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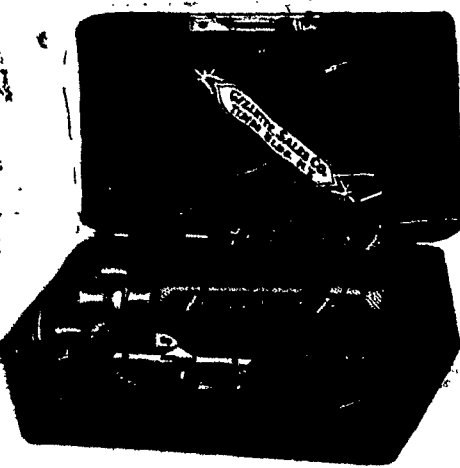
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## The Hour of Temptation.

They had been boys together, punched each other's noses, later sworn eternal friendship, gone to the same dances, played cards in the same Laversham sets, and—worst of all, though this was Henry Covert's ranking secret—fallen in love with the same girl.

It was because of Ethel Glyn that Covert had gone on his travels. He understood that he hadn't a chance with her. She was a young lady of expensive habits. Would he ever forget that beguiling moment of but two months ago when, after an intoxicating waltz, he had bared his heart to Ethel's proud eyes? The irony of it! She had let him tell her all about it. She was his idol, and there was nothing he wouldn't do to win her. And she looked so sweetly interested. But she gave him his quietus at length, with her pretty little hand on his to calm him. She told him she liked him very much, but couldn't marry him.

"Let's be friends always, Mr. Covert, and don't be foolish about me any more," she had said to him soothingly, just before the next man on her list came to claim her. He hadn't seen her since.

And now, miracle of miracles, here in this tumble-down little Portuguese village of the Upper Duero sitting in the smoking room he glanced up to see standing in the doorway his friend Randolph Quest, with the tremendous news for him that his Uncle Ben Covert had died and left him seventy-five thousand pounds! Ah, if that were all! But having told him this, Randolph had more to say.

"I want you to cut this touring, old man, and come home for my sake and your own. I'm engaged to be married, and you're my indispensable best man, Harry. You know Ethel Glyn pretty well, and may start congratulating right away. I'd a great business to persuade her that two folks can live off a thousand a year, but I did persuade her, and that's how we stand. But, heavens! what a hunt I've had to track you in this forsaken land!"

"Aren't you glad about your money, Harry?" asked Randolph. "You don't look much like it."

"Delighted, of course. Indeed, charmed!" Covert replied. "But it's so much more amusing to hear you enthuse about your own happiness."

"Oh, dates and the prophet, old man! You needn't be sarcastic. Ethel's worth raving over, don't you think?"

Worth raving over? She was worth committing any crime for! And here—there was he, Henry Covert, with a fortune on his back to make her topaz-colored eyes gleam with love—either of him or the money, he didn't care which—and his laughing rival face to face with him—alone in a far country, just the two of them.

"She's all right," he said, with terrible calmness, and a steady, beetling gaze at his friend.

"Don't," exclaimed Randolph suddenly. "Don't look at me like that. You're trying to mesmerize me, but you can't do it, you know."

The vision of Ethel was before Covert again, more fierce than ever. The agony of it! And the injustice! She would marry him now, he knew it. If Guest were to vanish from life. And he and Guest were alone together in a country—or part of it—which might so in no time, hide a secret. Why, what could be more simple than to take his friend into the mountains behind Brancadilha and have an accident?

A water came in with the good China tea of Portugal. Covert asked if there were any bad characters in the house.

"No, señor; we are all honest here now," said the waiter. "We do not lock even the doors. There was until this morning a certain Pedro Martinez who—but one must not speak ill of the departed. He lies in his moment in the church for his burial, with six candles by him. One does not lock even the church door in Brancadilha, you understand, señor."

Covert bade the waiter definite "Good-night!" and with a respectful bow to both of them the man went to bed.

At length Randolph rose, walked to one of the windows and commented on the stary beauty of the sky.

"Can we get a breath of air, Harry?" said Randolph. "A few minutes' stroll wouldn't be a bad thing before turning in."

All Brancadilha was asleep apparently when they glanced into the little green center with pollard trees around it at regular spaces. The church clock struck 11 in a cracked, careless way. It finished only when they were at the door, which yielded to Covert's push.

"Oh, I say!" whispered Randolph when the special object in the middle of the nave was now revealed to them both.

Covert went straight to the coffin without a word. Screwdriver and screws were on the pavement. It was so like Portugal in the wilds to leave such trifles lying about.

"They don't always close them," said Covert. "We might have a look at him."

The lid lifted and there lay Pedro Martinez, with an ashen smile on his bandaged face. He was in his ordinary peasant's clothes, his hands folded on his breast, and seemed as if he had waited a long time ere dying.

"That'll do," said Randolph, shading.

But in that moment evil took complete possession of Covert. Putting his hand on Randolph's shoulder, he said, sternly:

"I want you to help me to do something."

He stared into Randolph's eyes as never before.

He made several passes, and Randolph stood rigid, with the light of life, as it were, gone from his face.

Pallid and ashen himself now as the corpse before him, Covert took up one of the great scones and its candle. He went down the nave first, to bolt the door. From the door he proceeded into the south side, and eerie shadows went with him along the wall. So to the east end, the north aisle and chapel, and then back again to a stone trap with a rusty ring in it which he had noticed behind the altar. There was much wooden rubbish.

Having raised the stone, he saw the steps which led to a grisly hole, where the bones of many generations of men and women were piled like the material in a union stone-yard.

And then he retraced his steps, leaving the candle in the vault.

Others of the candles he dispersed along the nave and past the altar, so that there was an avenue of illumination for the work next to be done.

Last of all, he removed the lid of the coffin, and turned to Randolph, who was like a petrified being.

"Give me a hand with this, and follow me!" he said.

All Randolph's individuality was submerged in the flood of Covert's dastardly will power. Covert himself lifted the dead man's head, and, expressionless as before being bidden, Randolph took the dead feet and so, slowly they marched with



Randolph told the glad news, their burden past the arranged candles, and—with difficulty here into the crypt itself. When no part of poor Pedro was left visible he gave the word to Randolph to return.

"Go up!" he said, and in grim procession they returned to the empty coffin.

Again Randolph stood like a senseless thing. Covert brought the candles nearer the coffin again. This done, Covert wiped his face and glanced about him once more. He hesitated before his crowning deed of infamy.

But having led him so far, the devil in him was not mocked by half measures. Summoning his strength for a supreme effort, Covert raised Randolph at the legs and arms, and laid him in the coffin. Then he replaced the lid and drove in five or six screws.

Back to the hotel went Covert, with fenshish triumph in him.

But bearing the half hour after midnight, suddenly, as at first, that eager nightingale outside broke forth into the sweetest song.

No longer possessed by the devil, Covert went to that sacred little scoop and moistened his already streaming forehead with a spot of that Brancadilha elixir of holiness. The words, "Oh, God—help me!" breathed from his lips, and in another minute he was outside the hotel hastening, heedless now of any chance human eye, again toward that church.

The task before him was a severe one, but he went through with it. Pedro Martinez was grubbed out of that dismal heap of bones, leathery skin and rags, and brought back to his coffin. Then, having already opened the coffin, he removed his friend and set him on a chair; and he laid poor Pedro's head in the groove of the pillow as before.

For several minutes Covert now rested, ere giving back to Randolph his consciousness.

When, after a promontory shiver or two, Randolph rubbed his eyes, opened them, and realized where he was, all he desired was to return to the hotel and go to bed.

"Haven't you had enough of this yet, Harry?" he asked. "It gives me the creeps!"

"Yes," said Covert. "I've had quite enough of it."

The next day they both made for Lisbon and England; and, in spite of the leaden weight of the secret that was in him, Covert showed more of his old schoolboy self to Randolph than Randolph had seen for many a month. Again and again during that day and days that followed he wondered what had wrought the change in him toward Ethel Glyn. He wondered and rejoiced. And he knew that he could support Randolph at his wedding without any jealousy now.

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