

THE CABLEMAN

AN EXCITING PRESENT-DAY ROMANCE

BY WEATHERBY CHESNEY

CHAPTER I

Horace Scarborough was sitting in front of the siphon-recorder in the Instrument Room of the cable station at Ribereira Grande. The faint whisper of electrical apparatus was round him, and the afternoon mist of the Azores had crept into the room and chilled the air. He had been on duty for nearly eight hours, but though he was tired, he was barely conscious of the fact; for the strain of watching for a message, expected but long delayed, had brought his nerves and driven away all trace of fatigue.

The message for which Scarborough was watching meant peace or war amongst the nations of the world.

For international politics had reached a crisis. A certain diplomatic "note" had been presented, and the answer was expected hourly. If the issue was peace, the public would probably never know that there had been a crisis at all. But the servants of the great cable companies necessarily have greater and earlier knowledge than the rest of mankind; and it is by no means the fact, as many suppose, that the most important news always passes through their hands in unintelligible cipher. Diplomacy is a shy monster, hunting by tortuous paths, and loves to shroud its tracks in obscurity; but sometimes even diplomats speak out, and when they do, their words are apt to be momentous.

In every Chancery of the world anxious men were waiting for the answer, which an Imperial courier was bearing post haste to the court of St. James's.

Scarborough glanced for the fiftieth time at the ribbon of paper which came from the siphon-recorder, and saw that it registered a plain straight line. Nothing was passing over the cable just now.

He dropped his chin on his hand, and stared at the instrument as though by staring he could force the news from it. There was no hint of impatience in the attitude or movement, rather of a strong patience that would be likely to win its way in life by meeting adversity with a square front, and then calmly wearing it down. He was about twenty-five. The lines on his face were deep for a man of his years; but they were lines given by character, not by experience—by a grave habit of thought, rather than by any knowledge of suffering in the past. He looked like a man who might take life hardly, because he would shrink none of its responsibilities; who would fight, if he had to fight, bravely and victoriously; but who, as yet had not been called upon to show the grit that was in him. When he smiled which was often—the lines vanished, and showed the face of a strong, good-humored boy.

But though his nerves were tense with excitement now, he had not been able to infect with his own eagerness the man who was on duty with him. A luxuriously elaborate yawning from a wicker chair behind him, echoed round the walls of the Instrument Room, and caused the quick smile to show itself on Scarborough's face. Scott, the man in the chair, was supposed to be sharing his watch; but he was one of those who take life easily, and his method was to read a French novel in a big chair until Scarborough should give him the word that the instruments were talking. Then he would rise slowly, stretch himself, and take his share of the work.

"What a phlegmatic beggar you are,"

said Scarborough. "Enormous issues are being decided, and the news may come at any minute, and I don't believe you're even interested!"

"Right, I'm not," Scott answered cheerfully. "Don't care for politics. Don't understand 'em, you see. Don't fathom what there is to worry about."

"A European war is generally courted a pretty important thing," said Scarborough dryly.

"Oh, yes, if it comes off! But it won't. Let's talk of something interesting. Going to the circus?"

"What circus?" he asked.

"There you are!" said Scott triumphantly. "You're just as ignorant as I am, in your own way. My ignorance embraces European politics—an admittedly unsavory mud; yours concerns the things that are taking place under your nose. What circus? Val B. Montague's American Circus Combination, of course. The whole island of San Miguel is placarded with it—pictures of beautiful ladies on barebacked steeds, balancing at extraordinary angles. It's the most exciting thing that has been in the Azores for a year. I went across to Ponta Delgada to see it yesterday."

"Oh? God show?" asked Scarborough carelessly, keeping his gaze fixed on the ribbon of paper which came from the siphon-recorder.

"Pretty fair," said Scott whose novel had bored him, and made him want to talk, even though he failed to interest. "There's a nice little girl who calls herself Mademoiselle Monda de la Mar, and does the bareback business—not like the pictures, but decently enough; and there's a very English-looking cowboy who shoots glass balls and things with very moderate success. Isn't a bad show though, on the whole, and Val B. Montague is beautiful."

"What does he do?" Scarborough asked next.

"Nothing in the ring. But he runs the whole show none-the-less and, prevents breaches of the peace amongst his troupe. No easy job that, I gathered. They've been touring the Atlantic Islands and the West Coast of Africa for a year and a half in a two-hundred-ton schooner, and the clown hasn't murdered the ring-master yet though Val B. seems to be very much inclined to offer odds that he will very soon. Fine fellow, Val B! Took my whisky and soda with the air of conferring a favor on me, and was graciously pleased to say that he would come over here on Tuesday to have dinner with me, if his children—that's what he calls the troupe—did not need him. I fancy he's nervous about the clown and the ring-master."

"What's the trouble between them?" asked Scarborough, more for the sake of continuing the conversation than because he cared. "Is it Mademoiselle Monda?"

"No," said Scott. "I understood that it was merely a case of professional jealousy. They've been boxed up together on that schooner for eighteen months, you see, with nothing to do at sea except quarrel, and nothing to interest them in the show they give when they're ashore. Come over with me to-night, and make Val B. Montague's acquaintance."

Scarborough did not answer. A message was coming through at last. The ribbon of paper from the siphon-recorder showed an irregular, wavy line now, and he read off the message in the hills and valleys of the Morse code as the instrument passed it through.

"Page, Chinelas, Ribeira Grande. Danger—circus."

That was all. It was obviously not the message for which he was waiting nor was it, at first sight either interesting or intelligible, unless one happened to know the code by which those two words "danger—circus" were to be interpreted. Scarborough did not know the code; and yet, because of the person to whom it was addressed, the cablegram interested him profoundly. Had he been able to foresee the difference which its arrival would presently make to him, his interest would perhaps have been even greater.

"Anything?" asked Scott listlessly. "Private message, in code," said Scarborough, and Scott returned to his novel with a grunt.

Scarborough sent the message through to the Post Office for delivery and then rose and went to the window. Through a break in the mist he could see about a mile away a white-washed house, built in the shelter of two great masses of grey volcanic stone that projected curiously from the side of a green hill. The two rocks were called in Portuguese, As Chinelas,—the slippers,—from a resemblance, not however very striking, which they were supposed to bear to a pair of rather down-at-the-heel slippers. The white-washed house took its name from them.

It had been in the possession, for the last two years of an Englishman, who, having come to the Azores as an invalid seeking for health, had not found that for which he sought, but had stayed, because the place had suited him. His daughter kept house for him at the Chinelas; and in this fact was the explanation of Scarborough's interest in the message which had just passed through his hands.

Scott broke suddenly into his meditations.

"You haven't said whether you'll go with me to the circus to-night," he remarked. He did not believe in leaving matters of real importance unsettled.

Scarborough started. The cablegram had coupled the word circus and danger. A coincidence of course. It was surely impossible that it should be anything else, and yet Scarborough felt a sudden misgiving. Was danger coming to Elsa Page? Oh, nonsense! code messages often combine words curiously. It was nothing but a rather queer coincidence.

"Can't," he said. "I've promised to play chess with Mr. Page to-night."

Scott pursed up his lips, and looked at his friend doubtfully.

"Oh, ah! um! At the Chinelas!" he remarked slowly. "Do you care much for chess?"

"Loathe it!" admitted Scarborough, with a laugh.

"So I thought. And yet you play at the Chinelas every second night or so, but risky, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. You know your own business best, of course. Miss Page is a nice girl; pretty too, but—" he broke off.

"But what?" demanded Scarborough, with a quick flash of anger. "Do you criticize her?"

"No," said Scott. "I believe she's as nice a girl as you think she is. And that's giving her high praise, you know."

Scarborough waited a moment, and then said:

"Well? Go on."

"I don't like her father," said Scott, with decision.

"Confound you, did she ever ask you to?"

"She will ask you to, if he becomes your father-in-law," was the retort. "And you won't be able to do it gracefully. The man's a wrong-un, and you know it as well as I do."

"I know nothing against him," said Scarborough hotly "nor do you."

Scott nodded calmly. "That's true" he admitted "nothing definite that is. But like you I've spent odd half hours in his company; not as many as you have but enough to make me back my opinion with perfect confidence. A man who shakes hands in the way he does for one thing can't possibly be straight. But don't lose your temper, old man. The daughter isn't the father, and I'll admit that it's none of my business in any case. To change the subject—look at the recorder. There's something coming over, isn't there?"

Scarborough went to the instrument and read the message aloud:

"Courier arrived in London this morning with important despatches from Berlin. It is officially announced that His Imperial Majesty will be present in the Hohenzollern during Cowes week and that the Meteor will be entered for the principal race."

"Rather cryptic!" said Scott. "What does it mean in plain English?"

"It means," said Scarborough. "that his Imperial Majesty has thought it prudent to climb down, and that there is not going to be a European war after all."

He sat down at the table and set on to its destination this message which seemed to speak only of sport, but which would cause many an ex-

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ious diplomat to sleep more easily that night than he had slept for a week. Then he turned to Scott.

"Our watch is over," he said. "I can hear Mason and Davitt coming to relieve us. You are going to the circus?"

"Yes. Let me book a seat for you?"

"Yes, please; afternoon performance to-morrow, two seats."

"Two seats!" echoed Scott. "For yourself and —"

"Miss Page," said Scarborough, and Scott laughed shortly.

(To be continued.)

A BURNING GHAT IN SUSSEX

Weird Scenes at a Hindu Burial in England.

So many incredible things are happening in this extraordinary time, says the London Times, that we become accustomed to take the incredible for granted. But the spectacle of Hindu burial rites performed on the Sussex Downs is one that must stir the most jaded sense of wonder.

There has been a death in the Kitchener Military Hospital at Brighton. The dead man was not a combatant, but one of the personnel; he was a Brahman, and of the Arya Samaj.

Before the body was put into the big, black motor hearse a photographer was allowed to come and take a picture of the dead man's features, to be sent to his relatives in far India. Over the body was stretched a pall of printed cretonne, bright flowers on a dark ground; and white chrysanthemums were strewn lavishly upon it.

Through the pretty village of Patcham this strange funeral procession went, until the road changed to a steep track; and before long the motors left the track and took their heavy way over the soft turf in a fold of the downs. Soon there came into sight a very ugly little screen and shelter of corrugated iron. To find its parallel you would have to journey thousands of miles. For that was the burning ghat of our Hindu troops.

The vehicle stopped; the mourners clambered out of the ambulances, and with much clattering and gesticulating took the body from the hearse. In time (for all the ceremony was conducted with an odd mixture of cheerful disorder, strict ritual and absorbed devotion) the procession began to climb the hill, the mourners chanting as they went: "Ram Ram satya hai: Om ka nam satya hai"—Vedic verses that tell of the eternal and single truth of the name.

The gates of the ghat were unlocked, and we passed inside a little inclosure, where stood three platforms of cement. One of those was carefully swept and sprinkled with water; and thus purified, it was heaped with blocks of wood for the burning. The body, under its bright pall, lay outside on the grassy slope; when the preparations had been made the mourners gathered round it. They sprinkled it with cleansing water; the face was exposed again, and honey and ghee, and minute portions of the eight metals, and other ritual things were passed between the pale lips. Then the mourners gathered round in a semicircle; and, squatting on their haunches, with their hands folded and their eyes downcast, they chanted their singsong chants, now shrill, now soft, now a murmur, and then a shout.

At last the time for the burning and the ceremony of havan that accompanies it. The ritual demands the right use of four kinds of things; odoriferous things, nutritive things, Some had been melting ghee, some preparing the raisins, the almonds and other food. When all was ready the body was laid on the pyre and over it and around it were heaped more blocks of wood and a great deal of straw. Then the attendants lighted crystals of camphor in a spoon on the end of a long pole, and when they were flaming well poured them on the centre of the pyre. A flame leaped up. Some one lighted a torch made of straw and camphor at the flame and applied it to the four corners; melted ghee was poured here and there; and soon the whole pyre was ablaze. And while it burned, the mourners kept tossing upon it little pinches of ghee mixed with grains and fruits, scent, saffron and spices.

When the friends of the dead man go back, they will find nothing but a few fragments of bones and heap of ashes. And some of those ashes they will take back to the hospital, where they will put them into a little wooden coffer that bears the dead man's name. In time, the coffer will be sent to his family in India, and from the Sussex Downs his ashes will return home, to be sprinkled on the breast of some Indian stream.

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