THE MYSTERIOUS CRIME ON THE S.S. NEPTUNE

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

Next morning they were out of sight of land, afloat on the blue waters, with the blue sky above them. Ronald was up early, as he found it too hot to remain below, and having had his tub and arranged himself in his flannels, he went on deck to have a smoke before the ladies put in an appearance. The lascars were washing down the deck, and disturbing numerous sleepers who had been taking their rest all night upstairs for the sake of coolness. One of these was Pat, who came stumbling out of the smoking-room in his pyjama, with a fur rug under one arm and a pillow under the other.

"Hullo, Pat," said Monteith, laughing; "you look as if you were going to the pawnbroker."

"I want to go to bed," retorted Pat, crossly; "those divils in the smoking-room always commence shyin' pillows in the morning, and I'm as sleepy as Rip Van Winkle. I'll have another forty winks."

"Nonsense," said Ronald, looking at his watch; "it's about seven; go and have your bath and join me on deck."

"All roight," assented Pat, with a gigantic yawn; "I dare say cold water will wake me up."

"And, I say," called out Monteith, as Pat rolled along towards the saloon, "knock up Ventin; his cabin is No. 43."

"Roight you are," from Pat, as he disappeared.

Ronald took a turn along to the end of the hurricane deck and, after surveying the slumbering forms in the smoking-room, walked back again. Just as he got to the captain's cabin he saw a steward emerge therefrom with horror and alarm on his face.

"Hullo," said the Australian, stopping short; "what's up?"

"Oh, sir," gasped the steward, pausing a moment, "Mr. Ventin, sir—he's dead—murdered!" and he ran off to the cabin of the first officer.

Ronald sat down on the nearest seat and let the cigarette drop from his fingers.

Ventin—dead—murdered!

Monteith thought of the dead man's story and how he said he would never reach England alive. His presentiment of evil was right after all, for his wife had fulfilled her promise, and killed him. "But she will not escape punishment," thought Ronald, "for in order to commit the crime she must have come on board."

The news was soon all over the ship, and in a short time all the passengers were on deck. The captain, the first officer, the doctor, and the purser all went along to see the body, after which the door of the cabin was locked while they deliberated over what was to be done. The excitement was intense, for no one doubted but that a murder had been committed, though no official notice had been given, and everyone was puzzling over what could have been the motive for such a crime. Only one man on board had a clue, and this was Donald Monteith, who determined to tell the captain Ventin's strange story, and then have the ship thoroughly searched to see if the Maltese wife of the deceased could be discovered.

After breakfast, when all the passengers were gathered in excited groups talking over the affair, Monteith went along and asking permission to see the captain on the subject, told him everything, while the doctor went down to make an examination of the body.

As the weather was very hot, the corpse would have to be buried before arrival at Gibraltar, and Captain Templeton determined to hold an inquest at once. A Jury was chosen from the passengers, and the captain acted as coroner, while the witnesses were the steward who had discovered the body, the doctor, and Ronald Monteith.

The jury, having inspected the body, went into the captain's cabin to hold the inquest, and the proceedings were opened by a speech from Captain Templeton.

He stated that a crime had been committed on board the ship, and it behoved every passenger to use his or her best energies to find out who had committed it. The idea of suicide had been talked about, but they would hear from the evidence of Mr. Monteith, an intimate friend of the deceased, that the dead man had distinctly denied having any such idea. He went to bed the previous night at half-past eight, and at seven that morning one of the stewards, by name Matthew Dalton, had gone to the deceased's cabin and found him lying dead with a stiletto in his heart. The stiletto would be laid before the jury, the evidence of the steward, the doctor, and of Mr. Monteith taken, and every attempt would be made to find the author of this dastardly crime.

The first witness called was Dalton, who deposed that he had knocked at the door of the deceased at seven, as usual, but receiving no reply had entered, and found him lying in the lower berth, with a stiletto, produced, in his breast. He was completely dressed, and as all the furniture of the cabin was in order, there was no sign of any struggle.

The stiletto produced was a slender, steel instrument, about seven inches long, with a curiously carved ivory handle, representing the head of Bacchus, surrounded by clusters of grapes.

Captain. Were the bed-clothes in the berth disarranged?

Witness: No, sir; he was lying on top of 'em.

Captain: Quite dressed?

Witness; Yes, sir; just as if he was taking a sleep afore turning in.

Captain: Any of his jewellery missing?

Witness: No, sir; his watch was in his pocket, and two rings on his fingers.

Captain: When did you last see him alive?

Witness: Yesterday, when he came on board at Valetta.

Captain: How long was he ashore?

Witness: About an hour, sir; he came back at three o'clock; he seemed upset, and asked me to get him a glass of brandy.

Captain: Do you know what time he went to bed?

Witness: No. sir.

Captain: Was there any blood about the cabin?

Witness: No, sir; just a little oozing from his breast.

The doctor was next called upon to give his evidence, and deposed that he had examined the body of Lionel Ventin, deceased It was that of a man of thirty-seven, or thereabouts, well nourished; very little food in the stomach, but a faint, spirituous odor, which showed that the deceased must have been drinking previously to his death. The deceased had died from a stab inflited by a stiletto, which had penetrated the heart. The stiletto was in the wound when the body was discovered.

Captain: At what time do you think the crime was committed?

Doctor: That is difficult to say; it was quite cold when I felt it, at seven this morning. I should say at least eight or nine hours.

Captain: From the way the wound was inflicted, did the idea of suicide occur to you?

Doctor: No; the stiletto was long, and as the body was lying in a lower compartment, he could not have lifted the stiletto high enough to have driven it so deeply, without knocking his hand against the bottom of the top berth.

Captain: If he had managed to do so, would there be any bruise or mark on his hand?

Doctor: I should say very likely; but I did not discover any.

Captain: Was there much blood?

Doctor: Very little; the stiletto had been driven into the heart and left there, so comparatively little blood could ooze out.

This closed the evidence of the doctor, and then Ronald Monteith stepped forward and told the jury the story of the deceased.

Captain: You say the deceased expected to be killed by his wife?

Monteith: He told me so several times.

Captain: And did he ever say he would commit suicide?

Monteith: He distinctly denied having any such intention.

Captain: When did you see him last?

Monteith: At half-past eight last night; he said he would go to bed early.

Captain: Was he excited in any way?

Monteith: No; just the same as usual.

Captain: If your theory is correct, and the deceased was murdered by his wife, as he expected to be, do you think she came on board at Valetta?

Monteith: Yes; I am sure of it. Sensation.

Captain: Will you give us your reasons?

Monteith: The deceased saw his wife in Malta, and she recognized him. When he left me at half-past eight to go to his cabin, there was a number of strangers, on board; if his wife were on board, she could easily have followed him to his cabin and killed him.

Captain; But she would not know the number of his cabin?

Monteith: Yes, she would. He asked me to see him in the morning, and told me the number of his cabin twice; the second time he spoke so loudly, that anyone could have heard, and immediately afterwards went away.

Captain: Then you think the crime was committed before the sailing of the ship?

Monteith: I can't say; if, as the doctor says, the deceased had been dead for nine hours, this would bring the time of the commission of the crime to nine o'clock last night, at which time the ship sailed.

The captain asked Monteith a few other questions and then the inquest was adjourned till the next morning.

CHAPTER IV.

When the inquest had been adjourned, and the excited passengers were assembled in saloon and smoking-rooms giving their ideas on the subject, Ronald Monteith, at the captain's request, remained to talk over things.

"It is a curious case altogether," said Captain Templeton, sitting back in his chair. "I never knew of such a thing to occur aboard one of our steamers before, and your story is a strange one."

"It is, rather," assented the Australian, pulling moodily at his mustache; "but I think it is true. Poor Ventin told me it only too bitterly to leave any doubt in my mind as to his veracity."

The captain took up the stiletto, which still lay on the table, and looked at it thoughtfully.

"Have you ever seen this in Ventin's possession?" he asked.

"No," replied Monteith, casting a careless glance at it. "But, then, I never was in his cabin. We sat next to one another in the saloon at meals, and talked together a good deal. Beyond the story I told you I know nothing about his life."

"Excuse me putting the question to you again; but do you really think this Maltese wife killed him?"

"Well, of course, I can't say for certain, but it looks very black against her. She wrote and told him she would kill him."

"Oh!" interrupted the captain, "did he show you the letter?"

"No; but it might be among his private papers, which you will of course take charge of."

"Yes; I will look over his things to-night. But go on."

"Well, he goes on shore at Valetta, sees his wife, who recognizes him, comes back, she follows, hears the number of his cabin, and kills him."

"And then?"

"Well, the question is easy to answer. She must have committed the crime before nine o'clock, and escaped on shore in the confusion, or——"

"Well."

"She must be still on the boat. What passengers came on board at Valetta?"

"I ascertained that when I heard your story this morning—two only."

"Maltese or English?"

"The former. Marchese Matteo Vassalla is the name of one, and the other is Miss Cotoner—both cousins."

"Do you think she is the wife of Ventin?" asked Ronald, eagerly.

"How the deuce do I know?" said Templeton, quickly; "I never saw her before!"

"What age should you think she was?"

"About twenty-four or five."

"Women's appearances are so deceptive."

"What the deuce are you driving at?" asked the captain, annoyed.

"I know the exact age of the Maltese wife."

"How so?"

"Ventin told me he was forty years of age, and that he was twenty when he started his career in London; he said he had thirteen years of fast living there, so in order to be forty now, seven years must have elapsed since his marriage."

"But what has this got to do with the age of his wife?"

"Everything; he said his wife was twenty-three years of age when he met her first; that, by my argument, must have been seven years ago, so to-day his wife must be thirty years of age—now is this new passenger thirty?"

"No, I'm certain she isn't; besides, the Marchese told me his cousin and himself stayed on deck till the vessel started."

"Oh!" said Ronald, thoughtfully, "so that disposes of this young lady, it cannot be she, but the Marchese might help us."

"I don't think so; he wouldn't know Ventin."

"Perhaps not, but he might know Mrs. Ventin, as he lives at Valetta, and the whole affair might be sifted to the bottom; but, oh, hang it, I forgot! broke off Monteith, in dismay, "Ventin was not his real name."

"Heavens, you don't say so! Then what was it?"

"He did not tell me."

"How vexatious," said Templeton, rising to his feet, "this involves the affair in still deeper mystery, for if Ventin were not his real name, we cannot find the former Mrs. Ventin, and will not be able to ascertain if there's any truth in the story he told you."

"Examine his boxes," suggested Ronald, as he followed the captain outside, "his real name may be among his papers, or else a crest; you might find out from that."

To be Continued.

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SEEMED FAIR.

I'd like to know, of course, said the new man, with some concern, whether my job is to be permanent or not.

Well, returned the employer, you can stay as long as you please. That's fair, isn't it?

Certainly. I'm much ob—

On the other hand, I reserve the right to discharge you whenever I please. That's equally fair, isn't it?

Ye-es, I suppose so.

THE HEAVY AND THE LIGHT.

Alas! we sighed, meaning to seem very sympathetic. You have felt Britain's heavy hand!

Heavy exclaimed the Boer, with some heat. Britain's the most light-fingered nation we ever met up with!

COL. GORDON'S PROPHECY.

TWENTY YEARS' FORECAST OF CURRENT EVENTS IN CHINA.

Chinese Do Not Fear Death—Fearful Consequences of a General Rising—The Mandarins Can Not be Trusted.

There was probably no European more qualified to express an opinion of the Chinese than Colonel Gordon, more commonly called Chinese Gordon, whose strange career closed at Khartoum in January, 1885. His military association with them during the two years, from 1863 to 1865, when he commanded the Ever Victorious Army, as it was styled, gave him a unique experience of the Chinese and an insight into their somewhat complex character.

With the crudest of material and in spite of the strongest opposition, an opposition that would have been fatal but for the loyal support he received throughout his short term of service under the Emperor of China from Li-Hung-Chang, he organized a force that under European officers of nearly every nationality, including some Americans suppressed the Taeping rebellion then threatening the existence of China and the dynasty. The opinions he expressed therefore have at the present moment

EXCEPTIONAL VALUE.

One which he gave confidentially to a friend in 1880 when he was just on the point of leaving for India, when he had accepted the post of Secretary to the Viceroy, Lord Ripon, is just now of particular interest. Speaking of the Taeping rebellion, and of the courage of the Chinese troops, he denied that they were cowards in one sense. He held that they did not fear death, though he had seen them stand up bravely sometimes and then flee like sheep afterward. But what Europeans would have to consider was, he said, the awful consequences of a general movement, when least expected, in the vast inert mass of hundreds of million of men to overwhelm the foreign devils whom they hate like poison.

The danger of such an outburst, Gordon said, became greater every year on account of the way the Chinese were being continually harassed by the European States with demands for compensations, in some cases just, in others quite frivolous When they saw that their only means of meeting the aggressions was to organize an army with improved weapons, then they would buy guns and rifles and ships, and with the aid of Europeans, who would always be found ready to drill and organize them, they would create

A FORMIDABLE ARMY.

Of one thing Gordon felt quite sure. The days when Europeans could march up to Chinese troops in position, or in defence of a position, and sweep them away like flies, would soon be over. There would be no more military promenades by a few hundred British and French troops through the country, driving thousands of Chinese before them.

Speaking of the authorities, Gordon said a mandarin was never to be trusted, and he was only too glad when he left their service. The English, in his opinion, made the mistake of thinking they were welcome wherever they went, but in fifteen or twenty years they would find proof to the contrary. With all their superstitions, their vices, and their ignorance, the Chinese were, in Gordon's estimation, far two good to be ruled by the class that governed them. The Governments of France, Russia, and England, he emphatically declared, had for the forty years before the time he spoke treated the Chinese most scandalously.

Current events are proving how accurately Chinese Gordon judged the situation, and the regret is that certain defects of character and temperament should have caused him to abandon a position in which he could have rendered great service to China and civilization. In the light of what is passing in China to-day Gordon's words of 20 years ago have a prophetic ring.

NURSERY DONT'S.

Don't put baby to sleep in the same room that he occupies all day.

Don't neglect to rub his scalp with sweet oil if there is any scurf.

Don't give him farinaceous food until the teeth start, or the salivary glands begin to act.

Don't over-salt or over-sweeten his food—salt and sugar create thirst, and thirst fretfulness.

Don't use silk-lined or cotton-wadded quilts on his bed; light, soft, all-wool blankets are best.

Don't always carry him on the same side but move him from one arm to the other, if he must be carried.