

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 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. The 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 coat-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 the open.

"Here's all this noise about?" asked the officer sharply.

"Ash, 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, pelulant, 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 thrice and there was the sharp crackle of a match inside, then a moment's silence.

"Mr. Kelsen?"

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

A glance down the hall showed that the door from which we stood was the sole means of entrance to the suite on the floor, except by another door in the rear, which was effectually 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, wrapped around in a long red-tufted dressing-gown with a tasseled cord about his middle. In his hand he bore a boott 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

huge yellow cat with a gesture and a brilliant smile. The beast was perched high on a desk, his yellow eyes glaring as he furiously endeavored to attend with his claws 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 candle-stick.

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. I went through the window—worse luck."

"Where is the other one you was just rowing with this morning 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 door with his club for concealed doors. Fully fifteen minutes he spent, Kelsen imperturbed, and deeply embarrassed, chattering 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 quarrel, 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 Kelsen and his cat.

Baffled, muttering, angry and threatening, the officer desisted and withdrew. Kelsen 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 Kelsen's perfect composure and good nature, had nothing to do with it.

It was with difficulty that I got rid of the policeman. He would have followed me home to talk of the bewitching affair, and even as it was Mrs. Keppler tarried at my door to say:

"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 Kelsen, of Ryndam, a singer, some said a great bass artiste. 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 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 Kelsen, the basso, but evidences of the existence and life of another being were abundant.

He marketed for Kelsen 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 Kelsen 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 noiselessly into the rooms from which Kelsen 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 Kelsen'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, 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 a work repairing the shattered pane. The curtain was drawn wide and could be easily drawn 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 were Kelsen and the glazier Sniffkin sat on the window-sill in the wintry sun-shine grooming his damaged head.

Kelsen, wrapped about in his beautiful robe, was pacing up and down the room, 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 Kelsen before. I have kept little track of musical matters in late years, but Dr. Tradigan is a man of the world, 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 Kelsen?"

"What?" Kelsen? Man alive, you do not mean to say you have never heard of the great Kelsen? 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. I have been told that he is a man known from my personal acquaintance with him that Madame Mentona has been in love with him for two seasons, yet he never sees her 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. Later he 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 harky shop and had been so charmed, had said that he was naturally a great singer and often 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 Kelsen 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 me and bear 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 box. Of course, Kelsen was almost the sole topic of conversation.

Throughout the evening whenever he was on the stage I was impressed 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 all 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 go to mine own place, but I leave my thoughts to attend you, and if you could but read them all I am sure you would forgive me, and realize my profound gratitude."

"I have another question," I said. "I know your language and your social ceremonies are difficult and intricate. Would you say the man who wrote that letter is Chinese?"

"Absolutely. None but a Chinese scholar could have written it."

More deeply puzzled than ever, after Dr. Teche Lun Mo's departure, I took the two letters and saw them safely on their way.

Far in the night sometime my housekeeper came tapping at my door.

"Get up, doctor—get up quick! There is something the matter over at Peter Hahn's."

I leaped out of bed and ran to the window. The first thing I noticed was that the freshly-fallen snow had been broken by a tortuous track, as if some huge dog had gone about rooting it up in various directions in front of the house. This I saw at a glance and then perceived in the shadowy doorway a big black heap apparently in the throes of some dreadful spasm. The door was open. The shapelessness of the heap gave me no clue, it had nothing of the appearance of a man, and suddenly it disappeared in the dark hall, the door was banged shut, and all was quiet.

In the morning the first sound that I heard was Kelsen's glorious voice singing his roles and when I went to the window he gaily waved his hand to me and smiled.

A little later in the day Dr. Teche Lun Mo called me on the telephone.

"I thought you might like to know," he said, "that I have learned from a cousin some interesting news pertaining to the writer of the letter which you showed me. His name here in New York had a visit from him. He came last night and, after a grand feast and, I fear, too much opium, he disappeared; but they know now that he is living, and he will certainly be killed for having pretended to be dead. He can't escape."

It was Christmas morning, bright and crisp, and the whole city was in sparkling white. I heard the creak of wheels in the snow and, looking out, saw that a carriage had drawn up at the door of the other house. Its top was piled with new luggage of a foreign look with the familiar Holland blue labels on it, and as I watched, Madame Mentona got out and turned to assist a crumpled little old woman who carried a heavy black stick and was covered to the waist in rags. Peter Hahn appeared and hurried to their summons. The door closed behind them.

About five minutes the door was pulled open again. The two women came forth hurriedly. The old creature was wailing and Madame Mentona was white with rage. They were coming across to my house apparently and I hastened to meet them at the door.

"Oh, it is outrageous, outrageous," began Madame Mentona as she came near. "Perfectly dreadful, Dr. Siddons. It was my little surprise for Kelsen. Now he has put her out of his own house."

"Has put who out, my dear child?" said I.

"His own mother."

So it appeared. When I got to the bottom of the affair it was simply that Madame Mentona and the venerable Mrs. Kelsen had conspired together that

the old lady was to come to New York, surprise her son by appearing at the door. Day and remain with him until she could find a suitable place to live in which she might spend her last days in comfort and happiness. As soon as Hendrik Kelsen 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 frightened and had unmercifully ushered both into the street.

That night I was dining at my sister's, and the festivities of the Christmas tree were at their height when I was called to the telephone. It was the young Chinese doctor.

Half-asleep of my intrusion into another man's affairs, I took the telephone and made out that the one was addressed to the venerable Mrs. Kelsen in Ryndam and contained New York exchange for two hundred dollars. The other was in Chinese and contained 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 frightened and had unmercifully ushered both into the street.

It happened that a very able young South Chinese

Dr. Teche Lun Mo 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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