

Stories from the Diary of a Doctor.

SECOND SERIES. NO. IV.

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[These stories are written in collaboration with a medical man of large experience. Many are founded on fact, and all are within the region of practical medical science. Those stories which may convey an idea of the impossible are only a forecast of an early realization.]



HER friends always expected that Edith Keen would marry her old lover, Donal O'Brien. Their astonishment, therefore, was great when it was announced that she was engaged to a retired West Indian of the name of Talbot. Maximilian Talbot was over fifty years of age, and Edith was twenty. He had been born in the West Indies, but his father was an Englishman by birth. He had amassed a great fortune before he came to settle in England, and as he was a good-looking man, with an aristocratic, old-world sort of flavour about him, those who met him in society expected that he would make a good match. His choice, however, fell upon Edith, who was no one in particular, her father being a man who had come to grief through his speculations. Edith was poor, and went very little into society, but Talbot happened to meet her at a country house, and from the moment he saw her, it was all too evident that his mind was made up. He proposed and, to the astonishment of lookers on, was accepted. Worldly people said that Edith had done well for herself, but all the same, those who really knew her were amazed. Donal O'Brien had been her lover

for years—it was even hinted, although no one was quite certain of the fact, that there had been an engagement between them; of course, he was poor—too poor to think of matrimony, but Edith was the last girl in the world, so her friends said, who would be likely to sacrifice love to money.

That she did so, however, was an all too patent fact. She married Mr. Talbot on a certain morning towards the end of May. She made a very interesting and beautiful bride, and, notwithstanding the disparity in their years, her handsome bridegroom seemed quite worthy of her. I happened to be present in the church when the knot was tied, and I can truly say that I seldom saw a more lovely face than that of the sweet, slender, white-robed bride.

The couple went away amidst the usual scene of rejoicing, and, busy with my ever-increasing work, I soon forgot all the circumstances of the wedding.

Three months afterwards I was in my consulting-room looking over one of my case-books, when my servant flung open the door and admitted a visitor. I looked up, and was surprised to see Donal O'Brien enter. He was a bony, red-haired fellow, with a mixture of Scotch and Irish in his com-

position. He was very tall, broad-shouldered, and gaunt; his eyes had a red gleam in them; he had a broad, firm forehead; his lips were closely set, and his square chin, which was cleft in the middle, had the determination of a bulldog about it.

I bade him welcome, drew forward a chair, and asked what I could do for him.

He stared fixedly at me for a moment without making any reply. I noticed then that there was a dumb sort of misery in his eyes. I recalled the old story about his love affair with Edith Keen, and roused myself to take an interest in him.

"The fact is," he began, "I have come here to consult you."

"Pray tell me what your symptoms are," I answered.

O'Brien laughed harshly.

"Bless you, I'm all right," he said. "I'm not here as a patient. You have always taken an interest in Miss Keen, have you not?"

"I have known Mrs. Talbot since she was a child," I answered.

"Yes, yes," he replied, impatiently, "but I never think of her as the wife of another man if I can help it. You know she was engaged to me, do you not?"

"I did not know that there was an actual engagement," I replied.

"Well, there was: it lasted for some months. I don't blame her a bit. She asked my leave to break it off. She told me, poor girl, that she had by no means ceased to love me, but her father, who has been, as perhaps you know, more or less mixed up in some shady speculations, had got into trouble. Talbot found out that Keen was hard up and likely to be publicly disgraced. He played upon Edith's affections, and told her that he would set her father straight if she married him. On this fact being known, all her family brought great influence to bear upon the poor girl. Keen himself came to see me, and begged of me not to stand in her way. She joined her entreaties to her father's. I was mad to yield, for I saw all through that she was only sacrificing herself. She never really loved the fellow, but like many another girl, she did not realize what marriage with a man of Talbot's temperament would mean."

"You speak as if you knew something about Talbot," I said.

"So I do; I'm coming to that part immediately. I made a fatal mistake in releasing Edith. I love her still to distraction. Poor girl, she has put her father straight, and tied

herself for life to a cold-blooded, inhuman monster. So much for self-sacrifice."

O'Brien jumped up as he spoke, and began to pace the room. He was in a state of great excitement. He clenched his hands, and now and then violent words burst from his lips.

"Quiet yourself, and sit down," I said, after a pause. "You have doubtless come to tell me all this for some specific reason. You had better do so at once, for my time is valuable."

I pitied the poor fellow from my heart, but I knew that it was necessary to bring him up to the point in the most matter-of-fact way I could manage.

He looked at me fixedly—shook himself as if he were a great mastiff, and then sank into the nearest chair, bending slightly forward, and pressing his hands upon his large knees.

"God knows I've come for a specific reason," he said. "It is this: Edith came to see me a week ago."

"Have they returned from their honeymoon?" I interrupted.

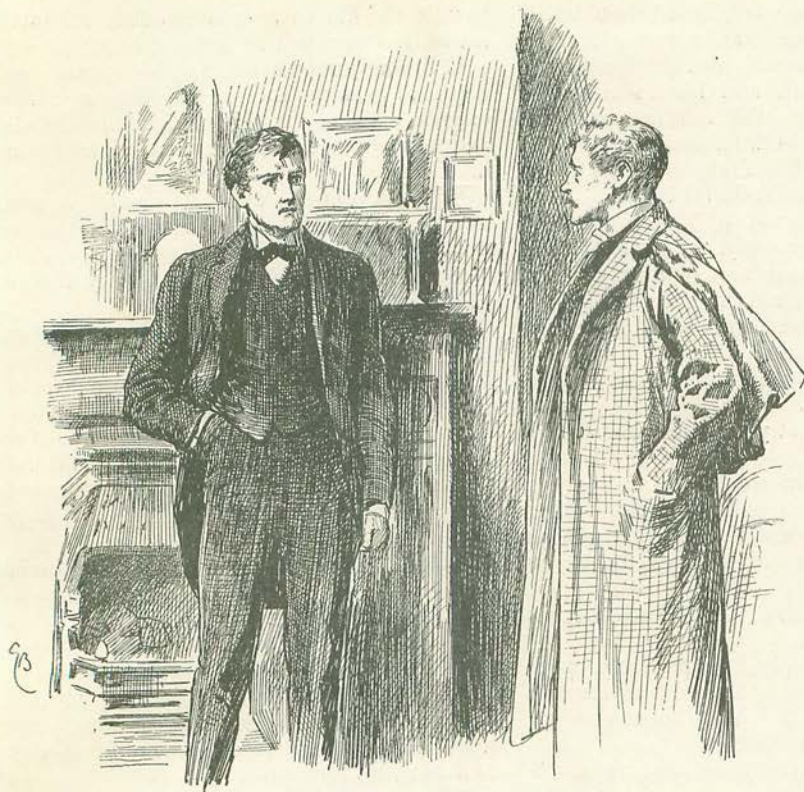
"Yes, they are staying in Surrey, near Dorking—Talbot has a bungalow there. She managed to elude his vigilance for a day, and came up to see me."

"That was the act of a mad woman, if you like," I said.

"I acknowledge that it was indiscreet; but, God help her! how could she think of proprieties in her terrible position? She wanted to ask me a question. She wanted me to do something for her. Can you guess what it was?"

"No, I'm sure I can't."

"Well, I'll tell you. You know my profession. I'm an experimental scientist. In especial I have devoted myself to zoology—and to that branch of the subject known as ophiology. I have made several valuable experiments with regard to the most interesting snake poisons under the guidance of the well-known Sir John Hart; our object is to discover antidotes for these terrible venoms. The most poisonous snakes of all are to be found in India, and amongst these the cobra undoubtedly takes the lead. My most exhaustive experiments, therefore, have been made in connection with cobra poisoning. I have been given special opportunities for studying the cobra and its mode of attack at Antwerp, and have discovered a method by which I can distil the poison, over the description of which I need not now waste your time. I should like, on a future occa-



"HE STARED FIXEDLY AT ME FOR A MOMENT."

sion, to talk over the antidotes which I consider most efficacious."

"Then you have really found out an antidote for cobra poisoning?" I asked, so much interested that I could not help interrupting the speaker.

"No; I wish I had. To a certain extent, antidotes have been discovered, but nothing up to the present has been proved to be of the slightest avail where *much* poison has been allowed to enter the system. Now, however, to return to Mrs. Talbot. I had just come back from Antwerp on the day she called, and had gone to report myself to Sir John Hart. On hearing that I was out, she asked my servant to admit her into my laboratory, and when I rushed in presently in a violent hurry, there she was standing by the window.

"She turned round when she heard my step, and came to meet me, with her face as white as death, and her hands tightly locked together. You know the peculiar fascination of her big, dark eyes. I never saw eyes with so much power of speech except in the case of a dog. They looked full at me as she came swiftly up to my side, but for a brief moment

neither she nor I uttered a single word.

"For God's sake, what have you come for, Edith?" I burst forth, at last. 'You know this is madness,' I continued, for I felt so wild at the sight of her, and at the thought of the barrier which now lay between us, that I could scarcely control myself. 'You must be mad to come here,' I said. 'I wonder you do it—and why don't you speak? Why are you dumb except with your eyes? What's up, Edith, what's up? For Heaven's sake, don't tell me that your marriage has

turned out a failure!'

"She raised her hand with a mute gesture for me to forbear.

"I have not come here to talk of my husband,' she said, in a broken, faltering voice. 'I have not come here in any sense to complain of my terrible position.'

"Your terrible position,' I interrupted. 'Then the whole thing has been a mistake. God knows, I ought never to have released you, Edith.'

"We must not talk of this,' she answered. 'I have come to see you to-day to ask your advice, and I can only do that if you will put sufficient control on yourself to listen to me quietly. My husband has a terrible dual nature. There are two distinct phases to his character. For days, perhaps a fortnight at a time, he is gentle, courteous, affectionate—a perfect gentleman in word and deed—but at any moment, without the slightest provocation, from no reason that anyone can account for, I see another completely different side to his character. When this phase overtakes him, he becomes not a man but a demon. He tortures me, he insults me; he is cruel, very cruel. At such

times, such misery is mine that I often fear I cannot retain my senses.'

"'Is the man insane?' I asked.

"'No,' she answered, 'there is not a trace of insanity about him; at least, if one understands the word in its ordinary sense. He is cool, calculating—he seldom rouses himself to be really excited. He seems to have the cunning and the cleverness of the Evil One. When he enters upon this strange mood, I can scarcely endure my life. There is no possibility of escaping from him. Oh, I can't talk further on the matter. I have come here, Donal, to ask you to help me. You know how fond you are of collecting snake poisons. You have even described to me the symptoms, and the certain effect of cobra venom. Donal, will you give me a bottle of this poison?'

"'In the name of Heaven, what for?' I asked.

"'Need you ask after what I have just told you? I want to have the poison by me, in order that I may take it if I find that there is no other door of escape from my terrible husband when he enters on his dark moods.'

"'Folly,' I answered. 'Sorrow has driven you mad.'

"'She broke down when I said this, Dr. Halifax, and burst into the most bitter, terrible weeping I have ever listened to. I stood and stared at her as speechless as if I were a dog instead of a man. I was enduring the worst torture which could possibly be laid upon me. I loved her to distraction, and yet I could do nothing for her—I dared not even attempt to comfort her. When she had got over her fit of crying, she began to appeal to me again.

"'Do grant my request, she said. 'I faithfully promise not to use the poison unless the most dire necessity arises; but to feel that I have it in my power to put an end to my misery will strengthen my nerves. For the sake of the old love we felt for one another, be generous enough to grant my request, Donal.'

"'No, no,' I replied. 'I must save you from yourself, at any cost.'

"'I had to say this many times. She went on her knees to me at last—still I refused her. When she found that all her entreaties were hopeless she ceased to argue, but sat perfectly motionless, staring out of the window. My servant came to tell me that I was wanted for a moment to speak to a messenger from Sir John Hart. I was absent about three minutes. When I came back, Edith rose and gave me her hand.

"'Good-bye,' she said.

"Her manner had completely altered. Her tears were all dried. Her beautiful eyes wore a veiled expression, and no longer gave me a glimpse of her tortured heart. I saw her to the door. It was a relief to see her calm, even though I knew how forced was her apparent serenity.

"Half an hour afterwards I went back to my laboratory. What was my horror to see that the small cabinet in which I kept my specimens of snake poison had the key in it. As a rule I keep it securely locked, but I remembered now, when too late, that I had, on my return from Antwerp, placed some new bottles of very valuable specimens of snake poison in the cupboard, and had, alas, forgotten to remove the key.

"Had Edith discovered the fatal mistake I had made? I rushed to the cupboard, opened it, and found that amongst the neat rows of carefully labelled bottles one was missing. There was not the least doubt what had occurred. Edith had helped herself to a bottle of snake poison. This accounted for the self-control with which she had parted from me. It is impossible for me to describe my sensations when I made this discovery. After thinking for a few moments I resolved to seek your advice. Here I am: what is to be done?"

"You are in a very awkward position," I answered.

"I should think I am. Is that all you can say?"

"Is the bottle of poison which Mrs. Talbot has taken very deadly?" I asked.

"Yes; she has helped herself to cobra poison; it would have a fatal effect immediately. She has taken a bottle of what we call 'Venom Peptone,' the most deadly part of the venom of the cobra. Don't let's waste time talking of it. What is to be done to get the bottle from her?"

Here O'Brien fixed his red-rimmed, anxious eyes on my face.

"You are a man of many resources. Have you nothing to suggest?" he asked, impatiently.

"Something must be done, certainly," I answered.

"Yes, what? Ought I under the circumstances to go and see her?"

"Certainly not," I replied. "A man like Talbot is certain to be consumed by jealousy. He may or may not have heard of your old engagement to his wife. A visit from you at this crisis could only precipitate the mischief we dread."

"Then you will go, Halifax?" said O'Brien.



"SHE BEGAN TO APPEAL TO ME AGAIN."

"I don't well know how I can without arousing suspicion."

"You must devise some subterfuge—you must invent something to account for your presence."

I thought deeply.

"I have it," I said, after a moment.

"Where do you say the Talbots live?"

"In Surrey, close to Dorking."

"And this is Saturday afternoon," I said, half under my breath.

"What in the world has that to do with it?"

"A good deal, as far as I am concerned. I have more leisure on Saturday afternoon than on any other day of the week. The case is an extreme one. Edith is an old friend. All right, O'Brien, I will take the matter up."

"God bless you, but won't you tell me what you mean to do?"

"I can't do that, for I don't quite know myself. I will go down to Dorking to-night—put up at the White Horse, and go over to the Talbots' house early to-morrow morning to pay a visit to my old friend."

"How can I ever thank you?" exclaimed O'Brien. He sprang forward and took my hand, which he wrung violently as if it were a pump-handle.

"I'll get that bottle of poison from Mrs. Talbot before I return to town," I answered. "How, I cannot say, but in some manner the deed will be done. Now leave me, like a good fellow, for I must see one or two patients before I start."

Two hours later I found myself in a train on my way to Dorking. I put up for the night at the White Horse, and the next morning, shortly after breakfast, set off to walk to the Talbots' place, which was beautifully situated on a rising ground not quite two miles out of Dorking.

The house was a long, low bungalow. It was picturesquely made, and was surrounded by beautifully kept gardens. The name of the place was The Elms. As I walked up the avenue under the shelter of a long double row of these stately trees I saw Mrs. Talbot standing on one of the lawns, talking to her husband. They were a tall couple, and made a striking effect as they stood together with their figures silhouetted with great distinctness against the summer sky. They were evidently engaged in amicable conversation, and Edith's silvery laughter floated down to me as I approached them.

There was nothing in the attitude of this pair to suggest even the most remote suspicion of unhappiness. Remembering O'Brien's words, however, I concluded that Talbot was in his amiable phase, and almost regretted that I had not an opportunity of seeing him at his worst. Edith heard my footsteps, and turned to see who was coming to intrude on their Sunday peace. We had always been good friends, and she coloured with pleasure when she saw me. Talbot also gave me a most courteous welcome. He was a remarkably good-looking man. His voice was low and somewhat languid. He had a slight drawl, which at times almost produced

a sense of irritation. His words were extremely well chosen, and when he addressed his wife his manner was the perfection of gentle and affectionate courtesy. I noticed, however, as I watched him carefully, an uneasy gleam flit now and then through his cold, grey eyes. It vanished almost as soon as it came, but I further observed that Mrs. Talbot seemed to watch for this expression with ill-concealed anxiety. At the present moment, all was undoubtedly sunshine.

"I am delighted to see you, Dr. Halifax," said Mrs. Talbot, "I know my husband joins with me in bidding you welcome. Are you not glad to see Dr. Halifax, Max?"

"I am very pleased to welcome any friend of yours to The Elms, my love," answered Talbot.

"But where are you staying, and why have you come?" asked Edith.

"I am staying at the White Horse," I answered. "I was rather hipped with work, and thought a day in the country would set me up. It enhanced the pleasure of my intended holiday to know that Dorking was within a short distance of your place."

"You shan't stay another hour at the White Horse," said Mrs. Talbot—"you must come here. Am I not right in asking Dr. Halifax to be our guest, Max?" she continued, glancing at her husband.

"Certainly," he replied. "We shall be pleased if you will come to us, Dr. Halifax, and remain as long as you can be spared from London. A servant can go to the White Horse and fetch your traps up presently."

After a moment's reflection, I replied, with a smile, "I shall be very glad to spend the day with you, but as I must return to town at a very early hour to-morrow morning, it is not worth while sending for my belongings. It will be more convenient for me to sleep at the White Horse but I can stay here until the evening with pleasure."

"That is better than nothing," replied Edith. "Now, won't you come and let us show you our gardens—we are so proud of them—at least I am."

"My wife has quite a passion for the cultivation of orchids," said Talbot. "Are you fond of orchids?"

I replied in a light spirit, and we spent the next couple of hours in the conservatories and out of doors wandering about on the beautifully kept lawns.

By-and-by we went into the house to lunch.

During lunch, I could not help noticing

that Talbot drank a good deal of wine of a rare quality and flavour. It had little apparent effect upon him—it brought no added colour to his face, nor any additional light to his cold, dull eyes. I saw at a glance that he was accustomed to imbibing great quantities of the poison, for, notwithstanding his outward calm, I was quite certain that wine had a poisonous effect upon a man like him.

Instead of taking the head of her table, Mrs. Talbot sat close to her husband, and to my surprise, took care to fill his glass whenever it was empty. This she did in a very quiet and unobtrusive manner—he never seemed to notice the action, but he invariably drained off the full glass when it was presented to him.

After lunch he came for a moment to my side.

"I am the victim of a very intolerable form of neuralgia," he said, "and am forced to keep it at bay by various sedatives, and also by the aid of wine, which acts on me as a narcotic—you will excuse me if I go to lie down for an hour—I shall hope to join you and my wife later on in the garden."

"We'll have tea in the garden about four o'clock," said Mrs. Talbot; "you will find us there whenever you have concluded your nap, Max."

He tapped her lightly on the shoulder, and gave her an affectionate smile, which she returned with pleased and heightened colour. Then she asked me to accompany her into the garden.

The moment had now arrived when I must make the real object of my visit known. I found it a little difficult to break the ice, and in consequence kept silent for a time, scarcely replying to the light and happy talk of the pretty girl by my side. She looked so fresh and animated—so young and peaceful—that I could not help sincerely hoping that O'Brien had exaggerated matters, and that Mrs. Talbot could never have contemplated the terrible sin of self-destruction. Still, there was no doubt that the bottle of venom peptone had disappeared from O'Brien's laboratory, and no one else could have taken it.

"Forgive me for interrupting you," I said, suddenly. "We are alone, and I must not lose so good an opportunity. I wish to tell you why I have really come to see you to-day."

The moment I said this she turned pale. Her pretty lips trembled, and she fixed her eyes on my face with a glance which gave me distinct pain. I avoided looking at her again, and began to speak slowly and calmly.

"Yesterday Donal O'Brien came to see me."

"Ah," she answered; "he discovered it, then?"

"Yes," I continued, "he discovered what you had done. You took a bottle of very deadly poison from his laboratory, having first begged of him in vain to give it to you. In his brief absence from the room, you stole the bottle—forgive me if I use very plain words."

"What does that matter?" she answered. She pressed her hand against her heaving chest. "Yes, it is true," she interrupted. "I took the bottle without his knowledge, and I know—I am glad to know—that it contains deadly poison."

"You must not keep it," I answered, in a firm voice. "I have come to fetch it. Will you run and get it for me now?"

She gazed at me with a mixture of terror and astonishment on her face.

"Do you really mean what you say?" she asked.

"I undoubtedly do," I replied.

"Then I defy you—I will not give it back to you."

"In that case——" I began.

She interrupted me hastily.

"No, don't say what you are going to say," she exclaimed. "I will tell you the truth. I have got the poison, but I don't mean to use it. It comforts me to know it is in my possession, but except under the last and most terrible extremity, I should never dream of taking my life. Assure Donal on this point. Tell him, by the love I used to have for him, to believe that I am speaking the truth."

I laid my hand for a moment on Mrs. Talbot's arm.

"Before we go into the subject of your keeping that bottle of poison or not," I said, "I want to say a few words to you on another matter. When I arrived here this morning, no young wife could look happier or more united to her husband than you did

to yours. You made O'Brien acquainted with some strange facts. Do you mind repeating them to me?"

"They are true," she answered, in a low voice. "My husband's nature has two distinct sides. In one phase he is an angel, in the other he is a demon. More and more, as time goes on, the demon dominates over the angel. Oh, my God, my God! I can't endure the agony much longer. When he is in his torturing mood, he is cruel to me in the most refined, the most awful, ways. His one pleasure is to devise means of putting me on the rack. I see his eyes fill with a terrible sort of joy when he sees me shrink and suffer. To know that I have at hand a weapon which can deprive him at any moment of the one interest of his life, will enable me to bear up against the torture. Believe me, I value my life, and will not



"THEN I DEFY YOU."

throw it away except under the most fearful pressure."

"You are very much to be pitied," I answered; "I need not say that I wish

beyond words that it were in my power to relieve you. Your husband must be a very strange character, for even the most acute observer could detect nothing the matter with him in the mood in which he is to-day."

"I wish you could see him in his other mood," she replied.

"I will endeavour to do so. I may be able to assign causes for it, and trace so fearful a change to a physical reason."

"Oh, he is not mad," she answered. "We can't get out of the difficulty by that door."

"Well," I said, "I must devise some means for seeing him when his mood changes to the one you describe."

"He would be careful and gracious before you."

"I should manage to see him when he is not on his guard," I answered. "But now to return to yourself, Mrs. Talbot. You must let me have that bottle of poison back. Whatever your circumstances, you have no right to attempt self-destruction. Your life has been given you by God; it is wicked to throw away His gift. If you patiently wait the Divine will and pleasure, I make not the least doubt that your misery will be removed in time. You were a good girl once: I have known you since you were a child. No life need be unendurable to those who seek for assistance from above. I am not a man to cant, but I believe in Divine power. Fetch me the bottle of poison—we will throw it away together. Don't keep this terrible temptation in your possession another moment."

While I was speaking, Mrs. Talbot stood with clasped hands; her face was deadly pale, and her eyes wore a fearful look of dumb misery.

"Think of the agony you are causing to the man you used to love," I said, after a pause.

She flushed crimson at these words.

"Wait for me here," she said, in a hoarse whisper; "I will fetch the bottle."

She ran into the house. I could not help thinking with great anxiety of her strange case.

Mrs. Talbot came back sooner than I expected; she looked excited and almost wild.

"I cannot find the bottle of venom peptone," she exclaimed. "I have searched everywhere—it has vanished."

For a moment I thought she was deceiving me, but a glance into her eyes told me that she spoke the truth.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Certain," she replied. She leant against

a neighbouring elm tree as she spoke—she was trembling from head to foot. "I don't understand it," she said. "I can't imagine how anyone could have got to it. There is a cabinet in my room with a secret drawer. No one knows the secret of the drawer but myself. I brought the cabinet from my own home, and have used it since we came to The Elms to hold the treasures which used to belong to me when I was a happy girl. When I stole the bottle of poison from Mr. O'Brien, I put it immediately in the secret drawer of my cabinet. It was there yesterday, I know. When I opened the drawer to-day it was empty. Oh, what is to be done?"

"The bottle may have fallen to the back of the drawer," I said. "Are you certain you looked everywhere?"

"Certain—positive. I looked in every corner. The poison has vanished."

She had scarcely said these last words before Talbot appeared walking slowly across the lawn. Edith recovered her serenity as if by magic. She ran off to her husband, and asked him in quite a tender tone how he felt now.

"Better, my dear," he replied, giving her face a keen but very brief glance.

"I am so glad you were able to do without the morphia," she said.

"Oh," said Talbot, smiling, "you must not tell tales out of school, little girl; but after all, I don't mind a medical man like Halifax knowing. The fact is," he added, turning to me, "my neuralgia becomes so unendurable at times, that I am forced to resort to morphia as a mode of relief, and have taught these delicate little fingers"—here he took his wife's hand in his—"to manipulate the hypodermic syringe."

"As a medical man I must protest," I replied. "The use of morphia is extremely bad for you."

"In large doses, I grant, but not as I take it," replied Talbot.

A servant now appeared carrying a teatray, and our conversation drifted to indifferent matters.

I had not yet by any means accomplished the object of my visit. The strange disappearance of the venom peptone gave me a very queer sense of uneasiness. I had no opportunity, however, of again referring to the matter to Mrs. Talbot, and presently the hour arrived when I must bid my host and hostess "Good-bye" and return to the White Horse.

Just before I left, as I was standing on the veranda with Talbot, he dropped his voice to a low tone.

"I have often heard of your medical skill," he said. "I have a great mind to call on you some day and put my case into your hands."

"You suffer from neuralgia, do you not?" I asked.

"Yes, and other matters. Can you appoint a day and hour to see me in Harley Street?"

"Certainly," I replied. "Can you be with me to-morrow at twelve o'clock?"

"As well to-morrow as any day," he answered.

I made a note of the engagement and soon afterwards took my leave. Talbot walked a little way up the avenue with me.

"To-morrow at twelve," he said, as we parted. He half turned to go, hesitated, and came back to my side. "By the way," he said, "I should like to ask you as a medical man a question. Did you ever hear of a person who was bitten by a cobra recovering?"

Knowing what I did of Mrs. Talbot and the bottle of poison, this remark startled me. There was a moon in the heavens, and I saw a gleam, unsteady and uneasy, glittering in Talbot's eyes.

"Did you?" he asked, seeing that I hesitated.

"I know very little of serpent poisoning," I said. "A man bitten by a cobra would, I make no doubt, have a poor chance of life."

"You see a man before you who escaped death," he answered. "Years ago, in India, a cobra fastened its fangs into my leg. I was bitten severely, I was at death's door, but I recovered. I have never been the same man since. I recovered from the worst effects of the poison, but my nerves were destroyed. Good-night."

He held out his hand. I took it. It was limp and fibreless—cold as a fish.

"God help that poor girl," I could not help muttering, as I wended my way back to the White Horse.

I went to bed, and the thought of this ill-assorted couple mingled with my dreams.

I was awakened from sleep quite early in the night by hearing someone knocking loudly at my door. I sprang up and opened it—the landlord of the White Horse stood without.

"If you please, sir," he said, "you are sent for immediately to go to The Elms—Mr. Talbot is alarmingly ill. There's a brougham at the door, and Mrs. Talbot begs that you will go without a moment's delay."

"Tell the messenger that I will be down immediately," I answered.

I hurried into my clothes, slipped a small medicine case, without which I never travelled, into my pocket, and stepped into the brougham. It bore me quickly to the bungalow. As we drove up the avenue I saw that the house was full of light—figures were flitting here and there. When we reached the front door, a servant ran out to open the door of the carriage.

"My mistress wishes to see you immediately in the morning-room," he said.

I was shown into a pretty little room, where Edith was waiting for me. She was in a long white dressing-gown, and her masses of hair lay in confusion on her neck and back. Her eyes looked wild—her face was ghastly pale. She came up to me and clasped my hand.

"Oh, what am I to do?" she cried.

"Try to calm yourself, and tell me what is the matter," I answered.

"I can't bear it," she exclaimed, wringing her hands frantically. "How can I tell you what has happened?"

"You must try, my dear young lady, if you wish me to help you. You have sent for me because your husband is very ill. Had I not better see him?"

"Yes, he is ill—dying," she answered. "I will tell you what has occurred as briefly as I can. When my husband suffers much I generally sleep in a room near—I heard him groaning, and went to him. I had injected morphia into his arm as usual before I went to bed. I thought he wanted a larger dose. As soon as ever I appeared I knew by his voice that he had entered into one of his fiendish moods—he called out to me in harsh and terrible tones—he said that he had discovered the bottle in my cabinet, and knew that I concealed it there for the express purpose of taking his life. He accused me of having injected him, not with morphia, but with the awful cobra poison."

"The man must be off his head," I replied.

"No, no, he has only got into the phase of his terrible dual nature when he resembles a demon, not a man. He says that he is certain to die, and that I shall be arrested for his murder. Oh, can it be true, Dr. Halifax? Will anyone believe such a monstrous story? Tell me that you, at least, don't believe it!"

"Of course I don't," I replied. "But now you must let me go to him. If he is really poisoned in the way you describe, he must have done it himself. The poison is a fearful one, and almost momentary in its effects—he must be nearly dead by now. The important

thing is to try and save his life—this is necessary both for your sake and his.”

“One of the servants was by when he accused me of having injected him with the contents of that dreadful bottle,” said Edith. “Oh, why did I ever steal it from Donal? I am justly punished now. How am I to endure this fearful position?”

I saw that the poor girl was frantic with fright and agony of mind. I also perceived that her presence would be of no use whatever in the sick room.

“Stay here until I come back,” I said. “Believe me that I am your friend and will do my utmost to save you.”

I went upstairs, and a servant showed me into the room where the sick man lay. He was lying on his back—his hands and arms were thrown outside the counterpane—he was breathing quickly—his eyes were wide open. Now and then he clenched his hands, and a slight convulsive motion ran through his frame; he was conscious, however. The moment he saw me he opened his lips and began to speak with a quick, nervous energy.

“She has had her desire,” he said. “Is that you, Halifax? I am glad you have come. She

life in return. Well, I vow that she shan’t escape.”

“You gravely accuse your wife of having poisoned you?” I said.

“It is a fact,” he replied.

“How did she do it?”

“She injected cobra poison instead of morphia into my arm.”

“Where did she get the poison?”

“I told you just now that I found a small bottle of it in her private cabinet.”

“Where is the bottle?”

When I asked this last question, a cunning, secretive sort of look became immediately apparent in Talbot’s eyes.

“You had better ask her that question,” he said, in a sulky tone.

“Well, keep still and let me examine you,” I said.

I had never come across a case of snake poisoning, and did not therefore feel as competent to judge symptoms as I did on most occasions; but, looking now fixedly at Talbot, it darted through my mind that the state in which I found him was unlike that which I should expect such deadly poison to produce. I opened his eyes and looked into

the pupils—they were contracted; the eyes were full of a strange excitement. Beads of perspiration stood on the man’s forehead; he was evidently not only in violent pain, but was also suffering from excitement almost maniacal in its intensity.

“Can you administer an antidote?” asked Talbot, in a rapid but quavering voice.

“I will give you something to quiet you,” I answered.

“Now keep still.”

I took his wrist

between my finger and thumb—there was no depression of the heart’s action. The pulses were beating fast and full. The man’s heart was going like a sledge-hammer. Even as I stood by him, he began to talk rapidly and in a sort of semi-delirium.



“‘SHE HAS HAD HER DESIRE,’ HE SAID.”

concealed a bottle of cobra poison in her private cabinet for the purpose of injecting it into me. She accomplished the fiendish act an hour ago. I am dying—so much for the loving young wife—I gave her everything that man could, and she has tried to take my

"I'll be even with her yet. Ha, ha, my widow—the inheritor of all my wealth—I'll put a spoke in your wheel." Then he recovered himself and looked at me cautiously. "I don't want any blundering, stupid servants about the room," he said. "Can you stay with me alone, Halifax? I wish to make a full and clear statement of what has occurred. Can a magistrate be summoned?"

I replied in soothing tones, and desired the servant to wait in the ante-room.

Snake poison or not, the man was not dying at present. I knew of antidotes to many poisons, but it suddenly flashed through my mind that the only person who could really cure Talbot was O'Brien. He had spent many years of his life in studying this special subject. I made up my mind to go immediately to see him.

Desiring the servant to remain in the ante-room, I went downstairs to where poor Edith sat, her elbows on a table, her face covered by her hands—she started up when I entered—her eyes looked quite wild.

"Now listen to me," I said. "You must on no account lose your self-control. I am convinced that I can get you out of this, but it is necessary for you to be calm, and to show no fear. Of course, you are innocent. I know you well enough to be certain that you could no more take a man's life than you could fly—but this is a delicate matter, and it is necessary for your own sake that you should not be too much broken down in the presence of the servants. You must get one or two of the men-servants to remain in the ante-room in case the patient should become violent, but if you have strength of mind sufficient to go back to your husband, I should like you to do so, and to remain with him until I return."

"Are you going to leave me?" she said, with a terrified cry.

"I must for a short time. I must go to London."

"Why?" she asked, with parted lips.

"I must see O'Brien. It is my private opinion

that your husband has not taken the poison."

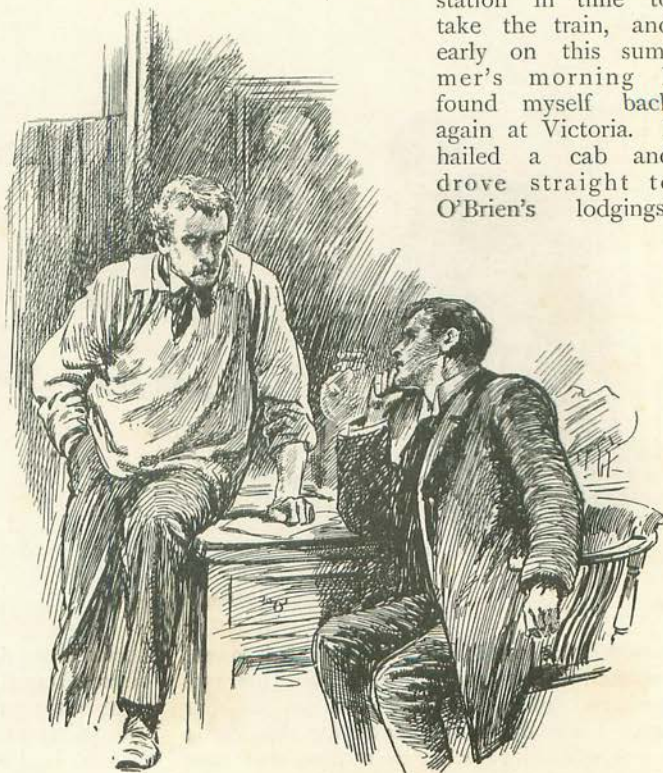
She started up with a joyful cry.

"But I am not certain," I repeated, "and I must see O'Brien. Cobra poison is fatal almost immediately, and your husband's symptoms, although dangerous, are not those of a dying man. It is impossible for me, however, to be quite certain what the final result will be, and I wish to consult O'Brien. Talbot has imbibed alcohol in large quantities for a long time, and that fact may possibly arrest the quick action of the poison. If there's an antidote, O'Brien knows it—I must go to see him by the next train."

We looked in a time-table and found that an early train left Dorking between three and four in the morning. If I drove off immediately I should just catch it. The bell was rung, the carriage ordered, and three minutes later I found myself driving to Dorking station.

Mrs. Talbot had recovered her nerve in the most wonderful manner, and when I again begged of her to take her place in her husband's room she promised to obey me.

I reached the station in time to take the train, and early on this summer's morning I found myself back again at Victoria. I hailed a cab and drove straight to O'Brien's lodgings.



"WHAT HAVE YOU COME ABOUT, HALIFAX?"

It was too early for any of the servants to be up, but I fancied I saw a light burning in the laboratory. I rang the house bell loudly, and to my relief O'Brien himself opened the door for me.

"In the name of all that's wonderful, what have you come about, Halifax?" he asked.

"I want to speak to you immediately," I replied.

He was an excitable fellow, and my presence evidently disturbed him very much. He led me with speed to his laboratory, shut the door, and faced me.

"Now, out with it," he said: "for Heaven's sake, don't keep me in suspense. Is anything wrong with Edith? Has she—oh, my God, if she has lost self-control and taken that poison, I shall administer a dose to myself. Speak, Halifax, speak."

"Keep quiet," I said. "The blow you fear has not fallen. Things are in a terrible position, though, at the bungalow. I spent yesterday there. I was alone for a time with Mrs. Talbot, and spoke to her quite frankly on the subject of the venom peptone. She confessed that she had it—and did not mean to part with it. After a little very plain speaking, I induced her to promise to give it to me. She went to fetch it, but returned in a few moments to say that it had vanished. She was much disturbed, and could in no way account for its disappearance. We hadn't any opportunity of discussing the subject, for Talbot appeared on the scene."

"I left The Elms late last evening, and returned to the White Horse. I was called up in the middle of the night to see Talbot, who, the servant said, was alarmingly ill. On returning to the bungalow, Mrs. Talbot took me into her morning-room, and told me that her husband had accused her of injecting cobra poison into his arm instead of morphia."

"The brute. Impossible!" exclaimed O'Brien.

"Try to calm yourself, O'Brien. This is not a moment for any outsider to give way. Of course, the unhappy wife is innocent—that fact goes without saying—but I greatly fear that matters may look very ugly for her if Talbot dies. The first thing to be done is to try to save him. If he dies there will be a very black case against the poor, innocent wife."

I never saw anyone look paler than O'Brien when I told my story.

"Is there an antidote to the poison?" I asked, speaking quickly.

He leant up against an old oak bureau before he replied.

"The case is hopeless, Halifax," he said then. "The bottle which Edith stole from my cabinet contained a preparation of cobra poison which we call 'Venom Peptone.' This is in truth the very essence of the cobra venom. If the man has got the contents of that bottle in his blood, nothing can save him. He is a doomed man—nay, he is dead by now."

"You have studied this poison very carefully?" I said.

"Carefully? I should think so."

I looked at my watch.

"I have a moment or two to spare before I must catch my return train to Dorking," I said. "It might help the case if you were to give me a few particulars with regard to the symptoms."

"I will do so. Perhaps I'd better tell you, first, how the poison is obtained. I collect with the aid of the snake loop. This I fasten round the neck of the cobra. The lip of a saucer is then slipped into its mouth. It grows angry, lifts its fangs, which catch on the inner edge of the saucer, against which it bites furiously again and again. Very soon a thin yellow fluid squirts out. This is the venom. It is innocent-looking enough. It has no smell and no taste. Injected, however, beneath the skin, the victim becomes immediately dull and languid. In some cases death takes place within a minute—but this would not be the case unless the dose given were specially large, or by chance entered a vein. The heart is immediately enfeebled, but after a time recovers partially; the respiration becomes slower and weaker, and still more weak; paralysis seizes the legs; the chest becomes motionless, and death quickly follows, as a rule without convulsions. If by any chance the victim survives the injection for half an hour, the part affected swells and the tissues soften as if they were melted—a horrible putrefaction occurs, and the tissues swarm with bacteria, which, as you know, are the cause of putrefaction. Meanwhile the breath-sustaining centres become weak and cease to stimulate the muscles so as to cause them to move the chest. The victim finally dies from failure to breathe. With the dose which I had collected in that small bottle death would be a certainty. I mention this to show you that there is no antidote, and Talbot has probably breathed his last long before now."

"Well, then," I said, springing up and speaking with animation, "my hopes have

become certainties—none of the symptoms which you describe have taken place. There was no depression of the heart's action when I saw the patient—on the contrary, he was in a highly excitable and even maniacal state. What I believe is this, that the man is not quite accountable for his actions. I noticed a peculiar look in his eyes the moment I saw him. I think on one or two points he is insane. He told me last evening that, some years ago in India, he was bitten by a cobra. I presume the bite was a very slight one, for his life was saved. He said that ever since that day his nerves have been in a high state of irritation. Since his marriage he has been without question very jealous of his wife. A person once bitten by a snake of any sort has a horror of the reptile to his dying day. Talbot is not, I should say, a very scrupulous person. There is no doubt whatever that he discovered the bottle of cobra poison, and that the mere sight of it excited his strongest animosity. His nerves, already terribly affected in this direction, gave way—he lost all self-control, and thought of a fiendish plot by which to ruin his unhappy wife. Thank you, O'Brien; I must now return to the bungalow. I believe I see my way out of this mystery. As I said, I had a hope when I came to you which you have made a certainty."

"Can I not go with you?" said O'Brien. "It's awful to think of the state that poor girl must be in."

"No, you had better stay away," I replied, "Your presence, under the circumstances, would do far more harm than good."

I left him, jumped again into my hansom, and returned to Victoria. I caught a train after a brief delay, and found myself, still quite early in the morning, back again at Dorking. I had desired the Talbots' carriage to be in waiting for me, and drove out to the bungalow.

A servant came to open the carriage door.

"Is your master alive?" I asked of the man.

"Yes, sir," he replied.

I could not help breathing a sigh of relief and thankfulness. Even granted that the action of the poison was rendered slow by presence of alcohol in the system, if Talbot had really been injected with the cobra poison, he must long ago have succumbed to such a large dose. I went upstairs prepared for immediate action, and entered the room without knocking. Talbot was sitting up in bed—his whole face was deeply red;

his eyes slightly protruded. He was using violent and excited words. Edith was standing close to him holding his hand. I never felt a greater admiration for Mrs. Talbot than I did at that moment. She had just been accused of the most awful crime that can be laid at anyone's door. She had gone through months of the most racking nerve torture, and yet she stood now close to the side of the man who had accused her, absolutely forgetting herself. When he spoke wildly, when he flung himself about madly, she tried to soothe him. I noticed that he clutched her hand in a firm grip. Although he hated her, he dreaded to let her go.

"Now, Mrs. Talbot," I said, "will you have the goodness to leave the room? I should like to see your husband by himself."

My presence and the sound of my voice evidently gave her such relief that she was on the verge of breaking down. She looked at me with a pathos which I have never seen equalled, and went softly out of the room, closing the door behind her.

"Why have you sent her away?" cried Talbot, his voice harsh and penetrating. "I order her back again. What is a wife for if she can't stand by her husband's dying bed? She has poisoned me—she can at least see me out of the world. It will be a pleasure to her to see the effect of her deadly work."

"Now, look here, Talbot," I said, "there is no use wasting breath over a man in your condition, but you have still got sufficient sense to understand what I am saying to you. You are no more the victim of cobra poisoning than I am. Why, man, if the dose you accuse that innocent girl of injecting into you were really in your veins, you would have been dead two or three hours ago. You are guilty of the most fiendish plot to destroy the life and reputation of a helpless and innocent girl that in all my experience I have ever heard of. In the presence of a physician you cannot for a moment maintain your position, and I advise you to confess the truth without delay."

The man looked at me while I was speaking, with lack-lustre eyes—he was quite dazed and puzzled for a moment, then his jaws slightly fell, and he lay back half fainting on his pillows.

I saw that my words had told, but the patient was in no physical condition for me to say anything further to him just then. I administered restoratives, felt his pulse,

listened to his heart, and came to the conclusion that he was undoubtedly poisoned, but not by the deadly weapon which he had accused his wife of using.

I left him after a time, and went downstairs to speak to Mrs. Talbot.

"You may take comfort," I said to her. "Your husband is in a very dangerous state at the present moment, but, in the first place, he is not dying; in the second, he has never been injected with the deadly poison which he accuses you of having administered to him. Now you must keep up your courage—I am anxious to have a talk with you. Talbot is very ill, but I think it probable that he will recover from his present state. You told me yesterday that you were in the habit of injecting him with morphia. Are you quite certain that you only used morphia for this injection?"

"He sometimes used morphia alone, and sometimes with another preparation," she replied. "When he was in a terribly depressed state he used to mix the morphia with another drug—I have got the bottle upstairs. Shall I run and fetch it?"

"Yes," I replied.

She left the room and returned in a few moments with a small bottle, which she placed in my hand. The mixture had been made up by a chemist, and the label on the bottle only contained some of the usual directions. I removed the cork, and smelled and tasted the contents. Like a flash the solution of Talbot's queer attack was made plain to me.

"Why, this is *cannabis indica*," I exclaimed.

"What does that mean?" asked Edith, looking at me with wildly dilated eyes.

"It means this," I answered, rising to my feet: "all your husband's symptoms point to poisoning with *cannabis indica*. Venom peptone would depress the heart's action, would stop respiration, and cause death from failure to breathe. None of these symptoms are present in your husband's case. The heart is much excited instead of being depressed—there is no difficulty of breathing.

Now, my dear Mrs. Talbot, the case against you is completely broken down. If venom peptone had been injected into your husband's arm he would have been a dead man hours ago. He is a living man now, but very ill—his symptoms all point to poisoning by *cannabis indica*, which, taken in large doses, produces maniacal excitement of brain and heart. He has doubtless injected himself with this deadly drug."

"He often did, I know," answered Mrs. Talbot. "Whenever he mixed the drug he used to inject the hypodermic syringe himself into his arm—when he only used morphia he liked me to do it for him—but, oh," she added, "what is to be done? What does it all mean?"

"I should like to see your father," I said, after a short pause, during which I had been thinking hard. "He probably knows something of Talbot's past."

"What can he know? My husband returned from the West Indies eighteen months ago, he settled here, and we met him quite by accident."

"Exactly; still, I am anxious to become possessed of some of his past history, and it is possible that it may have reached your father's ears. Can you send for him?"

"Of course I can: my father lives only five miles from here. I will send the carriage with a note and ask him to come over immediately."

"Do so," I replied; "meanwhile, I will go up to the patient."

"Dr. Halifax," said Mrs. Talbot, "you will not leave us to-day?"

"I will certainly not leave until your husband is better," I answered.

A faint smile was perceptible for a moment around her sad lips. She sat down to write a note to her father, and

I went upstairs to Talbot. I administered soothing remedies, and after a time some of the violent symptoms abated. As I sat by the man's bedside, and watched him as he sank into a heavy sleep, I became more and more fully persuaded that



THIS IS 'CANNABIS INDICA.'

this was an undoubted, although strange, case of insanity. I could not be certain, however, on this point until I could learn some particulars with regard to Talbot's previous life.

In a little over two hours Edith came to inform me that her father was downstairs.

I knew Keen slightly, but not so well as I knew his daughter. He was a thin, cadaverous-looking man, with a drawn, anxious expression of face. Edith had evidently been confiding in him, for he looked very much excited and disturbed.

"I am so glad you are here, Halifax," he said, grasping my hand. "What an awful tragedy has occurred—my poor, poor child; what is to be done for her?"

I asked Mr. Keen to accompany me into Talbot's private study; there I shut the door, and, turning round, began to speak abruptly.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Keen," I said, "to ask you a very straightforward question. When you gave your daughter to Mr. Talbot, did you know anything of his past life?"

Keen coloured painfully.

"God forgive me," he exclaimed. "Why do you ask me that question, Halifax?"

"It is necessary that I should do so," I replied, "in order to enable me to throw

light on a mystery which now exists. I will tell you frankly, that it has never been my lot to listen to a more diabolical scheme to injure an innocent and good woman than that which Talbot has perpetrated. I can only account for it by believing him to be out of his mind. Can you help me to find someone who knew Talbot in the past?"

"It is quite unnecessary, Dr. Halifax," said Keen. "I, alas, am terribly to blame. When I gave Edith to Talbot, I knew his past history. He had been insane for some years, and spent that period in an asylum in the West Indies. At the time of his marriage he was supposed to have completely recovered, or, although pressed as I was, I would not have given my child to him."

"Did Edith know of this?" I asked of Keen.

"No, I was careful to keep the knowledge from her."

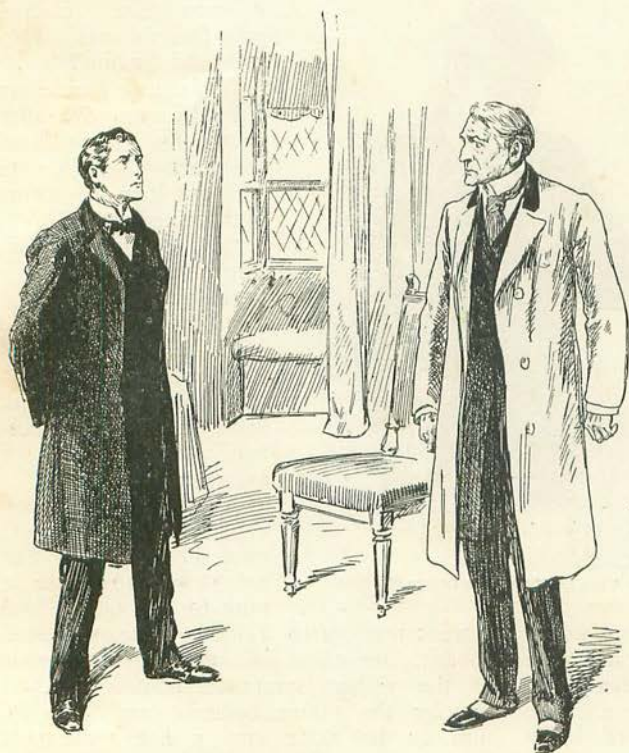
"I need not say that you behaved in a very unjustifiable manner," I replied; "but it is not my place to call you to account. Please help me at the present juncture with all the explanations in your power. Was there anything peculiar with regard to the nature of Talbot's insanity?"

"I was given some particulars at the time," continued Keen. "It so happened that Talbot, when a young man, was severely, but not fatally, bitten by a cobra in India. He was never very strong mentally, and the shock had a strange effect on his nerves, producing, at intervals, violent fits of insanity. On such occasions it was one of his most constant illusions to imagine that someone had injected him with cobra poison."

"You knew this when you gave your daughter to him?"

"I regret to say that I did. I was almost off my own head with misery at the moment. Much depended on the money relief which Talbot was prepared to offer. He had been in his right mind for many years, and my firm conviction was that he would never again become insane. I was wrong—may God forgive me."

"I hope He will," I answered. "I must return now to my patient. You have thrown light on the whole mystery. The thing now to be done is to get hold of the bottle of poison, for it will



"DID YOU KNOW ANYTHING OF HIS PAST LIFE?"

not be safe for Talbot and his wife to live together while he has it in his possession."

"How do you know he has it?" asked Keen.

"There is no doubt on that point—he evidently stole it from a cabinet in Mrs. Talbot's room. I must not leave a stone unturned to get it from him."

"Then he never injected himself with it?"

"Never. Had he done so, he would have been a dead man hours ago."

I went back to my patient, who was sleeping heavily. The effects of the *cannabis indica* were subsiding, and I thought it likely that when Talbot awoke from his sleep, he would more or less be restored to his right mind.

This proved to be the case. He opened his eyes late in the afternoon, and looked at me in some surprise.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Why are you here, Dr. Halifax?"

"I am glad to see you so much better," I replied. "You have been very ill."

"Have I? I have no recollection of it."

I looked at him steadily. He moved restlessly on his pillow and asked for his wife.

"Do you really want to see her?" I asked.

"I certainly do. No one can make tea like Edith—I want her to give me a cup."

"I wonder you can bear to look at her, after the cruel and shameful way in which you have treated her," I answered.

When I said these words, Talbot's face blazed with angry colour.

"Sir," he said, "you forget yourself."

"I do not, Mr. Talbot," I answered. "It is my painful duty to recall something to your memory. Last night you were very ill—at death's door. You accused your wife of having attempted to poison you with a bottle of cobra venom."

When I said the word "cobra," the man started, and an uneasy, troubled light filled his eyes.

"You accused your wife of having poisoned you," I continued, "when you knew perfectly well that she had done nothing of the kind. The cause of your illness was due to your own mad act—you had injected yourself with a strong dose of *cannabis indica*. This drug, when recklessly administered, produces maniacal excitement."

Talbot was quite silent for a moment after I had spoken. Then he said, in a subdued voice:—

"Then you think I was a maniac last night, Dr. Halifax?"

"I not only think it, I know it," I answered.

"You say I injected *cannabis indica* into my body?"

"You did, Talbot—you know it; I have proof of it, so it is useless for you to attempt to deny it."

"In my fit of mania," continued Talbot, "you say I accused my wife, my young wife, of having poisoned me?"

"That is so."

"If I did such a thing I must have been insane."

"The drug you injected made you insane for the time," I answered.

"Do you think that I am insane now?"

"No, the effects of the *cannabis indica* are lessening, and you are in your right mind."

"Will you believe me if I tell you, as a man of honour, that I have not the faintest remembrance of all that you describe as occurring last night? My wife is the gentlest and sweetest of women; I love her better every day."

"I believe you," I answered, suddenly; "and yet, Talbot, since your marriage you have been cruel to her. You have given her moments of intense agony—such fearful moments of torture that the idea of self-destruction has occurred to her."

"Heavens! You don't say so. Why, I have always loved her to distraction. What sort of brute do you take me for?"

"I take you for a man who at times does not quite know what he is about," I replied.

"Yes, yes, I recall things now," said Talbot. "I was in an asylum once—it was years ago. My madness was caused by shock after cobra bite."

"By the way," I said, as soothingly as I could speak, "you have a bottle of cobra poison in your possession. I should like you to give it to me."

He looked at me watchfully. Up to that moment he had been sane and calm—now an uneasy glitter returned to his eyes.

"Ha, ha! I want that bottle," he said; "it may be useful."

"Will you give it to me to take care of?" I asked.

He looked at me again, and with a violent effort managed to curb the strong excitement which was rising within him.

"Halifax," he said, bending forward and grasping my arm with one of his hands, "I dread the thought of cobra poison more than anything else in all the world. I found the poison a week ago in my wife's cabinet; since then the thought of it has haunted me day

and night. I have seen pictures in my dreams. I have seen the cobra, with its hooded head—I have watched its eyes with their wicked and unchanging expression. When I have dropped off to sleep I have felt its sudden stroke, and have awakened bathed in perspira-

He hesitated. A mighty struggle seemed to convulse him. Suddenly he thrust his hand under his pillow, and pulled into view a tiny bottle with a glass stopper. When he looked at it he laughed as only a madman could. I sprang upon him and wrested it



"I WRESTED IT FROM HIS HAND."

tion and sick with terror. Many times a day I have tried to throw away the poison, but I have never gained sufficient courage to do it. For God's sake, take it and destroy it."

"Where is it?" I asked. "You will be much calmer when it is no longer in existence."

"No," he interrupted, his whole tone changing. "I had better keep it. Any moment it will free me from my haunting agonies—the death would be painless. After the first horror of the injection the agony would be past."

"Don't be a fool, Talbot," I said. "You are exciting your nerves in the most unjustifiable manner. You have been perfectly sane for years, and if you take my advice you may remain so for all the remainder of your days."

"My days are numbered, Halifax. I have an incurable disease, which I meant to consult you about when I called at your house as we arranged."

"Be that as it may," I replied, "have the courage to end your days as a temperate and good man should—don't yield to this horror. Give me the poison."

from his hand. My movement was so sudden as to be unexpected. I had just time to glance at the name printed in firm characters on the label, "Venom Peptone," then I dashed the bottle with its fatal contents into the midst of a small fire which was burning in the grate. I expected Talbot to spring upon me as I did so, but when I looked round I saw that he had suddenly fainted.

The rest of this strange story is told in a few words. When Talbot recovered from his fainting fit, he was quite gentle and sane. I sent for his wife to come to him. He received her with a smile of the deepest affection, and seemed restless and uneasy when he did not hold her hand in his. I made a careful medical examination of the man that evening, and found that his own conjectures about himself were correct, and that his days on earth were numbered. He lived for about a fortnight, when he died. During his brief remaining days he had no return of insanity. His last words and looks of affection were for the young wife who in his insane moments he had so basely and cruelly maligned.