

THE PHANTOM RICKSHAW.

And for visible answer to my last question I saw the infernal thing blocking my path in the twilight. The dead travel fast and by short cuts unknown to ordinary cooks. I laughed aloud a second time and checked my laughter suddenly, for I was afraid I was going mad. Mad to a certain extent I must have been, for I recollect that I reined in my horse at the head of the rickshaw and politely wished Mrs. Wessington "Good evening." Her answer was one I knew only too well. I listened to the end and replied that I had heard it all before, but should be delighted if she had anything further to say. Some malignant devil stronger than I must have entered into me that evening, for I have a dim recollection of talking the commonplaces of the day for five minutes to the thing in front of me.

"Mad as a hatter, poor devil, or drunk! Max, try and get him to come home." Surely that was not Mrs. Wessington's voice! The two men had overheard me speaking to the empty air and had returned to look after me. They were very kind and considerate, and from their words evidently gathered that I was extremely drunk. I thanked them confusedly and cantered away to my hotel, there changed and arrived at the Mannerings' ten minutes late. I pleaded the darkness of the night as an excuse, was rebuked by Kitty for my unloverlike tardiness and sat down.

The conversation had already become general, and under cover of it I was addressing some tender small talk to my sweetheart when I was aware that at the farther end of the table a short, red whiskered man was describing, with much broiery, his encounter with a mad unknown that evening.

A few sentences convinced me that he was repeating the incident of half an hour ago. In the middle of the story he looked round for applause, as professional story tellers do, caught my eye and straightway collapsed. There was a moment's awkward silence, and the red whiskered man muttered something to the effect that he had "forgotten the rest," thereby sacrificing a reputation as a good story teller which he had built up for six seasons past. I blessed him from the bottom of my heart and went on with my fish.

In the fullness of time that dinner came to an end, and with genuine regret I tore myself away from Kitty, as certain as I was of my own existence that it would be awaiting for me outside the door. The red whiskered man, who had been introduced to me as Dr. Heatherlegh of Simla, volunteered to bear me company as far as our roads lay together. I accepted his offer with gratitude.

My instinct had not deceived me. It lay in readiness in the mall and in what seemed devilish mockery of our ways, with a lighted head lamp. The red whiskered man went to the point at once in a manner that showed he had been thinking over it all dinner time.

"I say, Pansy, what the deuce was the matter with you this evening on the Elysium road?" The suddenness of the question wrenched an answer from me that I was aware.

"That," said I, pointing to it. "It may be either D. T. or eyes for aught I know. Now you don't liquor I saw as much at dinner. So it can't be D. T. There's nothing whatever where you're pointing, though you're sweating and trembling with fright like a scared pony. Therefore I conclude that it's eyes. And I ought to understand all about them. Come along home with me. I'm on the Blessington lower road."

To my intense delight the rickshaw instead of waiting for us, kept about 30 yards ahead—and this, too, whether we walked, trotted or cantered. In the course of that long night ride I had told my companion almost as much as I have told you here.

"Well, you've spoiled one of the best tales I've ever laid tongue to," said he, "but I'll forgive you for the sake of what you've gone through. Now, come home and do what I tell you, and when I've cured you, young man, let this be a lesson to you to steer clear of women and indigestible food till the day of your death."

The rickshaw kept steady in front, and my red whiskered friend seemed to derive great pleasure from my account of its exact whereabouts.

"Eyes, Pansy—all eyes, brain and stomach. And the greatest of these three is stomach. You've too much concocted brain, too little stomach and thoroughly unhealthy eyes. Get your stomach straight and the rest follows. And all that's French for a liver pill. I'll take sole medical charge of you from this hour, for you're too interesting a phenomenon to be passed over."

By this time we were deep in the shadow of the Blessington lower road, and the rickshaw came to a dead stop under a pine clad, overhanging shale cliff. Instinctively I halted, too, giving my reason. Heatherlegh rapped out an oath.

"Now, if you think I'm going to spend a cold night on the hillside for the sake of a stomach-cum-brain-cum-eye-illusion—Lord, ha' mercy! What's that?"

There was a muffled report, a blinding smother of dust just in front of us, a crack, the noise of rent boughs, and about ten yards of the cliffside—pines, undergrowth and all—slid down into the road below, completely blocking it up. The uprooted trees swayed and tottered for a moment like drunken giants in the gloom and then fell prone among their fellows with a thunderous crash. Our two horses stood motionless and sweating with fear. As soon as the rattle of falling earth and stone had subsided my companion muttered: "Man,

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if we'd gone forward we should have been ten feet deep in our graves by now. There are more things in heaven and earth. . . . Come home, Pansy, and thank God I want a peg badly."

We retraced our way over the church ridge, and I arrived at Dr. Heatherlegh's house shortly after midnight. His attempts toward my cure commenced almost immediately, and for a week I never left his sight. Many a time in the course of that week did I bless the good fortune which had thrown me in contact with Simla's best and kindest doctor. Day by day my spirits grew lighter and more equable. Day by day, too, I became more and more inclined to fall in with Heatherlegh's "spectral illusion" theory, implicating eyes, brain and stomach. I wrote to Kitty, telling her that a slight sprain caused by a fall from my horse kept me indoors for a few days, and that I should be recovered before she had time to regret my absence.

Heatherlegh's treatment was simple to a degree. It consisted of liver pills, cold water baths and strong exercise, taken in the dusk or at early dawn, for, as he sagely observed, "A man with a sprained ankle doesn't walk a dozen miles a day, and your young woman might be wondering if she saw you."

At the end of the week, after much examination of pupil and pulse and strict injunctions as to diet and pedestrianism, Heatherlegh dismissed me as brusquely as he had taken charge of me. Here is his parting benediction: "Man, I certify to your mental cure, and that's as much as to say I've cured most of your bodily ailments. Now, get your traps out of this as soon as you can and be off to make love to Miss Kitty."

I was endeavoring to express my thanks for his kindness. He cut me short.

"Don't think I did this because I like you. I gather that you've behaved like a blackguard all through. But, all the same, you're a phenomenon and as queer a phenomenon as you are a blackguard. No," checking me a second time, "not a rupee, please. Go out and see if you can find the eyes, brain and stomach business again. I'll give you a lac for each time you see it."

Half an hour later I was in the Mannerings' drawing room with Kitty, drunk with the intoxication of present happiness and the foreknowledge that I should never more be troubled with its hideous presence. Strong in the sense of my new found security, I proposed a ride at once and by preference a canter round Jakko.

(Continued on page 8.)



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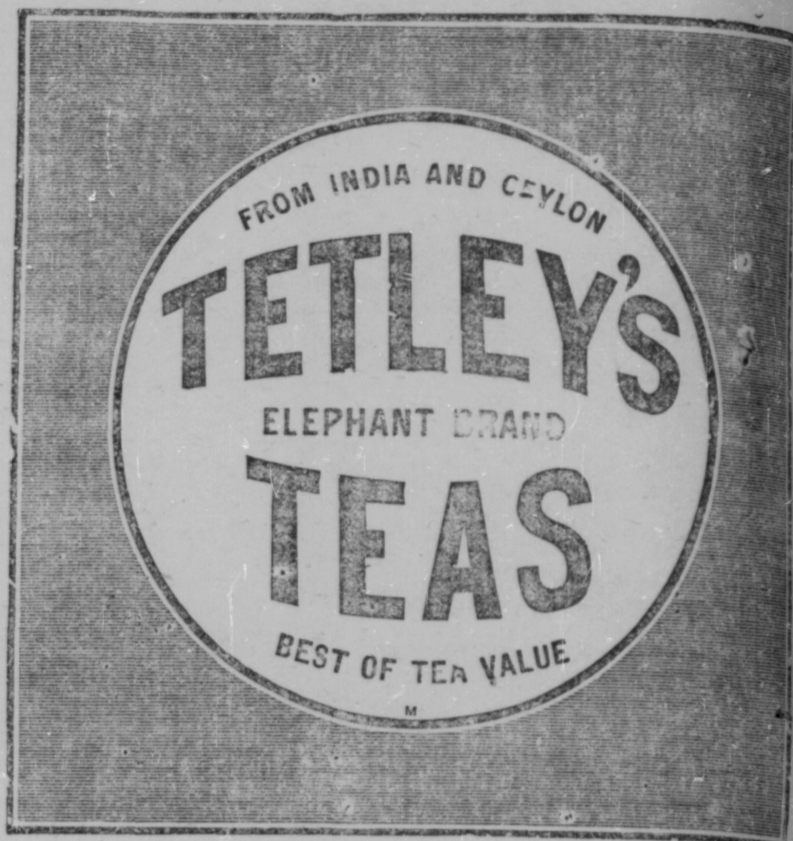


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