a piece—gross, coarse, red-faced men whose hands and feet seemed out of all proportion to their size, bulky as it was. Of the three O'Hara, possibly because of familiarity, struck me as the least offensive. But after all it was not the detectives who claimed and held my chief interest, but the shrunken, shadow-like creature they had in charge, whom I recognized instantly as the supposed castaway the Sibylla had picked up that warm October day somewhere east of Nantucket—the slinking figure I had followed through the press of Doyers street almost to my death.

My conjecture was thus in part verified; John Soy and Peter Johnson were the same, and it only remained now to prove that the rest of my guess was as well founded.

Stepping to the door of the reception room, I made brief apology for my detention and bade my two Catholic visitors join the others.

"I think, Mr. . . .," I observed, "that we have here the Eurasian cook of the Sable Lorch about whom you told me."

I suppose I was foolish enough to fancy that the merchant would at once make the identification I desired. I should have known better. In subtlety we are no match for the ancient race to which Yup Sing belonged, as was evidenced by the absolute impetration of his manner, as, after gazing sharply at John Soy, he turned to me with a visage as blank as the marble wall, and, in a voice without a shade of inflection, said:

"I do not know him. I have never seen him until now."

Had a white man dared to make such denial, I should have laughed in his face. But the dignity of the Oriental, the perfect aplomb of his manner, including an utter absence of all that could be construed as feigning, forbade such rejoinder; yet I knew that he had lied.

"Come, gentlemen," I said, denying myself even the satisfaction of a shoulder shrug, "and we shall decide whether the man upstairs is, or—?" but I was in no mood to finish the sentence.

The seven of us, crowding into the elevator, were lifted to the floor above, where I preceded the others to the door of what we were wont to call Cameron's bedchamber. There I paused.

"Pardon me just a moment," I begged, with my hand on the knob, "until I see whether everything is ready."

I had instructed Mr. Bryan to have McNish up and dressed, and I wished to make sure that these preparations were completed. But I was hardly prepared for the scene which greeted my entrance.

McNish, clothed in the suit he had worn when I found him, was in the act of closing a drawer of an old-fashioned rosewood secretary which occupied a place against the right wall, beneath one of the medallioned windows. And the nurse was nowhere in sight.

Startled by the sound of the opening door, the trespasser half turned, his hands still on the brass drawer-handles; then, at sight of me, he wheeled completely and stood defiant with his back to the antique desk.

"What are you doing there?" I cried, indignantly. "What were you looking for?"

Even before he spoke I saw the look of cunning come into his small, furtive eyes.

"I was looking for some papers of mine, Clyde," he answered, boldly, and his voice was so like Cameron's that, for just a moment, a shuddering uncertainty assailed me. Only the crafty leer weighed for the truth.

"Papers of yours?" I snarled, ignoring his familiar use of my name. "I have the only paper you brought into this house, Donald McNish, and that's evidence enough to put you where you belong. Where's Mr. Bryan?"

But at that moment the nurse, appearing from the adjoining room, answered for himself, and McNish, with a capitally assumed nonchalance, said, smilingly:

"I didn't think you could be so easily imposed upon, Clyde. The letter to Donald McNish was given to me by McNish himself. He wanted me to answer it. It was his last request. He—"

"Silence!" I cried; and then, "Mr. Bryan, get him into that chair before the bureau, facing the door. These people outside must not be kept waiting any longer." With which I turned, and with hand on knob once more, paused until the nurse had rather roughly, but in all haste, dragged his charge across the floor and fairly flung him into the indicated seat.

It was not until after the immediately succeeding occurrences that I learned from O'Hara what had been told to John Soy on his way up town in the taxicab. As I understand it, the other detectives had informed him that he was being taken to this house so that his chief accuser, who was high unto death, could make an ante-mortem identification. As a matter of fact, of course, the situation was practically the reverse: We desired Soy to identify McNish, and McNish, under stress of the encounter, to admit his own identity. The Eurasian, however, having been thus misinformed, was at a distinct disadvantage. So, when I drew back the door, and he was pushed forward into the room, instead of seeking, he imagined himself sought, and with bowed head and eyes on the floor, stood shrinkingly ill at ease.

To this misunderstanding is probably attributable all that followed. Had Soy known that McNish was regarded, equally with himself, as an aggressor, he might have controlled his outbreak and permitted the law to wreak its tardy justice. But Soy did not know, and the tide of events met sudden change.

It is, indeed, scarcely conceivable, how rapidly it was all enacted. For just a moment the weakened figure stood still, while behind him crowded the rest of us—the three detectives, the two Chinamen and myself.

I saw McNish struggle for an instant to maintain his pose of indifference, and then I saw his cheeks blanch, and his little eyes widen in craven terror as he recognized the shabby, silent thing before him. His lips parted, his bared teeth clicked together, and his hands, like talons, clutched tensely his chair arms.

In that strained moment the room was strangely hushed. I know I scarcely breathed, as nervously intent I watched those two miserable creatures: the one keenly conscious, the other blind to everything save the rug pattern at his feet.

Then, like a flash, Soy stole a glance at his supposed accuser, and I saw him quiver into steel. It was as though an electric bolt had struck

through his shrugging frame and limp limbs. He seemed to grow out of himself, to rise inches taller, towering with stiffened neck and lifted head.

To describe with any degree of accuracy what ensued, I cannot. I know only that McNish rose cumbrously to his feet, only to fall back again beneath the pouncing spring of the Eurasian. Then followed a pistol shot, muffled, yet sounding lethally loud against the grim silence of the chamber; and, as with one accord we leaped forward, I saw Soy roll over in a spasm of contortions, and McNish, thus freed from his gripping hold, raise an arm and fire again, with the pistol pressed to his own temple, just as Bryan, who had been nearest to them, bravely made a grab for the weapon.

CHAPTER XXVI.

His Sister Confesses.

The death of McNish was instantaneous. Soy, with a bullet in his abdomen, lingered for three days. During that time Miss Clement became his sister confessor, and so there drifted into our possession a host of facts which otherwise we might never have learned. Strange, uncanny creature that he was, he seemed to repose the utmost confidence in the gray, sweet-faced missionary, and fairly unburdened his sin-charged soul to her. Those of his fellow conspirators that she promised to protect, she protected. Those that he believed to have played him false, she protected likewise. Her religion was one in which personal justice has no dwelling. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," her Lord had admonished, and to him she was content to resign the problem of retribution.

Had I been more familiar with the Cameron town house and the town habits of its master, justice probably would not have been tricked out of having her way with two as lawless wretches as ever infested a community. I should have known then that one of the drawers of that quaint old rosewood secretary was the hiding place of a .38-caliber Colt, and in all likelihood have had it removed before McNish was capable of searching for it. As it was, Mr. Bryan took no little blame upon himself for not having been the first to discover it, though to my mind he could hardly be regarded as recreant in failing to investigate a piece of furniture of so intimate a character.

The notoriety consequent upon the murder and suicide was hideously inordinate. Inspired and stimulated by the sensational press, which did not hesitate to imply what it dared not state openly, the currency of falsehood and misconception at one period came close to being disastrous. As I had foreseen, the resemblance of McNish to Cameron, coupled with the seemingly convincing fact that the tragedy had occurred in the Cameron town house, where the millionaire was supposed to be convalescent, gave excuse for persistent iteration of a rumor that, in order to preserve the fame of a man regarded as above reproach and at the same time to protect the line of securities in which he had been interested, the story of a confining likeness had been invented.

No paper in the land would have had the temerity to print this as a fact, but again and again—silly and impossible as it must have appeared to all thinking persons—it was promulgated by innuendo and embodied in more or less weakly-worded denials.

As a result Crystal Consolidated suffered. Bonds and stocks alike sloughed fraction after fraction and point after point. And our mouths were necessarily closed upon the truth, since that, if possible, would have been even more damaging; for while we still hoped, we could give no positive assurance that Cameron was yet alive.

Strangely enough, though the whole wretched complication had been raked reportorially with a fine-tooth comb, the kidnapping from the yacht had not yet been so much as hinted at, but I lived, daily, in mortal dread that it would be brought to light at the next journalistic hand-sweep. Accurate information as to Cameron's present whereabouts was the news now most eagerly sought not alone by the press but by Wall street as well; our failure to supply it—though excused by us on the ground that in his present nervous condition, it was imperatively necessary to keep him sequestered from interviewers—was not unnaturally arousing a suspicion that we did not possess it to supply.

If, under the strain of the tragedy and the brutal publicity which followed upon it, Evelyn Grayson had not eventually succumbed she must have been more than human. Bravely she had borne up against a whelming succession of nerve-wrenching experiences, refusing to entertain fear and fighting valiantly against discouragement, but heart and nerves have their limit of endurance; and when, on the third day, John Soy was gathered to his yellow and white fathers, and a more yellow than white evening journal ventured, more boldly than had been dared hitherto, to make the implication to which I have referred, Evelyn collapsed utterly.

As chance would have it, I myself came upon her, lying white, limp, and unconscious on the library floor, with the paper still loosely held in her right hand. The sound of her fall had carried to me faintly as I neared the closed door, and a misty vision of intuition rather than of any more definite cause had hastened my steps.

Having lifted her to a couch and rung for her maid I at once set about doing what I could to restore her to consciousness. But her plight was no ordinary momentary faintness. Stubbornly she refused to respond to my efforts, and those of the maid when, after hours it seemed, she at last

equally unavailing.

Alarmed, I called up Dr. Massey, only to learn that he had gone to Boston for a consultation, and that Dr. Thorpe, his assistant, was operating at Roosevelt Hospital. For a moment, distressed and anxious, the names of other physicians eluded me. In despair, I opened the Telephone Directory, in hope of a suggestion, and the name of Addison leaped at me from the page. To my infinite relief he was in his office; his electric was at the door, and he would be over at once.

And it was not until ten minutes later, when he came hurriedly into the room, that I remembered. The name, when I saw it, had at once struck me as familiar. I seemed to know, even, that it belonged to a physician of reputed high standing; yet it was only at the instant of his entrance, when his penetrating steel-gray eyes drilled into mine, that I associated it with the man to whom I had gone, not for any ailment, but to learn whether my friend, in spite of his denials, had ever been in China.

If the recognition was mutual, Dr. Addison gave no sign of it. His patient demanded and received his immediate attention. Hastily he administered a stimulating hypodermic, and then, himself assisted in carrying her to her room.

When he rejoined me in the library, half an hour later, it was with the glad news that she had responded gratefully to treatment, and was sleeping calmly. After thanking him for his promptness and efficiency, I said:

"You do not remember me?"

"Oh, yes, I do," he returned, brusquely, fixing me with his gaze. "You are Mr. Clyde. Did you get any relief from the prescription I gave you?"

I had not expected the question and was unprepared for it. In venturing an evasive reply I stammered.

"I don't suppose you even had it filled," he declared, with a grim smile that was at least partially reassuring. And I admitted that his surmise was accurate. Moreover I begged him to sit down.

"I have a confession to make, Doctor," I said, a little shamefacedly. "It is unnecessary, Mr. Clyde," was his half-polite rejoinder, as he sank into a chair before the fireplace. "I read the newspapers, and I have come to understand many things in the past few days."

As I took a seat opposite to him, I said:

"The newspapers have been misleading, I fear, Dr. Addison."

"No," he contradicted, his tone softened. "On the contrary they have opened my eyes to a truth that was long hidden; they have made a very contrite and, I must confess, a very unhappy man of me."

"Unhappy?"

"More unhappy than you can conceive, Mr. Clyde. For years I have misjudged one of the best friends Heaven ever privileged a man to have."

"But, my dear Doctor," I began, "you were not at fault, altogether; you—"

He raised a deprecatory hand. "No, please don't," he pleaded. "You cannot temper it. I should have taken his word, without question. I knew his love of truth—I probably more than any one else. What right had I to conclude then, because of certain apparently irreconcilable happenings, that his word was false?"

"We are all fallible," I said.

"All but he," was his prompt reply. And then, leaning forward, with a strained, eager look in those piercing eyes, his voice vibrant, he asked:

"Is it true that he is very ill? That he cannot be seen?"

"For a scruple I hesitated. The newspapers have been misleading, I fear," I said again, and I judge my expression of countenance was as cryptic as my words, for my visitor's look changed instantly to one of dire perplexity.

"He is not ill?" he questioned.

"You mean—"

"Confidentially, Doctor," I admitted, "we haven't the faintest notion just how he is. He may be in excellent health or he may have ceased to exist."

"Good God!" he exclaimed, and his face was as white as his linen.

"Our best information is that he is on a steamer—a tramp—bound for China, but we have no particulars, and worse still, no verification."

It was neither fair nor consistent to conceal longer from one so justly interested the whole truth, and so, without reservation, I told Dr. Addison the story.

Before I had quite concluded, Miss Clement was announced, and when she was shown into the library, instead of permitting the physician to leave, as he made offer of doing, I presented him and insisted upon his remaining.

"I want you to tell Miss Clement about your patient, Doctor," I said. "Miss Clement is a very good friend of Miss Grayson's."

Graciously he complied, making it quite clear that sedatives and sleep would undoubtedly effect a prompt recovery.

"And now Miss Clement will tell me something," I added. "She has had a patient, too, who died this morning, as you may have seen by the afternoon papers—the Eurasian who was shot by McNish."

Up to that moment I knew but little of what Soy had divulged, for the missionary, in her two or three brief telephonic talks, had given us scarcely more than promises of important revelations when opportunity could be made for a meeting; and I was impatient for the fulfillment.