

# THE MYSTERY OF THE BRONZE STATUE.

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Illustrated by Max Cowper.

## PREFATORY NOTE.

*The murder of Sir John Duchford and Mr. Jacob Hilton, an Englishman, who had for many years resided on the Continent, is still a vivid memory.*

*At whose hands, however, they came by their death remains a mystery, for the perpetrators of the foul deed—though popular surmise pointed to the miscreants, who were credited with having stolen a valuable bronze from the museum—were never traced.*

*The following MS., now for the first time made public, which was found, crumpled and torn, near the body of Mr. Hilton, throws a singularly uncanny and almost incredible light upon the gruesome affair. If it be, as is probable, a source of ridicule to the prejudiced and ignorant, the open-minded, I trust, will find therein matter for serious reflection.*

*These latter I would refer to the collection of spirit lore and story formed by Mr. Andrew Lang, and regarded by that level-headed litterateur with sober tolerance; as well as to the more technical works of Mr. Podmore, and other scientists, who have succeeded in elucidating much that has hitherto been without Nature's pale by an ingenious application of Nature's laws.*

## I.

**T**HOUGH the tragedy of Alan Chartier's death filled me with horror, I must, to my shame, confess to experiencing a certain elation. For a rival, such as any man might fear, had been removed, and Alice Denzil, no longer under the spell of his subtle charm, was free to recognise my more sober devotion.



WE RAISED THE PROFESSOR'S BODY AND BORE IT TO A COUCH

With Chartier my intercourse had been slight, and the rare occasions of our meeting had but engendered the mutual distrust that precludes desire for closer acquaintance. Great, therefore, was my surprise on being notified by his executors that he had bequeathed to me his bronze statue of Maximin, a veritable antique, and the gem of a collection that justly enjoyed a world-wide reputation.

As, however, a strenuous life of stern realism had stifled what little appreciation for the arts a more leisured existence might have fostered, this posthumous courtesy awoke in me little emotion, save

a nebulous regret at having misjudged my dead rival. Still, I accorded to my new possession a prominent position in my

s a n c t u m ,  
where, amid its *fin-de-siècle* environment of luxurious ease, it looked so grotesquely incongruous as to evoke the cynical depreciation of my old friend Professor Style.

This erudite virtuoso was

never tired of expatiating upon what he declared was a unique example of Roman art; for, though but at earliest the work of the third century, the bronze would not have discredited the zenith of the Augustan period. The statue, which was in height some five feet, portrayed the Scythian in his shepherd's garb, before his advancement to within measurable distance of the purple he so ignobly wore. This bald statement must suffice. For ample detail I refer the curious to that excellent monograph, by Professor Style, that he

had scarce completed ere a ruthless fate snatched him from our midst. It is of this that I must now speak.

One evening, Style, after his wont, dropped in. I was on the point of going out, and, guessing the motive of my friend's visit, did not scruple to keep my appointment. I bade him till my return take possession of my study, where he would find cigars, spirits—and the Maximin. He nodded a laughing assent, and we parted.

I spent two delightful hours with Alice, now growing perceptibly reconciled to the loss of one who, if a tithe of the rumours that darkened his memory were true, would indeed have made an ineligible husband. She, I think, recognised this, and, out of gratitude for her escape, and contrition for such slights as I might hitherto have suffered at her hands, began to regard my suit with no equivocal favour.

I left her house as the neighbouring church of St. Barnabas was chiming eleven. Home was soon reached, and, letting myself in, I hastened to my study, expecting to discover Style wrapped in smoke and contemplation. To my surprise the room appeared empty; but I noticed that the Maximin had been removed from its customary position, and was standing on the rug, before the fire; placed there, maybe, by its admirer, that he might the better consider its artistic points. I summoned my valet, and questioned him as to the Professor's departure. Of this the man knew naught, nor could he, in answer to further query, account for the statue's displacement, a feat assuredly beyond my friend's unaided strength. Of a sudden his face paled.

"Look, sir!—look!" he cried, starting back.

My eyes followed the direction of his gaze. From below a Persian cloth, whose embroidered splendour nearly touched the floor, protruded a clenched hand, which from the cameo ring encircling its third finger I knew to be Style's. We moved the table, and reverently raising the body, bore it to a couch. Though the warmth had not wholly left his limbs the poor fellow was quite dead. His features were hideously distorted, and the impress of pain and terror with which they were stamped attested but too significantly the torture he must have undergone.

In my present awful pass I have no heart to speak further of this grim horror. Let such as love gruesome detail look up the

ample reports of the coroner's inquest as given by contemporary journalism. Sufficient here to say that Professor Style was strangled, and that the brutal deed was accomplished with a ferocity and strength so preternatural as to baffle the ingenuity of our shrewdest detectives. The manner of his death—which, by the way, bore a strange resemblance to that of Chartier—was not inaptly compared at the time to the tragedy so graphically related by Poe in "The Murder in the Rue Morgue"; but the grisly and bizarre element was, I think, even more pronounced in the real than in the fictitious drama.

As soon as I was in a position to leave town I dismissed my servants, and, having placed my house in charge of a caretaker, a decayed gentlewoman of unimpeachable reference and strong nerve, I hurried abroad, trusting in the excitement and hurry of travel to lay the ghastly memory of the past month. But scarce a fortnight had elapsed ere a telegram demanding my instant return reached me at Vienna. I hastened home, to find, on reaching London, that the poor woman to whom I had entrusted my ill-omened abode was dead—done to death in the same awful manner as Professor Style!

The police were again completely at fault. No inkling of the truth dawned upon them. In the light of subsequent events that would have been more astounding than the truth itself. Even now, the accuracy of this statement—made though it be by an eye-witness—can be alone attested by death. Were I to survive this night these words would, to the world, seem but the fantasy of a madman's brain.

Once more I quitted England, leaving this time my house unoccupied, assured in the knowledge that its evil repute would be a sure deterrent to thief and burglar. For three months I roamed through Hungary and the Tyrol, and when in late autumn I turned homeward I was a happy and hopeful man, for Alice Denzil, whom, with her mother, I had met at Pesth, had promised to be my wife, and our marriage was fixed for the following spring.

For a bride to cross such an inauspicious threshold as mine were impossible; so I cast about for a new abode, which I found at length at Surbiton—a well-ordered, spacious, and newly built villa. Thither, when vacated by the decorators, I moved my furniture; and cheerful and homely the place looked when, the following June, on

our return from our wedding tour, I welcomed Alice as its mistress.

And now I reach the nadir of my misery, to which, though even now its memory lacerates my heart and racks my brain with the bitter strength of present despair, I must perforce make brief reference. Thus only can the tragedy of the past, and the gruesome catastrophe of the immediate future, be comprehended in all their grotesque terror.

A week after our home-coming, Alice and myself were, with our old friends the Baxters, seated in the drawing-room. It was late, and Mrs. Baxter remarked that if they were to catch the last train they must say good-night.

"But the train doesn't start for forty minutes," I said, in deprecation of premature departure.

Tom Baxter glanced at his watch. "Twenty minutes," he said, authoritatively.

"Forty minutes," I persisted; "let the timetable decide."

I rose to fetch it, when Alice, who was nearer the door, said, "I'll get it, dear. I can lay my hand upon it at once; I was consulting it only this morning." She left the room, and we heard her open and shut the library door. Then of a sudden there rang out a shriek so piercing, so appalling, as for the moment to strike us motionless. The voices of the terrified servants rose from below, and their hurried steps sounded on the stairs as we sprang to our feet. I was the first to reach the library door. It was immovable—locked.

"Alice! Alice!" I cried. No answer. I stepped back some two paces, and flung my weight against the panels. The lock gave; I was precipitated forward. The room was in utter darkness.

"Light!" I gasped; "for heaven's sake, light!"

Someone lit the gas.

At the base of the pedestal whereon stood the bronze lay my wife. I threw myself at her side, and called her endearingly by name. She returned no answer. Sick with apprehension, I peered into her face. It was black and distorted, with suffused eyes that, starting from their sockets, stared into mine with a stony glare of pitiful entreaty.

"Dead!" I moaned. "Merciful heaven! dead!" And I fell senseless across her corpse.

## II.

WHEN at length I rose from my bed, on which a fever of uncertain issue had stretched me helpless, I vowed my returning strength to the prosecution of a ven-



AT THE BASE OF THE PEDESTAL WHEREON STOOD THE BRONZE LAY MY WIFE.

geance that was to me as the very breath of life.

Intuitively I connected my wife's death, as well as the preceding atrocities, with my legacy, the bronze Maximin. This I knew to be of great value, and as such likely to tempt covetous rascality. I reasoned then that by an extraordinary series of coincidences the would-be thief had on each occasion been baffled in his nefarious intent by the inopportune presence or entrance of those whom he had sacrificed to the fury of balked greed, or the exigency of safety. That the assassin was not of the common ruck was evident; yet, so far from lessening my determination, this unknown danger urged me forward.

After a somewhat cursory investigation,

the police had, with the smug perfunctoriness that distinguished them when dealing with the former crimes, relegated my wife's murder to the category of unsolved mysteries. I saw then that I must virtually act alone.

My first care was to seek a helpmate, and after some difficulty I procured the services of one John Evan, an ex-sergeant of the Guards, and a giant whose stature and strength would have warranted him in contesting a fall with Goliath himself. Well armed, we each in turn kept watch over the statue, agreeing that the explosion of a pistol should apprise the other, were any sudden danger to arise.

On the fifth night of our vigil I retired at midnight, utterly worn out, to my bedroom, in the hope of snatching some few hours of much-needed sleep. I left Evan on guard, seated in an armchair in front of the Maximin, smoking his pipe and reading the day's paper. On gaining my room I threw myself, dressed as I was, upon the bed.

From a troubled sleep I woke, my limbs a-tremble, and my brow clammy with a cold sweat. It seemed as though someone from a vast distance had spoken my name. A limitless space yawned around me as I sat up and listened—listened till the whispers that dwell in the silence of the night crept into my ears and filled my brain with a hideous dread. The tension was becoming insupportable, when of a sudden, clear and sharp, rang out the warning.

I tore down the stairs and into the library. As I entered, the body of the sergeant was hurled across the room. It struck the edge of the table with fearful force, and rolled, an inert mass, to the floor. Dazed and panic-stricken, I fired my revolver at a venture. A howl of pain, raucous as that of a savage beast, rent the air, and I reeled backward stunned and bleeding. The front door fell to with a deafening clang.

Regaining my feet, I staggered from the house. The calm of the night was broken by the thud of a retreating footfall. Stepping into the road, I looked down the hushed avenue. Past the sleeping villas, bounding from shadow into light, from light into shadow, as one by one the lamps were left behind, sped a monstrous form. It ran with incredible fleetness, and was lost to view in the distant gloom.

A policeman came up. I could not speak. I pointed to certain crimson spots that bespattered the ground—my chance shot had

told—then down the avenue. Very faint the footfalls now—almost inaudible. I beckoned the man to follow. Slowly, painfully, I dragged my aching limbs to the library. On the floor lay the dead body of John Evan. The statue of the Maximin was gone!

Now at last I held the clue; yet so *outré*, so opposed was it to sense and possibility, that to have sought official aid would have been to invite ridicule, or at best such commiseration as is accorded the insane. More than ever, then, had I now to rely upon my own unaided efforts, and, while the hue and cry of Scotland Yard frittered away to its usual lame conclusion, perpend my course.

Broadcast and persistent advertisement, though baited with promise of ample reward, proved sterile. None could tender information as to the lost statue—worthless conjecture only, and unsolicited advice. At last my patience became exhausted, and, leaving for ever my home of hateful memory, I set forth on my quest.

For years I was a wanderer, drawn hither by recital of uncanny crime, driven thither by report of antiquarian find—superior to hardship and danger, guided through the shoals and quicksands of despair and doubt by the dim beacon of revenge. And now that the hour has come, I sit impotent—thwarted by a purblind fool. Yet no small solace have I in the knowledge that, as I pen these words, the shadow of his doom is creeping o'er him.

A week ago I reached this old-world place, where, at the inn, I made the acquaintance of Sir John Duckford, the celebrated dilettante and collector, whose artistic knowledge is almost encyclopædic. As I had some hope of turning this to account, I sought his company; but though he had seen and admired the Maximin—it appeared that he had had intercourse with Chartier—and, like the rest of the world, had heard of its disappearance, he could hazard no surmise as to its whereabouts. His sympathy, however, at my loss was so unaffected that my heart went out to him.

We spent our days together, making excursions into the delightful country that surrounds this forgotten town, or visiting the rich architectural beauties of its silent streets. Close fellowship begat mutual confidence. He consulted me relative to certain family matters, while I in turn related my strange experience. He listened in

courteous silence, punctuated with compassionate interjection at my misfortune; but when, in an access of thoughtless candour, I expounded my theory, he with adroit tact deflected the drift of our converse. He clearly thought the trouble had affected my brain.

This morning a letter of recall came for Sir John. As, however, he had not visited the museum, he postponed his departure for a day. The forenoon was devoted to packing; and, our mid-day meal discussed, we strolled leisurely to the building that contains the town's artistic treasures. Formerly the palace of some noble, it boasts now but scant patronage, for the townfolk love not art, and tourists are few. The custodian gave us admittance, readily pocketed a gratuity, and left us to our own devices.

The collection occupies the left wing. It is heterogeneous and neglected; yet to my companion it afforded no small pleasure. He descanted learnedly, and—to my thinking—with excessive prolixity, on such curios as took his fancy. At last, somewhat tired, we sat down, and, overcome maybe by the oppressive atmosphere of the unventilated rooms, lapsed unconsciously into a doze.

I must have slept for some hours, for it was dusk when I awoke. I aroused Sir John, and, half amused, half vexed, at this untoward occurrence, we rose to depart. To our surprise we found the door by which we had entered locked and unyielding. We raised our voices to their highest pitch: a dismal echo was the sole response. We ran to the nearest window: it gave upon a high-walled courtyard. Cursing the custodian's thoughtlessness and neglect,

we proceeded to make a careful survey of the museum, in the hope of finding another exit.

In the farthest gallery we came upon a door that yielded to the touch. We entered a large chamber—the chamber wherein I now write—which serves apparently as a lumber and store room, containing as it does a quantity of furniture, worm-eaten and decayed—doubtless a remnant of the palace's ancient glory—besides a most varied collection of articles which civic indifference has consigned to uncatalogued obscurity. Sir John, who

was in advance, stopped suddenly.

"Look!" he cried. "There! The Maximin!"

Before me, half concealed by a couch whose erstwhile beauty damp and time had sadly marred, stood the lost statue—the bronze Maximin. My excitement was such that, had not Sir John held me, I should have fallen.

"Steady, old man," he said. "I can quite understand your feelings. Better now?"

With an effort I regained my composure and nodded. I could not trust myself to speak. Then I looked eagerly around. A weapon lay at my hand—a heavy

mace, derelict of chivalry, that of a surety had never been wielded in holier cause than mine. With a shout of delirious joy I snatched it up, and sprang forward. Sir John interposed his stalwart person.

"Out of the way!" I cried, attempting to thrust him aside. He closed with me, and strove to wrest the weapon from my grasp.

"Man—man!" he cried, between the throes of our desperate struggle, "what



I POINTED TO CERTAIN CRIMSON SPOTS THAT BESPATTERED THE GROUND.

madness would you do? Has luck turned your brain?"

"Let go! Let go!" I shrieked, "that, ere it work further ill, I may dash yonder accursed devil to atoms. Let go, fool, ere I do you a mischief."

"Never, madman!"

The strife drew to its close. My antagonist, a heavier and more powerful man than myself, was surely gaining the upper hand. My grip on the steel shaft was relaxing. I made one supreme effort, frenzied and vain, then loosed my hold.

"Your blood be on your head," I cried, and slipped my hand into my pocket. I had left my revolver at the inn!

Sir John laughed, and sat down on the couch, behind which stood the statue. He regarded me fixedly as he poised the mace in his hands. Anon he lit a cigar, and began to smoke. His eyes never left me. He seemed to apprehend a renewed attempt on my part to destroy the Maximin. Yet he need have had no fear, for my bitter hate had turned from that which had wrecked my life to him who had balked my vengeance. As, baffled and sick at heart, I sank into a chair, I would

not for my very soul's salvation have stayed the dread fate that awaits him—that awaits me.

The moon had risen, and was now flooding the room with its silver light. The statue stood out black and grim. Its shadow fell athwart the doomed man. The bells in the old tower chimed ten. From afar came a faint burst of song and laughter. It fell upon my ears like a

dirge—like some mocking memory of the old life.

Then over me came a longing for someone to whom I could speak my dying words—could make my last confession. There was Sir John, but he was my enemy, and could never bear testimony to my truth. Like me, he would not see dawn. Naught remained, then, but to write down my weird experience. Perchance on the morrow it would be found. I took out my note-book and began to write.

For over an hour I kept without pause to my task; I knew that my time was short. A large bat fluttered across the room, and struck the quarries of an old window, that rattled with the impact. Distracted momentarily by the noise, I looked up. My eyes fell upon the Maximin, and I shuddered. The statue had become gigantic; it towered above Sir John in malign menace. I felt for the man such a pity as the inquisitor might feel for the victim who should grace the *auto da fe*. A morbid compunction stirred my conscience. I could not keep silence.

"Do you remember," I asked, in a quaking voice, "what Gibbon in his 'Decline and Fall' says about

Maximin—about his fury, his cruelty, his strength?"

Sir John shrugged his shoulders. "A relevant remark!" he exclaimed, selecting another cigar from his case.

"Very relevant," I said. "You'll find it so."

I laughed nervously; for I saw that the colour of the bronze was rapidly changing—changing to a fleshy hue.



"'OUT OF THE WAY!' I CRIED, ATTEMPTING TO THRUST HIM ASIDE."

Sir John deigned no reply. He struck a match and lit his cigar. His apathy shocked me. Much as I hated the man, I would not have him go to his death unprepared.

"Do you ever pray?" I whispered, hoarsely.

"What?" he exclaimed. Then, "Have a cigar? I find it infallible for unstrung nerves."

"For heaven's sake," I implored, "say some kind of prayer."

"You won't smoke? You make a great mistake."

He leant back in the full enjoyment of his Havana.

Thus far have I written of the immediate past. I must now, as best I may, keep pace with the fearful tragedy that is evolving itself before my eyes. Thus only can this document be complete—be conclusive.

I raise my eyes; hardly can I repress the

cry that starts to my lips. The statue lives! On its mighty limbs the great muscles twitch and quiver. From the depths of its evil eyes its foul spirit glowers.

The bat, flapping round in uncertain orbit, strikes it, and utters a shrill cry.

"What's that?" exclaims Sir John. "What are you grinning at, man?"

I am utterly unnerved. I try to say, "For heaven's sake, say some prayer"; I only mow and gibber.

The horror raises its giant arm. My voice finds vent in an unearthly yell. Sir John, starting to his feet, looks round.

"My God!" he shrieks. "Mercy! mercy!"

It is too ghastly; I can look no more.

"God have mercy upon me a sinner. Have mercy up—"



"THE STATUE LIVES! ON ITS MIGHTY LIMBS THE GREAT MUSCLES TWITCH AND QUIVER."