

The Duel in The Deeper Pit

It came upon me like the shock of a bullet-wound. The thing was impossible to refute; it was real. The nickel-plated revolver was in the mildewed locker where he said I should find it.

Valpy was mad; his mania was homicide.

The net which his maniac cunning had spun around my life seemed of such malignant strength and grip that no human effort could win me clear of its coils.

For a while I was so stunned by its discovery that Valpy's letter fluttered from my fingers to the coaly mud of the floor, and the fluttering tallow-candle with its stepping of clay threatened to follow it. Peril of life is no great novelty to me. It was not so much the physical danger which caused my head to whirl then, as the shock of the other discovery. Valpy had been my friend for more than twenty years; we had known one another in salon and steamer-room, by tent and camp-fire; our camaraderie had run its course with never a hitch—and now he demanded my life for an offense which could never in possibility have existed. He said in the bitter letter which he left me to read, that I had alienated from him the affections of his wife. Why, the man had no wife.

This challenge of his was no sudden spasm; I saw that he had been contriving for weeks to pin me so that I must fight him. He had laid his plans with consummate skill; laid them, too, in the full sight of myself, and yet never allowed me a gleam or a glimmer of his real object will the time was full and ripe for doing so.

He had found the advertisement in the "Daily Courier," as it were by accident, before my very eyes, and after we had talked chaffingly about it during a lazy afternoon, it was actually this that suggested his taking up this pit which was offered for lease.

"D'you know, Calvert," he had said, "I've the deuce of a good mind to follow your advice. I'm getting rather bored with wandering over the globe doing nothing. It sounds fascinating to have an occupation in life, and the idea of being a colliery proprietor is, to a man of my antecedents, distinctly bizarre—that is, attractive. Honestly, if this place turns out to be anything like the advertisement states I believe I'll go in for it. Will you come with me when I go to prospect?"

I had laughed and assented, and for the succeeding days he was full of the mine as a child with its first school-boy hobby. Our rooms were littered with plans, tables, reports and specimens. The smuggled Tauchnitz novels had disappeared, the bookcase was reinforced by technical literature of a new genus. Everything about the mine was dinned into my ears about twenty times a day. It was in the neighborhood of a shallow seam of coal recently worked out. The shaft penetrated lower than this, and was known usually as the Deeper Pit. For years it had been unworked, flooded. Now the water had drained away of its own accord—as mine water does once in a thousand times—and the workings were again ready for the collier's pick. The royalties surrounding the original workings could be obtained readily and cheaply. Altogether it was a most desirable property to secure.

So the rusted engine on the pit-bank was cleaned, a wire rope rove over the sheave in the derrick, and the heavy iron cage bent to its end. On a day appointed Valpy and I came to Bromlope to make the descent.

There is a slight feeling of exultation when one drops down the shaft through which living man has not penetrated the entrails of this planet for over sixteen years; and this feeling exhilarates. The cage descended slowly, screaming and grating along the rusted guide-iron, and in a matter of many minutes landed us on a platform of ebony bog left by the receding waters.

With our candles thrust out at shoulder-height, we stepped off the floor of the cage, plodding heavily through the mud. The gallery was low enough to make us crouch our heads; the air was chill and moist. Presently we came to a small oblong cavern which formerly had been the colliers' drawing-room and eating-chamber. Valpy went in first, asking me to remain in the gallery.

Presently he called that I should come to him.

"Look here, old man," he said, thrusting a roll of foolscap into my fingers, "have another turn at geography; make sure how you stand, and then we can move more comfortably. I'll just go out and see if the narrow gallery which runs round the back of this is still sound, or whether it has fallen in."

He went through the doorway and, after the yellow beam of his candle had been swamped in the darkness, I could still hear the faint splashing of his feet in the semi-liquid mud. Then I stuck my candle by its clay socket against the wall, and carelessly unrolled the crisp paper and flattened it out.

So confident had I been that it was merely a map of the mine which had been handed to me, that it caused me a preliminary shock to find it was instead a note scribbled in blue pencil. As I leaned through, the hair tickled on my scalp;

Valpy accused me of tampering with the love of this imaginary wife of his, setting forth this indictment with detail and circumstance. He called to my memory the fact that our engine-man on the pit-bank had returned to his home, and had been ordered not to rewind us to the surface for eight more hours. Then he challenged me to fight him to the death. Previous to my entrance into the room he had placed a revolver and cartridges in the locker opposite the door; he himself possessed an armament similar in all respects.

Furthermore, he had observed that our watches coincided. So I should be able to know when he made it exactly 10.30; up to that time there was a truce between us. The second it passed, he gave me his most sacred word of honor, he should set about endeavoring to slay me.

Some people reading so strange a screed under such strange circumstances might have scented the practical joke and endeavored to treat the matter as such. I knew Valpy too well; he was always an earnest sort of man; and the letter was pious to a degree. By some cerebral lesion he had lost his mind, and as with other mad creatures, his first wrath rose against his staunchest friend. If the chance came to him he would shoot me down like a beast.

Now, as I have said, the first shock stunned me; but the habits of a life spent for the greater part in wild places soon made themselves felt. My own self-preservation clamored to be thought about.

I glanced at my watch. There were left to me four minutes' grace. Then the truce would come to an end, and I might expect war to open at any moment.

Next I blew out the candle-flame. Everything seemed to point to this as a necessity. Then when the cold darkness had closed down, I nipped the smelting wick and slipped the candle into a pocket. It might be wanted again. I most sincerely hoped it would be wanted, because at that stage of the affair I had but one idea in my mind; I must come upon Valpy suddenly and disarm him; the rest would be simple. I was by far his superior in point of bodily strength. First, however, he must be found; and that, moreover, without letting him know he was being sought for until we came to hand-grips. In other words, he must be stalked. This seemed plain enough.

But as I went out of the door into the gallery, a sense of the difficulties of my position began to grow upon me at once; There were two ways to turn—up and down. From the farther side, other galleries led off at right angles; on my own side, there were still others; in fact, as I knew from the maps and plans, the coal seam round the foot of the shaft was burrowed till the reticulations, if measured end on end, would make a line of tunnel many miles in length. Of course, there would be stoppages at all places where the roof had caved, but these points were to me unknown. Valpy and I descended the pit mainly to find how frequently they existed.

Thinking of these things, I listened intently. In that black silence the only sound which fell upon the ear was the distant rivulet of water trickling from a roof-track into a shallow pool below. Then a voice startled me.

"Half-past ten, Calvert. I see you have put out your candle, so we begin on entirely even terms. I need hardly recommend you to do your best to kill me. Because if you fail, as sure as God can see us even through all this great roof of rock, so surely will I satisfy my honor with your life."

The voice seemed to come from close to my elbow. On the first tone I began moving toward it, using infinite care to stalk noiselessly. Yet the voice receded before me like an ignis fatuus, if one may use such a word in reference to sound, and I saw that Valpy had anticipated the maneuver, and was in equal-paced retreat. His original distance I could not guess, because the tunnels acted like a speaking-tube, and carried sounds with little diminution of volume.

I traveled on thus for quite two hundred yards, with every muscle ready to spring, every nerve at highest tension. Then I stopped to listen. At first it appeared that the silence around was absolute, but as my ear strained to even further refinements, it seemed to me that I caught ever and anon the faint hush of breathing. Then, not very far away, a splinter of stone, dislodged from roof or wall, fell with a falset splash to the slime of the roadway, and what had before been a suspicion now became a certainty.

Valpy had rounded my flank and was now stalking me!

Let it be confessed that my first thought was for flight. My next, however, pointed out that he was playing my game. If he came upon me in the darkness, I could seize him before he was able to use his weapon; with him once in my grip, I should be content. The gallery there was a good six feet in height, and I leaned against the cold, slime-covered wall with hands half raised. You can guess how keenly I listened for any small sound speaking of his advance, but not the faintest whisper came to me. In our many wanderings Valpy and I often stalked big game together, and I remembered with a grim smile how well he had earned the title of "Cat" which had once been admirably bestowed upon him by a Bengal shikari. Here he was stalking me now through slush which to another man's movements would have been noisy with squelchings and splashes, and yet, though I felt that he was advancing, yes, and following my spoor with his finger-tips in each foot-step, the deep earth-silence was never intruded upon.

Suspense in many of its lurid shapes had been shown to me before, but the agony of that wait for the madman is one of the deepest scars on my memory.

Always far sharper than my own, and now more tartly stung, by in-

sanity, his animal senses showed him my whereabouts first, and he raised the muzzle of the revolver and pulled the trigger.

The sum of what my dazed eyes saw was Valpy's smudged white face, and the pistol, in a dazzling halo of flame. The bullet struck the wall beneath my left armpit, bringing down a small avalanche of shale.

I had no thought of returning his fire. Indeed, my revolver was in my pocket, still unloaded, but I leaped forward, endeavoring to grapple with him before he could get in another shot. Doubling like an eel in the utter darkness, he left a side-pocket of his coat in my hand and fled, giving parting shots behind him till he had emptied his revolver. The lead brought down great sheets of stone from the roof and sides till I thought that the whole stratum must have collapsed about our ears; still no shot touched me, and I crashed on at his heels. But Valpy ran like a deer and distanced me; and at length I slowed down, with hands and arms bleeding from contact with the rocky walls; and I heard Valpy slack his pace at the same time, and heard also the tinkle of the empty shells as he ejected them and reloaded his revolver.

My original feeling toward my companion had been one of compassion. This was beginning to give way now, and wild anger was coming in its place. What had I done that my life should be so savagely attacked?

The breach of his revolver closed with a vicious snap, and I heard him cock the hammer. Then he halted, waiting for me, I halted too; to advance upon him so would be a demand for instant death. As a general thing he was but an indifferent shot, but now I knew instinctively that he would not fire until the muzzle of his weapon rested against my breast.

He advanced again; I retreated, keeping pace with him; we were both too excited by this time to pay heed about treading delicately. Underneath were L-rails, and on these, our boots slid and clanked. The darkness was profound, and as I ran I steered by trailing raw finger-tips along the jagged walls. The plan of the mine was fixed pretty securely in my head, and twice I turned corners at right angles, hoping that the double would cause him to miss me. He did nothing of the kind, hanging like a dog on the track, and the third time I tried it he laughed loud in derision.

I was hot enough with exertion, heaven knows, but that laugh chilled me to the bone. The particular horror of it was something I could not describe, a something I would wish only my most hateful enemy to experience.

So Valpy hunted me on through the network of the colliery, till a thing happened which brought me to bay whether I wished it or no. The ground rose beneath my feet, and for a while the roof rose too. Then the roof dropped again and the floor slanted up to meet it. There had been a fall of rock. The gallery was barred effectually. The madman was not a dozen yards from my heels.

I turned then like a cornered animal to fight desperately for life. At my feet were jagged masses of newly fallen shale. As if by instinct they found their way into my clutch and with them I opened a furious bombardment of defense.

The roof of the gallery was rotten and crumbling, and where my missiles, vaguely aimed in the darkness, crashed against it, great masses detached themselves and fell into the slime of the roadway. Why merciful Providence prevented me from building myself into a living grave there, I cannot think, but I had the chance in my mind with every splinter of rock that I hurled, and in my savage fury cared not, so that Valpy might be smothered by the avalanche which walled in myself. Far above all that infernal turmoil of crashing stone his pistol-shots rang out shrill and clear, till the thick air grew biting with powder-smoke, and once more the chambers of my weapon were empty. Then, with a final discharge of missiles to herald my coming, I charged furiously at him and he in turn fled away down the gallery.

No longer did I remember that once he had been my friend, that his mind was untinged, that his state demanded all forbearance. He was my mortal enemy, the object of my most blind and deadly hate; and had I laid hands upon him then I should have ripped the warm life from within him with willing fingers. Taking the revolver from my pocket, I slipped cartridges into the chambers as I ran. His last bullet had scored my side like the scar of a red-hot iron. With gnashing teeth I lusted to smash my fist into the centre of his face. Valpy might have been mad all along, but at that moment I was no less a maniac than he.

Then of a sudden the scene changed. The noise of pattering feet in front of me abruptly ceased. There was a heavy splash, a bubbling cry, and silence.

I halted and listened. No sound came to me through the black gloom save only for the muffled lapping of tiny waves.

Then the noise of a heavy surge echoed down the gallery, and with it came a strangled voice which cried, "Help! for God's sake, help, Calvert!" The voice was drowned in gurglings and splashes, and again an earth-silence snapped down, amid which I could hear my own breathing and those faint splappings of water.

A great revulsion of feeling spread over me like a cold douche. Valpy, mad or sane, was drowning in some dreadful unseen tank, which drained the water of the mine. He could not swim a stroke. If I did not rush then to save him, he would die horribly. My fierce enmity withered and vanished within me; I remembered only the friendship of twenty years.

I strode forward again, stepped over some invisible brink, and sank deeply into water so cold that I emerged from it breathless and gasping. At the same moment Valpy rose again to the surface, almost noiselessly, well-

nigh lifeless. My fingers slid out and twined themselves in his hair. Slipping beneath him, I swam for the pair of us, and in that awful darkness may have swum in anything but a straight line. I was tired, faint, bruised; and the deadly chill of the water was paralyzing. I must have gone light-headed then, for a horror seized me that I was on some vast under-lake with shores leagues apart.

I swam on for what seemed hours—months—years—consciousness dimming with every stroke; and when at length I did touch a shelving beach, the last glimmer of sentient life within me died away.

Half in, half out, of that foul tank's broth we lay together, the pair of us, for how many hours I cannot tell; and when the man on the pit-bank above, growing alarmed at our non-appearance, formed a rescue party, they found us still devoid of consciousness.

When we were brought to blessed daylight once more, bruised, bleeding, filthy beyond recognition, a doctor took us both in hand, and through his skill I was little worse for the adventure. But Valpy's case was different. He woke into a raging brain-fever, and the doctor said that the disease must have smoldered in his system for weeks to permit of its arriving at such a sudden and violent head.

Eventually my poor chum recovered, though only after a long and tedious convalescence; but he knew nothing of that awful duel he forced upon me in the black abysses of the Deeper Pit, and to this day I have never told him.

A SACRIFICE.

His little shop was only a few doors from my home, but on the narrow side street—our house was on the corner—and often when I took baby out for an airing myself, I stopped to talk to him as he sat bending over his work. Mother nature had given him an intelligent rather handsome face, in compensation for the cruel hump which she had placed between his shoulders, and as he told me stories of his loved Fatherland in his quaint Swede accent, I remembered the lady who was so impressed by the eloquence of the French President, M. Thiers, that she described him as being very tall and handsome. But Andrew Oleson was only the hunchback shoemaker, and his little shop was located in a big, shabby terrace, which seemed always to be so full of occupants that they overflowed into the street, for a gesticulating, chattering crowd was always lounging around the doors. His trade was fairly lucrative; those North country people like to deal with one of their own race, so he mended and often made, shoes for all the Swedes, Germans and Icelanders in the West end.

Though always busy, he was yet always ready to tell the most wonderful fairy stories to the children, and every one of them—foreign and Canadian—loved Andrew Oleson.

I had known him two years when one day he told me of a contemplated change.

"I have saved some money, Meesis," he said, with a sparkle in his blue eyes and his pale face flushed. "At last I have got enough. I hate this place," with a wave of his hand, which took in the close, sultry workshop, and the stuffy little living room back of it, and for a background the dirty yard where the numerous olive branches of the families in the terrace alternately played amiably together, or fell into dispute and pelted each other with mud and decaying cabbage leaves.

"This is not like what I left—the dear old home—but the rent was low so I staid. But now, I can soon leave it. There is a little cottage down this street one long way, so pretty, with three rooms and a garden, where the vegetables may grow, so like the old home, and I buy it Meesis. I have waited some long while to get the money, but now soon I pay them two hundred dollars. Then I pay them some each month and soon all is paid and it is mine."

There was such pride and happiness shining in his face that I felt deeply interested in the proposed investment.

"I am very glad," I said cordially, "it will be so much better for you than these small rooms, and the garden will be a great pleasure to you."

His delight at the anticipated change was almost pathetic.

"Don't speak of it," he said at last, "as the deal is not completed yet and someone else may get it."

I could see how the possibility of this catastrophe troubled him, and I devoutly hoped that the cottage would not tempt any other aspiring householder.

Some time before this I had learned another secret of Andrew's, though he had not told it to me. He loved Inga Johansson, my fair haired Swede servant girl.

Well, he was deformed but what of that? Had he not the kindest heart I did not all the children love him? did any one ever hear him utter a rough or unkind word? Surely he would make pretty Inga a good husband. But fate and August Pjetursson, had decreed otherwise. Inga, with that feminine instinct which never errs in such matters, was perfectly well aware of Andrew's devotion, but she only tossed her head, was not August Pjetursson the best looking Swede in the west end, and did not all the girls envy her?

There came a day when Andrew spoke; played his last card—and lost. Inga told me the next morning, "The idea of marrying him!"

"You might do much worse," I said,

"Andrew would make you a good husband."

"But he is such an ugly looking fellow," she pouted.

"Oh, Inga! His back is deformed it true, but he has a very pleasant face, and you know how good natured he is. Then, he has saved money and would have a comfortable home for you."

But visions of August's stalwart form obscured all of poor Andrew's perfections.

All this had happened during the winter, and now for some time, Inga had gone about her work with a pre-occupied air and a downcast face.

"What is the matter with Inga, ma'am?" asked Andrew one evening when I had employed him to make up some flower beds, "has she quarreled with August?"

"No, I think not," I answered, absently, intent on my task of arranging the geraniums which Andrew was setting out, "that is,—yes I do know what is the matter, and I suppose it would not be a breach of trust to tell you as she would not likely object to your knowing. August has had letters from his father, the eldest brother is dead and the old people are left alone. They urge him to come home to live with them, and assure him that he will be able to secure a situation, as workmen are not so numerous there now since so many have emigrated. He is anxious to go, but he has never been able to save any money. I think he sent money to his father occasionally; anyway, he has very little now. He might work his way home but he cannot take Inga."

"And she would go?"

"Yes, you see her mother is there. She had thought that in time she might save money enough to pay her mother's passage out, but of course she would like to go with August."

Andrew leaned thoughtfully on his spade. "I don't think August Pjetursson is much of a worker; it would take him a long time to save enough to take Inga home."

"Yes, I am afraid so. Of course August should go at once; his parents need him, and as he will have to support them there will likely be years of waiting before Inga can go to him."

"Do you really, think she cares so much for him, ma'am?"

"I am afraid so, Andrew," I said reluctantly, for I thought it kinder not to deceive him; "you know how I wish she would care for someone else."

His face flushed and the hand that held the spade trembled. "She has a right to make her choice; I hope she will always be happy."

Matters had reached a crisis and Inga was in despair. August had had another letter from home; he must come at once or he would lose a good situation.

Inga's blue eyes were often dim with tears. It is so hard for the young to wait for their happiness.

But one morning she came to me in great excitement.

"Oh ma'am, what do you think has happened? Some good friend has given August the money to take us home. He don't know who it was but the money was left with our minister, and the letter said it was for to buy two tickets to Sweden and we go now, right away."

Before Inga had finished I was sure of one thing, and I wished that I was sure of another—that August Pjetursson was worthy of the sacrifice that had been made for him.

Well, they were married and went and Andrew wished Inga happiness and bade her good bye in a steady voice.

"When are you going to move, Andrew?" I asked one day as he passed down the side street, near where I sat on the lawn. He looked away before he answered.

"I have changed my mind. I am going to stay here."

"Mr. Oleson," I said leaning forward to pick a pansy from the flower bed, "it would cost just about two hundred dollars to buy two tickets for Sweden, would it not?"

"I think so, yes," he was looking at something down the street.

"Greater love hath no man than this," I said softly.

A. L. D. G.

SUBMARINE BOATS.

They Are Easily Detected By Balloon Soaring Directly Above Them.

Should the submarine boat take the place in naval warfare that some nations expect, one of the chief precautions taken by the world's navies will be an immense increase in the number of balloons, with duly trained staffs to work them, carried by war vessels.

The balloons carried by these battleships are of exactly the same material and pattern as those in use in the army, only smaller. They have a use far in advance of any mere long-distance, observational purpose, for, though the wake of a submarine boat sunk deeply in the water can only be traced with difficulty from such an elevation as that afforded by a ship, both such wake and the boat itself can be seen with absolute and undeviating clearness from a captive balloon. This is the result of a scientific and optical law, and when ship balloons were first put to the practical test in regard to this matter, the results attained were of the most surprising kind.

Even where the water is distinctly cloudy, objects of a much smaller kind than a submarine boat, and painted of natural color, could be seen from a balloon with the utmost clearness at a depth of five fathoms, or 30 feet, though the surface was rough. No submarine boat could in the daytime get within striking distance of a threatened ship that had a balloon without being observed.

THOSE LOVING GIRLS.

Clara, dressed for the ball. How do I look in this dress, Maude?

Maude. Positively handsome. Why, I hardly recognized you.