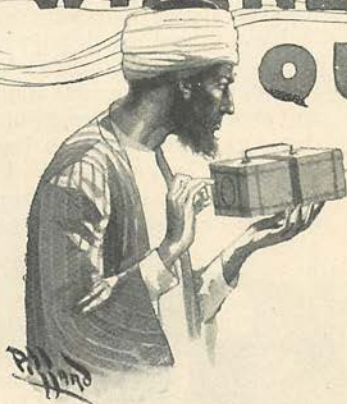


WHERE THE AIR QUIVERED



By L. T. MEADE

AND

ROBERT EUSTACE.



WHEN my daughter Vivien became engaged to Archie Forbes I naturally took a great interest in the circumstance. Vivien was my only child, and her mother had died at her birth.

She was a handsome, bright, sensible girl, worthy to be the wife of any good fellow, and with as much pluck and common sense as I have ever seen in anyone.

Archie was a landed proprietor on a small scale, and had not a debt in the world; his past was a clean record, and his future was as bright as health, intelligence, and a fair amount of money could make it. He was devotedly attached to Vivien, and I gave my hearty consent to the engagement.

I am a doctor by profession, and thoroughly enjoy the life. In the ordinary course of things the physician comes into close contact with the stranger and rarer forms of human nature, and being myself a lover of all that is out of the common, this outlook weighed with me in my choice. After many years of hard work I secured an enormous practice, and when I settled down as a specialist in Harley Street I was already a wealthy man.

On a certain warm evening in June I sat smoking at the open window of my dining-room when Vivien entered.

She held a telegram in her hand.

"This has just come," she cried, in some excitement; "it is from Archie. He has returned, and will be here this evening."

She sat down as she spoke on the edge of the table, and put her slim hand affectionately on my shoulder.

"You won't be sorry to see him, Vi, will you?" was my answer.

"Sorry!" she cried. "I cannot tell you how thankful I am! You never supposed I was nervous, did you, father; but the fact is, I hated Archie going away with Jack Fletcher. Oh, I know that Jack is a right good fellow, but he is terribly wild and daring. Lately I have had most uncomfortable dreams about both of them. Yes, it is a relief to get this telegram. Archie promises to call about ten o'clock; how nice it will be to see him again!"

Her bright eyes sparkled as she spoke, and into them stole that radiant look which girls wear when they speak of the man they love best on earth.

"Ah! Vivien," I answered, "there are two sides to every question. Archie will be taking you away, and what shall I do?"

"You will have another home to go to," she replied; but her face suddenly became grave.

"I wonder what their adventures have been," she said, a moment later.

"They will tell you themselves before another hour is out," I answered. I glanced, as I spoke, at a small clock on the mantelpiece. Vivien gave a quick sigh and stood up. She was in full evening dress, of some soft, white texture, and wore a bunch of yellow roses at her belt.

"Aunt Mary wishes me to go with her to Lady Farrell's reception," she said; "but I will be back, if possible, within the hour."

"Well, go, my dear, and enjoy yourself," I answered, standing up and kissing her. "If Archie should arrive before you are back, I will get him to wait."

She slowly left the room. I lay back in my chair and thought over my girl's prospects. The moments flew quickly. Shortly after ten o'clock I heard the hall-door bell ring, and the next instant Archie burst into the room.

"Here you are, old fellow, and you are welcome," I said, grasping him by the hand.

He came to me hurriedly; his dress was in considerable disorder, and his face wore a wild and terribly disturbed expression. To my hearty grip of the hand he scarcely responded.

"Is anything wrong?" I said, giving him a quick glance.

"I am in awful trouble," was the reply. "Is Vivien in?"

"No, she is out with her aunt, but she got your telegram, and will be back almost immediately."

"I cannot see her; not just yet. Do you mind if I lock the door?"

"What is wrong, my dear fellow?"

"Oh, I am in terrible trouble," he repeated. He strode across the room as he spoke, turned the key in the lock, and then sank into the nearest chair.

"I want your advice and help badly, Dr. Kennedy," he continued.

"But, my dear boy, what is the matter? What has happened?"

He raised his sunburnt face and looked at me gravely.

"Poor Jack is dead," he said then, in a broken sort of voice.

"Jack Fletcher!" I cried, springing to my feet.

"Yes, he died an hour ago, quite suddenly, at the Savoy Hotel, in his room. We got into London all right at six o'clock, and drove off to the Savoy at once. I never saw Jack in better spirits. We went to our rooms and had a wash and sat down to dinner at half-past seven. At half-past eight he went to his room for something. He did not come back, and after a time I followed him. I found his door locked and called to him, but he made no reply. In great alarm I went for help, and we had the door burst open. Jack was lying on the floor. Everything was done, of course. A doctor happened to be in the house, who applied all the usual restoratives, but it was too late; he was quite dead. My God, it is awful! I don't seem able to think. You must think for me, and come to the Savoy at once to see to things. What can have caused his death? You will come round, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll come," I replied. "I'll just scribble a note to Vivien first. It is fearfully sad. Death must have been caused by heart failure, of course."

I scribbled a few words on a card, laid it on

the table to be given to my daughter, and then went into the hall. A few moments later Archie and I were on our way in a hansom to the Savoy.

"Of course, there will be an inquest," he said, "and you will be present, won't you, Dr. Kennedy? The death must have been due to natural causes."

"Why, of course," I answered, looking round at him in some surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," he said, "only it



"JACK WAS LYING ON THE FLOOR."

seems so strange. He was in the best of health and spirits."

"All the same, there may have been lesion of the heart," I answered; "but we shall soon know. You say you found the door of his room locked?"

"Yes, fast, and the key was within; the window was open, though."

"What had that to do with it?"

"Nothing." Archie hung his head. Painful as the occasion was, his gloom and depression seemed greater than the circumstance warranted.

We soon reached the hotel. I saw poor Fletcher's body. Until a post-mortem was made it was impossible to tell the cause of death, so I superintended all the details of the removal, sent off a wire and letter to the poor fellow's mother in Lancashire, and then rejoined Archie in his private sitting-room. I found him pacing up and down the room, a wild gleam in his eye, a restlessness about his manner which I had never observed before. Once more I thought that Jack Fletcher's death could scarcely account for the disordered state of his whole appearance.

"You must pull yourself together, my boy," I said. "Men have died suddenly before now. Of course it is fearfully sad, but you have got Vivien to think of."

"I don't want to see her to-night," he said, eagerly.

"Why so?" I asked.

"She must be acquainted with the fact of Jack's death; it will upset her, and I—the fact is, I am completely done up; I don't know myself, doctor."

"Nor do I know you, Archie, in your present state. You must pull yourself together; and I tell you what, the very best thing you can do is to come away with me, and let us put you up for the night. Vivien will naturally expect to see you, whatever has happened, and the sooner you unburden your mind to her the better."

"My nerves are shaken to bits," he replied. "I have the strangest feeling about this whole matter. There is a cloud over me. The fact is, I don't believe Vivien and I will ever be married."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear fellow; come and have a talk with my sensible, matter-of-fact girl, and you will feel a new man. I am not going to leave you here, so come at once."

I got him to do so, but evidently with extreme unwillingness.

When we got home Vivien was waiting for us. She came into the hall. One glance into her face caused Archie to change colour.

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He went up to her, kissed her, took her hand, and then dropped it again.

"Something very sad has happened, Vivien," I remarked, "and Archie wants to tell you. Take him into your private room, my love, and have a good talk."

"Come, Archie, this way," said the girl. She led him down one of the corridors, opened the door of her own sitting-room, and closed it behind them.

"This is a queer affair," I could not help murmuring to myself. "Strange and disastrous as Jack Fletcher's death is, I am more disturbed about Archie. What can be the matter with him?"

The next day, with the consent of the coroner, I assisted at the autopsy. I need not go into details, but merely state at once that, after two hours' careful and most minute investigation, the cause of Jack Fletcher's death still remained an absolute mystery. Every organ was sound, there was no wound anywhere, and not a trace of poison was discovered. Dr. Benjamin Curtis, the skilled pathologist and analyst, was present, and the last sentence of his exhaustive report I append herewith:—

"There is absolutely nothing to account for the cause of death; and the only remaining alternative is that it was probably due to some very severe nervous shock of central origin, the nature of which is wholly obscure."

I flung the report down in annoyance, and went to meet Archie, who was waiting for me outside the coroner's court. I told him what Dr. Curtis had said. To my astonishment his face turned ashy white, and he almost reeled as he walked.

"Then it is as I thought," he said.

"What do you think?" I said. "Forbes, you are keeping something from us; you have something on your mind. What is wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said, hurriedly. "I hoped the coroner would find a cause for death. Dr. Curtis's report has upset me."

I asked a few more questions, and felt now absolutely convinced that Forbes was concealing something. Whatever it was, he was determined to keep it to himself. I went home considerably troubled.

A week after poor Jack's funeral, Vivien came into my consulting-room. Archie had only been to the house once, and on that occasion he could not be got to say a word with regard to their approaching marriage.

"Now, father," said my girl, closing the door, and coming up and planting herself in front of me, "there is something wrong, and you have got to find out what it is."

I looked full into her eyes; they were brighter than usual, and had a suspicion of tears about them.

"Archie is terribly changed," she said; "you must have noticed it."

"I have," I answered, in a low tone.

"I know he was very much attached to Jack," continued Vivien, "but this is no ordinary grief. There is something terrible weighing on his mind. If I did not know that he was a thoroughly brave fellow, I should say that he was oppressed by a fearful sense of overmastering fear. It cannot be that. What, then, can it be?"

I made no answer. She continued to stand upright before me, and to keep her eyes fixed on my face.

"What can it be?" she repeated. "I puzzle myself over the whole thing day and night. I don't believe he is tired of me."

"Assuredly that is not the case," was my quick response.

"But all the same, he is completely changed," she continued. "Before he went on this cruise, he was devoted to me—each moment in my presence was paradise to him—now it may be likened to purgatory. He is restless until he gets away from me. When he is with me he is unhappy and *distract*. In short, there is something terribly wrong, and you must help me to find out what it is."

"Ask him yourself, my dear. I have seen just what you have seen, but cannot get him to say a word."

"I am glad you agree with me," she said, the gloom of her brow lightening for a moment. "I will write to him at once and ask him to come here."

She had scarcely said the words before the door was opened and Forbes himself came in.

"Ah, that's right, Archie," I cried, in a tone of relief. "Come over here, dear fellow, and sit down. The fact is, Vivien is thoroughly unhappy. She sees that there is something wrong with you, and is discontented with the present state of matters. You have something on your mind, and you ought to tell us what it is."

Forbes raised two lack-lustre eyes and fixed them on the girl's face. The tears which were close to her grey eyes now brimmed over.

"Archie," she said, going up to him and laying her hand on his shoulder, "I want to ask you a plain question. Would you like our engagement to be broken off?"

"I was coming here to propose it, Vivien," was his strange reply.

She turned very white, and fell back as if someone had dealt her a blow.

"Good God!" she said. "It is then as I feared; there is something terribly wrong."

"It is not that I do not love you as much as ever," continued the poor fellow; "but I have no right to bind you to me. I scarcely dare to tell you what has happened. I am unworthy of you, Vivien, and besides, I am doomed. It is only a matter of time."

He flung himself into the nearest chair, and covered his face with two hands which trembled from nervous terror.

I nodded to Vivien.

"You had better leave him with me for a few moments," I said.

"No, I will not," she answered, desperately.

"I have a right to know the truth, and I am determined to get at it. What is wrong, Archie? You are not tired of me? You still love me, don't you?"

"With all my heart and soul," he groaned.



"'ARCHIE,' SHE SAID, 'I WANT TO ASK YOU A PLAIN QUESTION.'"

"And yet you want our engagement to be broken off! Why?"

"Because I am a guilty and doomed man," was his reply.

I started and felt my heart beat. Was it possible? But, no—I flung the unworthy suspicion from me.

"I ought not to be in this house," continued Archie. "I ought not to have let you kiss me the night we came home. I am unworthy of you, and yet . . . My God! this misery is driving me mad."

He pushed back the hair from his forehead; there were beads of perspiration on his brow.

"If we were engaged fifty times over, our wedding would never come off," he continued, speaking in the most reckless, excited tone. "I can no more prevent the fate which is hanging over me, than I can get rid of that thing which has stained me. I can only say this: As Jack died so I shall die. I am doomed, and the less you have to say to me the better."

"Now, that is all nonsense," she said, in her quick way, which could, at times of intense emotion, be wonderfully matter-of-fact, and, therefore, soothing. "Whatever you have done you must tell me and you must tell father, and you must allow us to judge as to whether it is a barrier between you and me or not. As to my love, you must have a very poor opinion of it if you think I would forsake you in an hour of trouble. Women who care for a man do not leave him when he is down. I am a woman, and, I hope, a brave one. I mean to comfort you, and to stay by you to the last, whatever has happened; yes, *whatever* has happened."

He looked at her with incredulous eyes, into which just a flicker of hope returned.

"You cannot mean it?" he cried.

"Yes, I do mean it; but I want your whole confidence, and so does father. You are concealing something. You must tell us at once."

"Yes, speak, Archie," I said, gravely. "Vivien, my girl, come here and stand by me. Archie, this is no ordinary case. Vivien and I will deal with you with all fairness, only we must know the absolute truth."

"I meant to tell you some days ago," said Archie, fixing his eyes on my face, "but somehow I could not get the pluck. The whole thing is so horrible, and the burden on my conscience so great, that I am overcome by a ghastly fear. I cannot fight against it."

"Well, speak," I said, with impatience.

"It is the queerest thing on earth," he said, slowly. "It has half stunned me. Though I consider myself pretty tough, the whole thing has knocked the pluck clean out of me."

He paused to wet his dry lips, and continued:—

"You know we were in the Mediterranean cruising about for six weeks?"

I nodded.

"We were just about to come home, when Fletcher, who was always up to a lark, suggested that we should go through the Canal, down to Jeddah, and then on to Mecca, to see the pilgrims. They would be all there, as it was the twelfth month of the Mohammedan year. I did not mind, so we went. We left the yacht at Jeddah, and went on to Mecca. The place was one mass of pilgrims. They were on their way to the Kaaba, the oblong stone building within the great Mosque. You have heard of it, of course, and also of the famous lava-like Black Stone, to which all Moslems turn in their prayers. It was in the north-east corner of the building. The place was in a sort of uproar, for it is part of the faith of every good Moslem to kiss that stone once in the course of his life. Well, Dr. Kennedy, you would scarcely believe it, but Fletcher, when he got into the midst of this throng, seemed to turn quite mad. He lost his head, and insisted that we should go and see the whole show. He intended to kiss the Black Stone, if he could. Of course, I knew we should run into the most fearful danger, and did my best to dissuade him, but nothing would do; go he would. He said to me:—

"You may stay away, old boy; you are engaged to be married, and perhaps ought to consider your life a little bit, but with me it is different. When I want a lark, I must have it at all risks. I am going; you can please yourself."

"Of course, I didn't relish running the risk of being torn to pieces, but I wasn't the fellow to see him start off alone, so at last I agreed to go with him. We put on the *Ithram*, the woollen thing worn by the Arabs round the waist and shoulders, got some sandals, and went bare-headed with the crowd of pilgrims to the Mosque. We joined the procession and managed to get right inside, and Jack got inside the Kaaba and went up to the north-east corner of the building and kissed the Black Stone. He told me afterwards that it is quite worn away

with the kisses of millions of human beings. I missed him in the crowd, and just as I was looking round to see where he could have got to, I noticed one of the Mueddins, or priests, watching me closely, and when his eyes met mine, I can tell you I shuddered. From the moment they singled me out he seemed never to take his gaze away, and I shall not, to my dying day, forget the expression of cruel, fierce suspicion that was stamped on his face, which was rendered hideous by being deeply pitted with small-pox.

"Well, Jack turned up, and we got out all right; and Jack, poor fellow! was in the best of spirits. He said it was the biggest lark he had ever enjoyed, and he did nothing but laugh at my fears. I told him about the priest, and said I was certain we had been discovered, but he made nothing of it.

"When we got out we were in an awful crowd, and our donkeys could scarcely move. We had just cleared the thickest of the mob, and I was hoping we were safe, when I noticed the priest, who had already observed me in the Mosque, detach himself from the crowd and move swiftly towards us. It was now nearly dark. I saw that he wanted to speak and, not knowing why I did it, reined in my donkey. He came up to my side. In his left hand he held a parchment scroll, and as I took it I saw his right hand steal down to his belt. There was the flash of steel. In an instant I should have been stabbed. I do not know what came over me; there was a ringing in my ears, and my head seemed to swim. I leant quickly over the donkey and plunged my long hunting-knife with all my force into the man's heart.

He fell without a groan. I touched Jack on the arm. We galloped madly and for our lives. The mob followed us, but we out-paced them, and at last their howls and shouts grew fainter and fainter behind us. We reached Jeddah in safety, got on board, and steamed away with all possible speed.

"'Why in the name of Heaven did you kill him, Archie?' said Jack to me then.

"'He would have killed us if we had not killed him,' was my reply, but while I spoke there was a dead-weight at my heart, and wherever I turned I seemed to see the dying eyes of the man, and to hear the thud of his body as he fell to the ground.

"'Have you got the parchment he put into your hand?' continued Jack.

"I had. He took it from me and opened it. It had some writing on it in Arabic, which we could both read and speak. Jack copied it out in English, and here it is."

As he spoke Archie produced from his pocket-book a piece of parchment and an old



"HE FELL WITHOUT A GROAN."

envelope, and read as follows:—

"The vengeance of Mahomet rests upon the two infidels and unbelievers who have profaned the Prophet. Their days are numbered, and before the sun rise on the Festival of Eed-Al-Kurban in the month of Dsul Heggeh they will be no more."

"There," said Archie, standing up, "that is what was written; and now, Dr. Kennedy, that I have had courage to tell you my story, I want to ask you a question. Do you think it is within the bounds of probability, or even possibility, that poor Fletcher's sudden death could have had any connection with this affair?"

"Absolutely out of the question," was my first remark, but then I paused to think the situation over.

"You certainly did a mad thing," I said then; "not only did you profane the religious rights of these fanatics, but you, in especial, killed one of their priests. Under such circumstances there is little doubt that they would do much to compass their revenge, but that they would follow you both to England seems on the face of it ridiculous. No, no, Archie; it is an unpleasant business, and I am sorry you did not tell me before, but that Jack's death has anything to do with that paper is the wildest fiction."

"I do not believe you," he answered. "I am firmly convinced that the Mueddin whom I killed will be revenged. Jack is already dead and the words of the prophecy will come, true with regard to me. I shall not live after sunrise on the festival of Eed-Al-Kurban, whenever that is."

While he was speaking Vivien had remained absolutely quiet. She went up to him now, and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Why do you touch me?" he said, starting away from her. "I have that man's blood on my hands."

"You did it in self-defence," she answered. "But we must not think of that at all now. Father"—she turned to me—"I agree with Archie: I believe that his life is in grave danger. We must save him; that is our present business. Nothing else can be thought of until his life is safe."

"I have one thing more to say," continued Archie. "Last night I saw one of the Mueddins in London. I knew him; I could not mistake him; he resembled the priest I had killed. He was standing under a lamp-post, opposite St. George's Hospital. He fixed his eyes on my face. I believe he is the man who compassed poor Jack's death, and mine is only a matter of time."

"Come, come, this is nonsense," I answered. "Fletcher was not murdered."

"What did he die of?" asked Archie, gloomily. "You say yourself that he was thoroughly healthy; he was in the prime of youth. Do healthy men in the prime of youth die suddenly without any discoverable cause? I ask you a straight question."

"The death was a strange one," I could not help replying.

"Very strange," echoed Vivien, "strange enough," she added, "to account for Archie's fears. The Moslems have threatened the deaths of both Archie and Jack. Jack is dead. Archie is the most guilty man of the two, for he killed their priest. They will certainly not leave a stone unturned to kill him."

"Yes, my days are numbered," said Forbes; "there is no getting over the fact. Vivien, our engagement must come to an end, and in any case I feel now that I have no right to marry you."

Vivien's brows contracted in a nervous frown.

"We will not talk of our marriage at present," she said, with some impatience; "but why should we not consult Dr. Khan?"

"Dr. Khan!" I cried. "Do you mean the Persian?"

"Yes; why should not we all three go to him at once? He knows much more about these Arabs and their queer ways and their sorceries than anyone else in London."

"Upon my word, it is a capital idea," I said. "Khan does know strange things, and is up to all the lore of the East. He is in some ways one of the cleverest fellows I know. He does not practise, but he has gone in for chemical research and forensic medicine as a hobby. There is no one in London whose opinion would be of more value in a difficult case like the present, and, being a Mohammedan by religion, he can help us with the side issues of this most extraordinary affair. Archie, you have got to pull yourself together, my boy, if for no other reason, for Vivien's sake. Come, we will go down to Professor Khan's chambers in Gray's Inn at once, and tell him the whole story."

"And Dr. Khan is a special friend of mine," said Vivien, brightly. "Oh, now that we are doing something to help you, Archie, I can live."

I crossed the room to order the carriage. As I did so I heard Archie say to her, in a low tone:—

"And you love me still?"

"I love you still," was her reply.

He drew himself up; the colour returned to his ashen cheeks and the light to his eyes.

In half an hour we were all driving to Hussein Khan's chambers, in Gray's Inn. When we reached them I rang the outer bell. It seemed ages before anyone came. At last the door was opened by an old housekeeper, in his shirt sleeves. He recognised me, and nodded when I spoke to him.

"Is Dr. Khan in?" I asked.

"Yes, sir; you know your way," was the answer.

We hurried up the uncarpeted stairs to the second floor, and pressed the electric bell. There was the sound of the latch

being drawn back inside; I pushed the panel, and we all three entered; the door closed automatically behind us, and stretched on the sofa at the far end of a long room, in a loose dressing-gown and slippers, lay the Persian. He was smoking a long opium pipe. The moment his eyes

Archie told his strange tale. While he spoke I closely watched the effect on my friend; but, once the narrative had begun, the expression on the Persian's face never altered. After that first glance of interest, it had settled down into a stolid, Oriental indifference.



"THE PERSIAN."

rested upon Vivien he put down the pipe and stood up. He looked us all over with heavy, lustreless eyes, and nodded slowly. He was evidently only half awake.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Professor," I said, apologetically. "You know my daughter, of course?"

Vivien came forward and offered her hand. Khan bent over it, and then raised it respectfully to his lips.

"I have not forgotten Miss Vivien," he said.

"I have come here to-day because I am in great trouble, and because I want your advice," she said at once. "It has to do with this gentleman. May I introduce him? Mr. Forbes—Dr. Khan."

Dr. Khan slowly turned his heavy eyes in Archie's direction. He looked him all over from head to foot, and then, rather to my astonishment, I observed a lightning look of intelligence and remarkable interest fill his eyes.

"Has the trouble anything to do with Mr. Forbes?" he said, glancing at Vivien.

"It has."

"Then I believe I may help you. Sit down, sir, pray, and tell me at once what is the matter."

"What do you think of it all?" I said, as Archie ceased to speak.

"Let me examine the parchment, please," he replied, with deliberate composure.

Archie gave it to him. He took it and read it over and over again, muttering the words to himself.

"You could find no cause for your friend's death?"

"None."

"You are quite certain, Mr. Forbes, that the man you saw yesterday outside St. George's Hospital was one of the Mueddins whom you had already noticed in the Mosque?"

"Quite."

"Well, my dear friend, I am sorry to say it looks a very queer business."

"And do you really believe that Jack's death was the work of the Mueddin?" I cried, aghast at his words.

"No; I only say that it is quite possible. I recall a similar case; the same thing may happen again. The Arabians, upon whose early researches the whole science of Europe was founded, possess, of course, secrets unknown to our Western scientists of the present day. I have seen some strange things done by them. The act of sacrilege

you both committed was one of the gravest offences possible, but it is just within the realm of possibility that such a crime might have been looked over; but as you, my friend, killed one of the priests as well, the Mohammedans whom you so deeply insulted would not leave a stone unturned to compass your end. The marvel is that you escaped immediate death. But now let us quite clearly sum up the position as it stands."

As he spoke the Persian stood up. He remained quiet for a moment thinking deeply, then he crossed the room and took down a volume in Arabic from a shelf. With pencil and paper he began working some calculations, referring now and then to an almanac, and once to a map of Asia.

We all three watched him in intense silence. After a moment or two he looked up.

"Assuming for the sake of argument that the Mueddin whom you saw last night has undertaken this work of revenge," he continued, "the position is this. Owing to the Arabs' year being a lunar one, the festival of Eed-Al-Kurban does not occur at the same date each year. I see, however, that it will commence according to our calendar to-morrow, the 8th of June, at daybreak, or Subh. At daybreak or Subh the first call to prayer is given by the Mueddin from the Mosque. Now, Mecca is exactly 40deg. longitude east of Greenwich, and, therefore, day will break with them two hours and forty minutes earlier than with us—that is, at seven minutes past one o'clock to-morrow morning. Of course, the Mueddin, whom you believe to have followed you, would know all this. And as, according to the words on the parchment, you are both to be dead *before* sunrise on the festival of Eed-Al-Kurban, so also, *failing* the fulfilment of this vow, you are perfectly safe when that hour has passed."

"Then you believe that Archie is in grave

danger until after one o'clock to-morrow morning?" exclaimed Vivien.

"That is my belief," answered Dr. Khan, bowing to her.

"But all this is most unsatisfactory," I cried, getting up. "Surely, Dr. Khan, even granted that it is as you say, we can easily protect Forbes. He has but to stay quietly at home until the hour of danger is past. These Arabs are not magicians: they cannot hurt a man in his own house, for instance?"

"How was it your friend died?" said the Persian, looking full into Archie's face.

"That I cannot say," was the reply.

Dr. Khan shrugged his shoulders.

"You declare that the Arabs are not magicians," he said, turning to me, "but that is just the point. They *are*! I can tell you things which I have seen with my own eyes which happened in Arabia that you would find hard to believe."

"Very likely," I answered, "but they require the Oriental stage and surroundings for the exhibition of the so-called phenomena. They cannot use magic within the four-mile radius of Charing Cross, under the vigilant eye of the Metropolitan police."

Dr. Khan did not immediately answer. He remained motionless in deep thought.

"What do you intend to do to-night?" he said then, turning to Archie.

"I have made no plans," was the low, indifferent reply. "I am so certain of my impending end," he continued, "that nothing seems to make any difference."

"You must come home with us, Archie," cried Vivien. "Dr. Khan declares that after one o'clock you are safe. Until one o'clock you must be with us; and suppose, Dr. Khan," she added, "you come too? Suppose we spend this momentous evening together? What do you say, father?"

Before I could answer the Persian said, slowly:—



"HE BEGAN WORKING SOME CALCULATIONS."

"I was going to ask you to invite me. Yes, I will come, with pleasure."

"One more question," said Vivien; "you do firmly believe that Archie will be safe after one o'clock to-morrow morning?"

"Yes; the words on the parchment point distinctly to his death on or before the commencement of the festival. The Mohammedans keep their vows to the letter, or not at all."

As he spoke Dr. Khan got up slowly, went into his bedroom, and reappeared ready dressed for the evening. It was already nearly seven o'clock. We got into my carriage and returned to Harley Street. I sent a servant to Archie's evening dress to the hotel, and at eight o'clock we found ourselves seated round the dinner-table. It was a strange and silent meal, and I do not think we any of us had much appetite.

I am naturally not a superstitious man, but matters were sufficiently queer and out-of-the-way to excite a certain foreboding which I could neither account for nor dismiss. The Persian looked utterly calm and indifferent, as betokened his race. But I noticed that from time to time he fixed his deep-set, brilliant eyes on Forbes's haggard face, as if he would read him through.

The night happened to be the hottest of that year. There was not a breath of air, and the heat inside the house was stifling.

When dinner was over, Vivien suggested that we should go into my smoking-room. The house was a corner one, and the windows of the smoking-room were on the ground floor, and looked into a side street.

She seated herself by Archie's side. He took little or no notice of her. Khan continued to give him anxious glances from time to time. Vivien was restless, often rising from her seat.

"Sit down, Miss Vivien," said Dr. Khan, suddenly. "I know exactly what you feel, but the time will soon pass. Let me tell you something interesting."

She shook her head. It was almost beyond her power to listen. The gloomy face of her lover, the slightly bent figure which had been so athletic and upright, the change in the whole man, absorbed her entire attention.

"Save him—give him back to me

if you can," was the unspoken wish in her eyes, as they fixed themselves for a moment on Dr. Khan's face.

He gave her a strange smile, and then turning addressed me. He was the most brilliant talker I ever met, and on this occasion he roused all the power of his great intellect to make his conversation interesting. He related some of his own experiences in the East, and made many marvellous revelations with regard to modern science.

Eleven and twelve chimed from a neighbouring church clock. Soon after midnight the Persian, who had been silent for several moments, said, suddenly, "During this last hour of suspense, I should like to put out the electric light."

As he spoke he crossed the room, and was about to switch off the current when our attention was suddenly attracted to Vivien. She had sunk back in her seat with a deep sigh. The intense heat of the room had been too much for her.

"Air! Air!" I cried.

Archie laid his hand on the heavy sash of one of the windows and raised it. There seemed to be a hush everywhere—I had never known so still a night. But just at



"HE REELED AND CLUTCHED WILDLY AT THE LINTEL OF THE WINDOW."

that instant I saw—or fancied I saw—the tassel of the blind move, as though the air had quivered.

The next instant Khan uttered a sharp cry.

"He is there—he has done it—I thought so!"

The words died on his lips, for Archie Forbes reeled, clutched wildly at the lintel of the window, and then with a heavy thud lay like a log on the floor.

I had always looked upon the Persian as a man of exceptional promptitude and great strength of character, but never for a moment had I realized his lightning grasp of an emergency.

"Artificial respiration—don't lose a moment. Take his chest, man; we shall save him!" he cried. As he spoke he leapt through the open window, vaulted the railings, and was in the street.

The shock acted upon Vivien like a charm. With her assistance I tore open Forbes's collar and shirt, and began apply-

gasp. It was followed by another. We redoubled our efforts and waited for a moment. Forbes began to breathe again; we drew back and dashed the sweat from our streaming faces.

"He will do now," whispered Khan; "leave him quiet."

"What is it? For God's sake, what is it?" I said, as soon as I could get my voice to speak.

"I will tell you. This has been the most dastardly and awful thing. I have been trying to get at the solution the whole evening, and just grasped it as Mr. Forbes stood up to open that window. I was too late. He got what they meant for him, but he will do. Yes, his pulse is stronger."

I laid my hand on the victim's wrist: the beats came more regularly each moment, though he was still only half-conscious.

"But what can it be?" I cried; "what have you discovered?"

Khan's eyes were blazing with excitement. "What has happened?" I continued. "A



"I TORE OPEN FORBES'S COLLAR."

ing artificial respiration with all my might. In less than a minute the Persian came back. He carried a small box in his hand.

"The solution of the mystery," he said. "I will explain presently. Now to save him. I believe we shall do it."

He fell on his knees and helped me with the artificial respiration with all his might. For five long minutes there was not the slightest result. Then there came a feeble

bullet through the brain could not have been more instantaneous; but, silent and unseen, before our very eyes the blow fell and left no trace. This is magic with a vengeance."

"I will explain it," said Khan. "I have been hammering out the solution all the evening, and, fool that I was, never suspected the real thing until just too late. Look here—here is something that your modern scientific criminal has never dreamt of."

"But what the deuce is it?" I said, examining a small box in much bewilderment which Khan now placed in my hands. Three of the sides and the top and bottom were made of wood, but across one end was stretched some material which looked like indiarubber. At the opposite end to this was a small circular opening, which could be closed by a hinged flap.

"Explain what this means, for God's sake," I cried. As I spoke I bent my nose towards the box, and instantly was seized by a catching sensation at the back of the throat.

"Ah, you had better not come too close to it," cried Khan. "This box contained the most deadly gas known to modern chemists: the vapour of concentrated anhydrous hydrogen cyanide."

I started back. Well did I know the action of this most infernally potent and deadly gas. Still, the mystery of how the gas reached Forbes was unexplained.

"How was it done?" I cried, staring at Khan in absolute bewilderment.

"Simply in this way," he answered. As he spoke he lit a cigarette, and at the same time laid his hand on the box. "The poison was projected as a vortex ring in the marvellous and mysterious rotational motion which vortex rings assume. This motion can be imparted to gas, but even scientists of the present day cannot explain it, although the study has given rise to Thompson's fascinating theory on the constitution of matter. All we know is this," continued Khan, "that, projected by the operator, a ring of that gas would move through the air as a solid body, and would burst as true as a shot from a rifle, and slay as quickly, only it would be

perfectly silent and invisible. When made with smoke these rings are visible, of course, and we can watch their motion—so." He shot a ring of cigarette smoke from his mouth, and I watched it as it sailed across the room and burst at last into curling wreaths.

"With this apparatus," he continued, pointing to the box, "an enormous velocity could be given to a vortex ring. Even in broad daylight its approach could not be seen, and, breaking on the mouth and nostrils of a man, it would instantly kill him unless artificial respiration were immediately resorted to. Yes," he added, "the modern detective has a lot to learn."

"But the man who did it?" I cried.

"Gone! We shall never see or hear of him again. He must have seen me when I leapt from the window, and dropped the box in his hasty flight. Of course he followed us here, and crept up to the open window. This was the Mueddin's chance—he projected the vortex ring straight into Archie's face. Thank Heaven, the instant remedies employed have saved him. One second's delay, and he must have died."

Forbes had now staggered to a sitting posture, and Vivien had fallen on her knees by his side.

"Leave us alone, father," she said to me; "yes, leave us alone for a little."

And the Persian and I slowly left the room.

My girl is now married to Archie Forbes. She loves him, as only such women can love. He has recovered his manhood and his pluck, but there is a shadow on his face which I think will stay there while he lives.