

The Storyteller.

HER GUARDIAN ANGEL.

It is very pleasant to see England again after ten years' residence in the East; but I know pleasanter places in England than London on a sultry day in July," soliloquized Dr. Neilson, a bronzed, middle-aged man, with remarkably keen grey eyes, and a certain expression of alert vitality that drew attention to him even in a crowd. He had landed in England some three days previous to the morning our story opens; and, having no family or near relatives alive, he felt rather solitary in the great city, and was now standing at the window of a West End hotel, gazing ruefully on the passing throng.

Suddenly a tap at the door and the announcement, "A gentleman wishes to see you, sir," disturbed his musings. He took the card off the salver which the waiter presented.

"Colonel Mathom! Show him in at once," he exclaimed.

A minute later he was shaking hands with a bluff, soldierly man, some 20 years his senior, but wiry and active.

"You were never more welcome, Mathom. I had not a soul to speak to. How did you find me out?"

Happened to see your arrival in the paper and hurried up to town to secure you. Now, have you any business to keep you here?"

"No, I have not even unpacked my trunks."

"So much the better. I ordered dinner in half an hour. Meantime go and put up your things and we'll catch the nine o'clock express."

Dr. Neilson laughed.

"You are not a bit changed, Mathom. Just the same old "hurry up," as the Eighth nicknamed you. Where are we going by the express?"

"Where!" To my place, of course—the "Moat." My widowed sister, Mrs. Sinnell, lives with me. But she is now on a visit to her daughter in Wales; so we shall be alone, fortunately; for I want your help."

And the Colonel's face looked anxious as his friend glanced at him in surprise.

"All right, Colonel! I am at your service. Take a cigar while I tell my man to pack up a few necessities. By the way, shall I bring him? He is an Afghan, but a splendid fellow. Saved my life twice."

"Yee, bring a dozen if you like. My big barracks of a house would hold a regiment; and, by the irony of fate, it has fallen to an old bachelor and a practically childless widow; for my nephews and nieces are in homes of their own. We'll have it livelier by the 12th. There's good shooting."

"Then Hamet will be useful—he is a first-rate shot," said the Doctor. "I'll be back in 10 minutes."

Not until they were seated in a reserved first-class carriage and had left London some miles behind did the Colonel explain his trouble to his old friend Neilson. The latter, accustomed to his ways, asked no questions and awaited his pleasure.

"Neilson," began Mathom, as they whirled through the summer night, "do you remember Lloyd Featherstone?"

"Of the 3rd Buffs?"

The other nodded.

"I remember him well. He was a gallant fellow and a brave officer."

"Poor fellow! he and his young wife were carried off by cholera in Ceylon about 20 years ago, leaving an infant daughter two months old. I was with him. He had barely time to tell me that he had made a will when the epidemic broke out, and, in case of his death, had appointed me joint guardian, with his wife, to his infant child. The wife, poor thing, died a few hours after her husband, so that the little Alys lost both parents at once. I took her and confided her to the care of a kind, motherly woman, wife of Sergeant-Major Douglas, who kept her until she was six years old. I then brought her to England and placed her at school in the Benedictine Convent of Princethorpe, where she was educated with my nieces, Maud and Lillian Sinnell, who were her seniors by two or three years. When Lillian married two years ago I brought Alys, then a blooming girl of 18, to the Moat, intending to keep her with me until she came of age. She inherited Featherstone Hall and £40,000 a year from her father; and this, owing to the accumulations of the long minority, makes her one of the richest heiresses in England."

"No light charge, Colonel," ejaculated his bearer. "The Featherstones were a handsome race; so I suppose your heiress to have many charms besides her golden ones."

Mathom nodded emphatically.

"She is, or rather was, a lovely girl; for of late ill-health has dimmed the radiance of her beauty. But of that later on. Let me not digress. The only relatives Alys possesses are her uncle's widow, Lady Zara Featherstone, and her son Harold. Lloyd Featherstone's younger brother, Harold, entered the diplomatic service, and received knighthood for some cause or other while British Consul abroad. He married a Greek lady, and left her a widow with one son when the latter was 20. He is 26 now, and has already squandered the moderate fortune Sir Harold left him. He and his mother live on her jointure of a thousand a year at Featherstone Manor, which she rents from Alys. It is the dower house of the Featherstones; and, acting as Alys' guardian, I let it to her for a nominal rent when she returned from a long residence abroad just as her niece's school days ended. When she asked Alys on a visit to the Manor, and then proposed to present her at the next *levée* at St. James' and bring her into society, I could not refuse; although I have no love for Lady Zara."

"Is she a pure Greek?"

"I don't know. She is a handsome woman, about 45—or perhaps more; well preserved and accomplished. She speaks several languages fluently—English remarkably so; and, on the whole, adapts herself wonderfully to our ways. Her home in London was one of the most fashionable, and she is liked in society."

"And her son?"

"He is like her. However, he has the Featherstones' tall stature and blue eyes. Honestly, I must acknowledge that he is an exceedingly good-looking young reprobate."

"Educated abroad, eh?"

"No. Sir Harold took care of that. He was educated at Oscott, and, it was whispered, narrowly escaped expulsion. When his father died he was called off to Trieste, where they lived; he then went on a tour to the East, and had not returned when Alys went with his mother to London for the season."

"Does the young girl like her aunt?"

"They agree pretty well, but there is no affection between them. When young Harold returned to England he at once placed himself at her feet as an ardent suitor. Alys laughed at him at first; but, finding he was troublesome, she threatened to leave her aunt's house if he continued his importunities. That settled the matter. Lady Featherstone, though greatly disappointed, refrained from all interference and sent her son on a trip to Greece. He reappeared at the manor three months ago, and has carefully refrained from all lover-like advances. But since his reappearance on the scene Alys' health, which had always been excellent, has suddenly and unaccountably failed."

The Colonel ceased speaking, and the Doctor stared at him in some perplexity. Was this half-Greek youth about to develop into a mediæval poisoner or a melodramatic sorcerer, whose unholy spells were sucking away the life-blood from his cruel enchantress?

"Well, Colonel, what is he doing to her?" he half-laughingly asked.

"I wish I knew," was the unexpected rejoinder. "Some foul play is going on, Harry; and I want you to find out what it is. Don't look at me like that, boy!" continued the veteran, testily. "I'm not a lunatic and I know what I'm saying. Harold Featherstone is his cousin's heir if she dies intestate. And before her twenty-first birthday she can make no will; so that her death before the 8th of next December means for her scampish cousin the inheritance of Featherstone Hall, £40,000 a year, and accumulations amounting to over £300,000."

"But, Colonel, why don't you bring Miss Featherstone to the Moat?"

"Because my sister has recently been very ill; and, with one invalid already in the house, I could not force Alys to leave her aunt. The latter, with her usual suavity, begged of me to let her dear niece remain with her until after a *bal costume* which is to take place at Hasley Towers on the 10th of September, to celebrate the coming of age of the young Viscount Netterville; and then she will, if I like, yield me her darling, from whom she is so loath to separate. My sister is better, and has gone to Wales till the end of this week."

"Of what does Miss Featherstone complain?" asked the Doctor, gravely.

"Of nothing. She looks wretchedly pale, has black circles under her eyes, no appetite and no energy. Now, four months ago Alys was a thoroughly happy, healthy, lively girl; the first in every amusement and always as busy as a bee."

"Have you consulted a physician?"

"Not one alone but several eminent in the profession. All agree there is no disease, only a want of vitality for which they can find no cause. Her parents were perfectly healthy young people when carried off by cholera, and there is no taint of hereditary disease."

"Beyond the mere fact of being his cousin's heir, have you any reason for suspecting young Featherstone?"

"No tangible reason, I must admit. However, one little incident aroused my suspicions, and they have never slept since. Wilcox, my own man, came to me one morning early and told me that, having gone over to the manor on a message the day before, the groom had asked him to look at a young horse Harold was getting trained for Miss Featherstone to ride. Wilcox, an old cavalryman, who is a crack rider and a first-rate judge of horses, told the man it was a showy but vicious brute and utterly unfit for a lady's use. The groom agreed, but said that Mr. Featherstone got into a fury when he told him so, and insisted it was to be tried by Miss Featherstone next day. "Then saddle my horse at once, and follow me with the mare for Miss Featherstone," was my reply."

"We arrived in the nick of time. Alys stood waiting on the steps while the groom and Harold forced a prancing black horse to approach her. Having finally succeeded, Harold was so busy persuading her there was no danger, and that the Khan's pranks proceeded from mere frolicsomeness, that he did not perceive my approach. Alys did, and, looking greatly relieved, came to meet me. I had never forgot the furious look of baffled malice that Harold bestowed on her. Quickly resuming his mask, he said coolly:

"Good morning, Colonel. I am persuading Alys to take a morning ride, but she is becoming quite nervous of late."

"Without noting him, I turned to the head groom and said sternly: "What is the meaning of this, Simson? How can you think of mounting Miss Featherstone on that vicious brute?" The Khan was just then making frantic efforts to stand upright, which it took all the man's strength to prevent. "I told Mr. Featherstone, sir, the horse was unfit for anyone to ride; but he cursed me for an officious coward, and saddled him with the young mistress's saddle himself," said the man, sullenly. "Very good. Know for the future, Simson, that you take no orders, except from your young mistress and from me. You are engaged for her service alone, and she is neither to ride nor drive any horses except those I choose."