

# MY MYSTERIOUS NEIGHBOR

By  
BROUGHTON BRANDENBURG

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THIS is a story of impotence and power terribly interwoven—of a man who triumphed so gloriously over tremendous odds that his final tragedy seems comparatively trivial. The intense, bewildering sequence of events I record, not as a man of science and medicine reporting phenomena before his society, but as a student of humanity.

One night last year, in early December, if I recall correctly, I was reading in my study in the old house in University Place, where I have lived for twenty-five years. It was some time after midnight, and the quietness of the tomb lay over all that part of the city.

I was just in the act of turning a page when the silence was broken by a terrible cry, long, shrill, agonized and very human, though there was a suggestion of something horribly bestial in it. It rose sharply, then fell, ending in a moan and leaving my heart standing still while the perspiration started from my palms and my brow. Cold horror spread slowly throughout my entire being.

There was no mistaking the location whence it came—the low, red brick house directly opposite. I ran to the window just in time to see by the light of the street lamp what was apparently the head and shoulders of a man in the lower window of the house.

The head was bald, the face was beardless and terribly contorted, while the arms were tossing wildly in the air. Just then from the darkened room behind came some heavy missile that struck the head and, crashing on through the glass, fell into the street. Instantly the face was gone; there was only the black hole in the pane. Nothing more was to be heard, nothing more was to be seen.

It was like some period in a dreadful nightmare. For a moment I sat frozen in my place. There was, however, a great stir in the room of Mrs. Keppler, my old housekeeper. Her chamber was directly overhead, and very soon she came clattering excitedly down the stairs. I was endeavoring to reassure her when the crunch of footsteps sounded on the broken glass lying in front of the other house and I saw a policeman coming across, bent on making inquiries and attracted by the light in my windows.

With the aged housekeeper, clinging tremulously to my cat-tails, refusing to be left in the place alone, I hurried across the street with the officer. Briefly, I told him all I knew of the place, that it was owned by an old German, second-hand furniture dealer, named Peter Hahn, who lived in the tenement alone, let out the first floor to lodgers and used the two upper floors for storing such furniture as he could not get into his little sales place.

The front door opened at once as the officer turned the knob. Old Peter had slid the bolts and was standing in the dingy hall, shivering in his night clothes, striving to shield the flickering flame of a candle from the blast that swept in from the open.

"Here, what's all this noise about?" cried the officer sharply.

"Ach, it should be nothing, but it is in there," whispered Peter, pointing to the parlor door. "We shall see, we shall see."

"Listen!" said I.

Within there sounded a shrill, peevish, whining voice and a heavy, voluminous one. They were talking in subdued tones, using what seemed to me to be Chinese, certainly some Oriental tongue, and they were engaged in a most bitter and angry debate.

"Go ahead and knock," said the officer.

Hahn rapped twice and there was the sharp crackle of a match inside, then a moment's silence.

"Mr. Keppler, Mr. Keppler!"

"Oh, are you there, Peter? Just a moment," answered the deep voice in velvet tones.

A glance down the hall showed me that the door to the suite on the floor, except by another door in the rear, which was effectively blocked, however, by a heap of heavy old furniture in the rear hall piled against it.

The lock clicked and the door swung wide, revealing a splendid black-bearded man of some breadth and stature, swayed around in a long red-tufted dressing gown with a tasseled cord about his middle. In his hand he bore a book with his fingers marking a page and he was peacefully smoking a deep-bowled pipe.

"Good evening, or rather good morning, gentlemen. Pray come in," said he, surveying our party keenly but with the utmost good nature.

The interior was divided into three rooms, richly furnished, all connected with wide doors. That much I could see by the light of the heavily shaded reading lamp in the front room, the one in which we now stood.

"What is all this row we hear, Mr. Keppler?" said the officer.

"Surely my troubles with Mr. Sniffkin there have not been so tumultuous as to rouse the neighbors and call in the police?" said the man indicated a

huge yellow cat with a gesture and a brilliant smile. The beast was perched high on a desk, his yellow eyes glaring as he furtively endeavored to attend with his paw a cut on the side of his head.

"That's too thin, mister, there's been a fight here, maybe murder," replied the officer, pointing to the shattered window-pane.

At the words old Peter shuddered and nearly dropped his candlestick.

The giant laughed heartily. "That is absurd enough to be very funny," said he.

"It is, eh? Where is the man who was screaming at that window three minutes ago?" demanded the officer.

"Why, my dear man, it was not I. I am alone here. Old Sniffkin was caterwauling there and I heaved a stone jug at him. It went through the window—worse luck."

"Where is the other one you was just rowing with this moment ago? Don't lie to me. I heard you from the hall!"

"Again, my dear sir, I am puzzled. Sniffkin and I have been scolding each other. As you can see, there is but one means of entrance or exit to this place. No one has been in or out. You may search these rooms if you choose."

"And that I will," said the officer. "Dr. Siddons, guard this door while I go through this place."

Really, I must say he made a thorough search in all the closets of the little kitchen and pantry in the rear, behind the tapestry hangings, under the bed and behind the grand piano and the music-cases in the front room, tapping walls, ceiling and floor with his club for concealed doors. Fully fifteen minutes he spent. Keppler and I, deeply embarrassed, chaffing on a score of extraneous subjects, while old Hahn and my housekeeper were exchanging terrified whispers in the hall behind us.

I have said positively that I saw that face at the window, that we heard the two distinct voices in squalor and yet with no exits possible save the one that had been constantly under our eyes, there was no living thing in those rooms except Keppler and his cat.

Baffled, muttering, angry and threatening, the officer desisted and withdrew. Keppler bade me a most neighborly good-night, saying the absurd incident had served one good purpose, it had made us acquainted, and he hoped to see me within his doors quite soon again. I believe I asked him, with some ill grace, to visit me. The extraordinarily contradictory events of the hour with all their terror and mystery when contrasted with Keppler's perfect composure and good nature, had quite taken me aback.

It was with difficulty that I got rid of the policeman. He would have followed me home to talk of the bewildering affair, and even as it was Mrs. Keppler hurried to say to me to say to me to say to me.

"Doctor, this is dreadful. The lies, the lies that big man told. You should have heard Peter—"

"And what says Peter? Draw those shades and come tell me."

Therefore she began a review of the statements that the panic-stricken old furniture dealer had made. It appeared that his strange lodger's name was Hendrik Keppeler, of Ryndam, a singer, some said a great bass artist. He had leased the rooms for a long term three months before and was paying double the ordinary rent for the privilege of doing absolutely as he pleased at any and all times and of being let entirely alone. He had specified that he was to be made the victim of no curiosity on the part of his landlord.

The two voices were no new thing to Peter. They were an every day, all day matter. He had heard that dreadful cry but once before and that was in the first month at daybreak. Never had he seen any one or anything in the rooms save Sniffkin, the cat, and Keppeler, the basso, but evidences of the existence and life of another being were abundant.

He marketed for Keppeler and always bought enough for two, often getting different sorts of food for each, such as fowl for one and steak for the other. He could hear the preparations for the meals and the two voices in talk and laughter, both perfectly distinct and always in this tongue he could not understand. Then after the meal Keppeler would go out, looking magnificent in the great coat and top-hat he always wore.

As soon as the door closed on his heels, Peter would go surreptitiously into the rooms from which Keppeler had just departed, alone and would find two chairs at the table, two soiled plates and two sets of silver and two bottles, one of unknown wine, the other of stout, but no one was there but Sniffkin. There were abundant clothes in the room, but they were of Keppeler's size only and were obviously for the sole use of one man. Never were there signs of two men having dressed and thrown down discarded clothes.

There was one other puzzling thing. Peter had often noticed in the room a sweet, sickly unfamiliar odor for which he could not account. At the mention of this it came sharply to me that I, too, had observed an unusual smell. Now that I thought of it,

was at work repairing the shattered pane. The curtains were fine and I could see entirely through to the back. There were two chairs at the table, two plates on it and two separate platters of food, yet the only person within was Keppeler and the glazier, Sniffkin sat on the window-edge in the wintry sunshine, grooming his damaged head.

Keppeler, wrapped about in his beautiful red robe, was pacing up and down the rooms, pausing now and then at the piano to strike a few chords and all the while singing tremendous basso roles. Often he came to the window, seemingly to look over at my house, and once, catching sight of me, he waved his hand in friendly fashion, turning away at once to go on with his study. The more I thought of it, the more it seemed to me that I had heard the name Hendrik Keppeler before. I have kept little track of musical matters in late years. I knew Bob Tradigan to be one of those things, however foolish as it may seem in a man of his years, and this morning I called him by telephone at the Presbyterian Hospital and said:

"Tradigan, have you ever heard of an opera singer named Hendrik Keppeler?"

"What? Keppeler? Man alive, you do not mean to say you have never heard of the great Keppeler? Why, the world has never known such a voice. I heard him early in the week in 'Aida,' and he sings again on Friday. But why do you ask?"

"Oh, I find that he is my neighbor, and some circumstances which I cannot go into now have caused me to become greatly interested in him. Have you ever heard anything concerning him that was out of the ordinary?"

"Well, really nothing more than vague gossip. There has always been speculation as to why there were so few roles that he would sing. I have noticed that he seldom or never sits down when singing. Also, he is eccentric in that he keeps entirely to himself, never lunches or dines out and never leaves New York for concert work or tours. I know from my personal acquaintance with her that Madame Mentona has been in love with him for two seasons, yet he never goes anywhere but on the stage or about the opera house, though he writes her the most beautiful letters every day. She is a dear creature, one of the sweetest of women, and he apparently has no ties in the world to prevent his marriage to any one whom he might love. Certainly his old mother, who lives in the little village of Ryndam, Holland, would not constitute an obstacle. His story, as I have heard it, is that when a mere lad, his mother having been left a widow and he the only child, he left home and went to sea. On one of his voyages somewhere in Australia his letters and remittances ceased, and she heard his ship had been wrecked and she gave him up for dead. After two years had passed, there came a letter from San Francisco with a good round sum in it and bearing the news that Hermann Gross, the late manager, had heard him singing one day in a barber shop where he was the cashier, had said that he was naturally a great singer and after a year or two of study could go into opera. He has been singing three years now, and he and Gross were the closest of friends till the latter died last year. Madame Mentona has told me of the visit which she paid to the mother in Ryndam in the summer. Frau Keppeler now has a fine house bought from her son's earnings and is very proud and happy, only she grieves deeply that Hendrik will never visit her. Since you are interested, Siddons, why not go with him and hear him when next he sings? I think it is Friday night."

I had a message from Tradigan later and we went. Madame Mentona was not in the cast that night and Mrs. Tradigan had asked her to join the party in our house. Of course, Keppeler was almost the sole topic of the conversation.

Throughout the evening whenever he was on the stage I was oppressed with a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety which I could not altogether analyze. His singing was superb, his dramatic action wonderfully forceful, and yet it was restrained in some most peculiar way. Just what it was I could not tell.

After the opera Mrs. Tradigan, joined by Madame Mentona, sent him a line inviting him to supper with us, but he declined in a most deferential reply. There are two sentences of his note which have stuck in my mind and have left the deeper impression in view of what I now know:

"This would have been one of the pleasures for which I would yield any or all of the few things in my life which are worth while, but I am denied it. I am sure you would forgive me, and realize my profound gratitude."

Every little thing about him was faintly tinged with some element of mystery, and some things which were two voices, his exalted, his excited, his sad, his old mannerisms, that terrible face, that awful cry?

I reached home that night about one o'clock and was puzzled in quietude after seeing that the house across the way was still lighted, though the shades were drawn, when something impelled me to look back. Keppeler was just raising the shade. I could see entirely through the lighted rooms. Filled with curiosity, I left my stoop and walked nearer, concealing myself in a deep shadow.

He was standing with his hand on the cord of the shade looking out, when suddenly he seemed smitten with the most terrible convulsions. I got but one glance, for he contrived to drag down the shade.

Again that horrible cry broke forth on the night stillness, sounding along the street—and if I am not much mistaken, when I first heard it, the effect was terrible. My hair tingled, my flesh crept on my bones and I shuddered with unexplainable horror.

Within, the light was extinguished and a perfect babble was going on. The voices of Keppeler were very clearly distinguished, but not more so than the frantic, querulous, thin whine and chatter of the other—of the terrible unknown thing. They were quarreling violently and Keppeler was uttering commands. The thing was refusing to obey. Now the awful wailing race and tossing arms showed at the window, then I saw Keppeler, and instantly some mighty power dragged both down and out of sight behind the shade.

I started from my hiding-place and was about to hammer on the door when I stopped to consider. What could have happened? The more I resolved the matter in my mind the more a profound panic took possession of me and, after about ten minutes of standing there in the light snow, I suddenly rushed madly across the street into my own house, shut and bolted the door behind me, and when I went to bed, it was with a pistol lying on a chair beside my pillow.

When I awoke after a bad night Keppeler, as usual, was pacing up and down, singing bitingly, stopping now and then at the piano. There was no sign about him or about the place of the tragic crisis of the night before.

This day, after the singer had left the house, I saw old Peter Hahn dart into the rooms and look hurriedly about. Fully a half-score of patients were waiting for me, but I left them to their own devices and went over.

Old Peter met me in the hall.

"See! See!" he exclaimed frantically. "Look for yourself. He has just gone out alone and yet a mere moment ago two men were in here. One had a sword and there is none—ach, there is none."

In his hand he was holding two unsealed letters, nervously pulling the enclosures from the envelopes. One I saw was written in Chinese and from it a New York draft flickered out and fell to the floor.

"What have you there?" I said.

"He gives me these each month. I should mail them and he pays his rent. But he will pay me no more. He should go. I cannot stand such things."

Half-shamed of my intrusion into another man's affairs, I took the letters and made out that the one was addressed to the venerable Mrs. Keppeler in Ryndam and contained New York exchange for two hundred dollars. The other was in Chinese and contained New York exchange drawn to "Yung Shai Kin, Canton, China."

It happened that a very able young South Chinese, Dr. Tche Lun Moe by name, was studying at the hospital, and I sent over for him at once and gave him the letter to read. He immediately became greatly excited and demanded to know the origin of it. I said it had been found by Peter Hahn and inquired what it contained.

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the old lady was to come to New York, surprise her son by appearing on Christmas Day and remain with him until they could find a suitable place to live in which she might spend her last days in comfort and happiness. As soon as Hendrik Keppeler understood the matter he insisted on his mother's returning to Holland by the next steamer, and as to her staying in his apartments even for a short time, he had grown frightfully incensed and had unceremoniously ushered both into the street.

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"What is all this row we hear, Mr. Keppeler?" said the officer.

"Surely my troubles with Mr. Sniffkin there have not been so tumultuous as to rouse the neighbors and call in the police?" said the man indicated a

I knew that it was the insidious fragrance of opium.

When Mrs. Keppeler had gone up, I looked out of my window toward the red house that held this dreadful and compelling mystery. It was now quiet and dark.

When I awoke the next morning I heard what I had never heard before, the occasional notes of Keppeler's piano and his magnificent voice drilling in tone production and rehearsing various operatic roles. Doubtless he had often sung so, but I had never noticed it. I rose and went to my window. A glazier

NEXT WEEK, COUNTING LOVE'S TOLL  
By Frances A. Harmer