

Deadly Letters.

By
ROBERT CROMIE.

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CHAPTER I.
Surgeon Colonel John Hedford, late of the Indian medical service, lived in the large residence of a Scotchman in the city of London. During a long residence in India he had given much time and study to the action of poisons on organic life. His knowledge of the subject became so exhaustive that he was in demand by the British Government for the purpose of appointing him to the post of medical officer of the Indian Medical Service. His specialty enabled him to supplement his knowledge by acting as an expert when called on. His book on toxicology, which he modestly entitled "Some Remarks on the Nature and Effect of Indian Poisons," had been favorably reviewed by the Lancet and the British Medical Journal and had been made a text book in the schools.

One morning he was watching the death throes of a mouse to which he had administered a new poison, when a letter, marked "immediate," was delivered by a commissionaire. It read as follows:

"The Royal Standard Life Assurance Co.,
21, Castle Lane, London, E.C. 4, 12th July, 1895.
Dear Sir: Can you favor me with a call at this office at 12 o'clock today? We wish to consult you on a matter of great importance. Kindly reply by messenger.
Yours very truly,
"Resident Secretary,
"The Royal Standard Life Assurance Co.,
21, Castle Lane, London, E.C. 4."

"The specialist read the note carefully through twice before sending an affirmative reply. By this time the

mouse was dead, and as that was the only urgent business he had on hand just then Hedford suspended his experiments for the day. His silver-mounted cane and immaculate Lincoln and Bennett were handed to him by his Hindoo servant, Chandra-Dass, and Hedford left the house. He was not to return for a few days. That morning the London dailies, where he arrived with military punctuality on the stroke of noon.

Hedford was received by the secretary, Mr. Morton, and introduced to Mr. Montagu Scott, the London manager, who had been in Scotland for the past two days. After paying a well-merited compliment to the specialist on his reputation as a toxicologist, Mr. Scott got to business at once, and said abruptly:

"I am going to put a case into your hands which cost this and two other companies, the 'Tresham' and the 'Mutual,' one hundred and fifty thousand pounds sterling, and which may cost us half a million unless the riddle can be read."

The specialist was silent.

"Before handing you these documents," Mr. Scott went on, indicating a tightly-strapped bundle of papers on the table, "I must ask your earnest assurance that you will maintain absolute secrecy on the subject under penalty of your own honor, or some other man, has solved the mystery."

The assurance given by Mr. Scott stated briefly that for the past two years purchases of life policies had been made by, or for, Sir William Huntington, M. P., a Scotchman of high reputation who lived principally in London; that most of the persons assured had died since the date of the transfer of the policies; that in only one case had there been an inquiry, for the sufficient reason that the assured had all died from well-known diseases, and had been attended by physicians who were beyond suspicion; and that the three companies had paid claims amounting in all to one hundred and fifty thousand pounds sterling to Sir William Huntington or to persons who were suspected of being in collusion with him. This coincidence of early death from "natural causes" occurring to nearly all the unfortunate transferees of the policies was, at present, inexplicable, Mr. Scott had no special hypothesis, but, on behalf of the three "Life" offices, he intrusted Surgeon Colonel Hedford with the case, informing him that if necessary he could call in the services of an experienced detective from Scotland Yard. This Hedford declined to do, preferring to work for a time single-handed in the matter. Mr. Scott intimated that a sum of five hundred pounds would be placed to the credit of Colonel Hedford's account in the Great Northern Banking Company, and that he was to spare neither pains nor money in the endeavor to clear up the mystery.

As the specialist left the Royal Standard office he buttoned his coat with determination and strode hastily homeward. He was well aware of the intricate nature of the task before him, and fully realized the difficulties in his path. On the other hand, the fact that the five hundred pounds would convert the small debit balance of his banking account into a handsome credit one was a matter for satisfaction. Anglo-Indian habits are expensive and difficult to break off. Besides, the work before him was purely humanitarian. It is pleasant to be a philanthropist when one is well paid for it.

On arriving at the "Elms," Hedford went straight to his study, and lighting a strong Indian cheroot he undid the straps which bound together the bundle of documents handed to him by the manager of the insurance company. They were records of the dates and causes of death of the persons whose policies had been purchased by Sir William Huntington. As the causes of death ranged from "smallpox" to "old age," and as the melancholy list included two railway accidents, very little was gained from the study of the papers. However, the specialist made a table of the dates, which he carefully completed, seemed to suggest something more than the individual documents read consecutively. On the impression thus formed he reserved judgment.

Surgeon Colonel Hedford spent the next three weeks in journeying north, south, east and west to the different parts of the Kingdom where the deceased policy-holders had resided. He interviewed doctors and relatives with much tact and circumspection without arousing the slightest suspicion as to his object, but failed to elicit anything material. Death in each case had been caused by one or other of the ill to which the death is left. The mystery was far from solution, however. One terrible fact, however, stood out in

ghastly relief--sooner or later after the purchase of their policies, people who lived hundreds of miles apart were struck down by some deadly disease, and in several cases not only had the assured persons been cut off, but also other members of their families. Hedford had seen strange things in India, but had never seen anything like the reverse of superstition, but he could not, at times, help feeling that there was more than coincidence in the matter, and that Sir William Huntington possessed powers of a diabolical and horrible nature. The specialist, however, was both sensible and scientific. To be both scientific and sensible is to be orthodox in mind and cordial in heart. Hedford was on the point of returning to Scotland, when he received a telegram from Mr. Montagu Scott, as follows:

"Policy purchased by Huntington yesterday, ten thousand pounds, in the insurance company, 21, Castle Lane, London, E.C. 4, 12th July, 1895. Let me hear from you there.
Scott, London."

Reference to the columns of the Daily Telegraph showed that a policy on the life of a retired Indian officer had been sold at auction the previous day.

The specialist arrived at Brighton tired and worn out by continuous travel, and he had a large fortune. Hence the sale of the policy.

Hedford was intensely interested. After removing the traces of his first journey he sent his cart to General Hamilton. They were old friends, and over a cigar and a whisky-and-seltzer in the smoking-room, Hamilton related the story of his misfortune. He had with him a pension and a small remnant of his capital left; but he bitterly regretted having had to let his life policy go. His daughters were to join him the next day and, in the course of a week or ten days, they intended going to some cheap continental watering place. The girls did not know of his financial difficulties, and Hedford was cautioned not to divulge anything to them.

The Misses Hamilton arrived the next morning and Hedford, accompanied by the specialist, who laughingly reminded them that when he bade them farewell ten years before at the Gorkanah residence they had shed tears at his departure and had been lavish of their caresses. He told them that he hoped by "strict attention to business," etc., to merit a continuance, or rather a renewal of favors then bestowed. For a brief space he forgot his serious mission, and, in the charming society of Ethel and Mary Hamilton a delightful evening was spent. But he did not long neglect his duty, and that evening the Hamiltons saw him off by the London express. He had arranged to accompany the party and to Dresden on his return from town.

That night Hedford had a conversation with Mr. Montagu Scott, and subsequently a night of sleepless rest with the celebrated Inspector Trowbridge, of South American fame, formerly of Scotland Yard, but now a private inquiry agent. The two left London together for Salisbury by the night mail.

Two days afterwards Hedford, Chandra-Dass, with several traveling trunks and portmanteaux, returned to Brighton. After a week spent by the party in making preparations for departure, it was arranged that they should cross by Dover and Calais next day.

Hedford retired to bed after an enjoyable evening, feeling relief in the thought that his old friend was leaving the mysterious fate which might befall him at any moment. He spent a troubled night. Distracted thoughts kept him awake, and he only fell into a sound sleep towards morning. He was awakened by Chandra-Dass, whose usually dusky countenance was literally of an ashen pallor.

"Sahib, Sahib," he called, "Chota-hazi," he stammered, with chattering teeth. "Sahib very bad. Him one dam rash all over."

Jumping out of bed, Hedford threw on his dressing gown, and, followed by Chandra-Dass, rushed to the general's bedroom.

The sword had fallen!

"What do you think is the matter, Hedford?" the general asked, anxiously. "I don't half like this rash on my face and wrists. I feel as if I've been poisoned by smallpox."

"I don't like it, either," said Hedford, gravely, after a careful examination of his patient.

"What have I got?"

"Smallpox."

"My God! the poor girls!"

"Major General Hamilton died and was duly buried."

The specialist might have made a "post-mortem" privately if he had wished. But the general had died of smallpox and there was an end of it. Hedford had entered a cul-de-sac.

On the day after the funeral Hedford, at Ethel Hamilton's request, went over the deceased's papers. He was struck by the number of gold and silver mine prospectuses which poor Hamilton had accumulated. As he tossed them one after another into the wastepaper basket he observed some pencil memoranda, in the general's handwriting, on a prospectus from which the wrapper had not been removed. The Dullwich postmark caught his eye. This struck him as odd. Prospectuses are not usually posted in small country villages a hundred miles from London. He turned over the contents of the basket on the floor, and found several torn wrappers which he minutely examined. Then taking from his pocket-book the reports of ex-inspector Trowbridge, which he had received from day to day, he perceived them with concentrated attention. The specialist set down to think. A dozen wild guesses passed through his mind, but none stood the test of "second thoughts." One shadowy idea began to form, wilder and more horrible still than all the rest; so far-fetched, indeed, that he dismissed it.

But it persistently returned again and again. He fought against it no further. He had a strong suspicion that a short telegram was dispatched to Trowbridge.

CHAPTER II.
Hedford explained to the two girls that he was summoned away for a few days on business of the most urgent nature. Before leaving he handed to them a note which he found in the general's writing desk. Owing to the fact that he had placed it there himself no one had a better right to read it than Hedford. The specialist was a kindly man, although a vivaciousist.

The next evening Hedford arrived at Dullwich. He was met at the station by Trowbridge. Dullwich is a small country village on the Great Northern line, some seven or eight miles from the large manufacturing town of Starlington. The detective took much interest in the arrangements of the village. Hedford explained that he had been called to the village on the morning of the general's death, to which fascinating pursuit he devoted himself with great energy. He got to know many of the golfers, and on the third morning of his stay in Dullwich, he was met on the links by Trowbridge, who took from his pocket a newspaper, the Starlington News, and pointed out a paragraph marked in blue pencil: "Dullwich Hospital. Sir William Huntington, M. P. for Starlington, has forwarded a check for five hundred pounds to the treasurer of the Dullwich hospital. If the other life governors would follow his principle example the institution's debt would be paid." Hedford's frequent visits to the wards testified.

Hedford read no more. The hospital was situated at the outskirts of the village. He went there without delay. The house physician, Dr. Grey, another ardent golfer, gratefully received his modest subscription of five pounds. Dr. Grey was much pleased with the interest in the hospital shown by Colonel Hedford--an interest natural enough in a brother-in-law of the treasurer of the Dullwich hospital. He invited him to inspect the wards.

After the tour of the hospital, Hedford said, carelessly: "What about your cases of infectious diseases?" "Specially isolated in a separate building," Grey explained. "Like to go through?"

"Yes, if I may."

"Most of our infectious cases are sent to us from Starlington," Dr. Grey said as they crossed the quadrangle to a row of isolated huts. "We have several bad cases of typhus and smallpox at present. It is wise, though, on your part to run any risk? You are not out of your wits?"

"Oh," said Hedford, with a quiet smile, "I am disease proof. I have seen too much of that sort of thing in India to have the least fear. You can distinguish me afterwards."

Nurse Hudson was on duty--a tall, expressionless woman, who answered Dr. Grey's questions in a direct, business-like manner. Nurse Hudson was reported to have no special means.

"Splendid woman, but too unsympathetic," Dr. Grey whispered in Hedford's ear.

Nurse Hudson looked keenly at the visitor who was in a seemingly careless manner, inspecting a patient's clinical chart, which hung on the wall beside the bed. The remarks on the chart were in Nurse Hudson's handwriting.

"Very interesting case this," said the doctor, joining Hedford. "How is Johnston?" This to Nurse Hudson.

"Much better, doctor," the nurse replied, hastily.

"Must have been bad, then," Hedford put in. "The man is comatose now, or dead?"

Dr. Grey drew down the bed-clothes and felt the patient's pulse. He placed his hand on the dead man's heart and possessed himself of the object unobserved by the nurse. The diabolical nature of Huntington's crime flashed upon him. His sunrise had become a certainty!

Hedford took leave of Dr. Grey hastily. Five minutes afterwards Detective Trowbridge interviewed Nurse Hudson. "The interview was short, sharp and decisive. She obtained leave of absence. A near relative was dying, she said."

For one hour exactly she was closeted with Colonel Hedford in his private sitting-room at the "Red Lion."

The specialist caught the first train to London. His brain was on fire. He could not sit still. He had a corner of the little room, and he could not even smoke, and he held a civil curate of the "private secretary" type, who said it was a "charming day" to go to the theatre.

When the train drew into Euston he could hardly wait for it to stop. He dashed out of the carriage, jumped into a hansom, and drove rapidly to the head office of the Royal Standard, where he found Mr. Montagu Scott awaiting him. The manager had been warned by wire.

"You have succeeded," said Mr. Scott, strongly agitated, as Hedford entered the room. "See it in your face."

Hedford produced an oblong-shaped paper which bore evident traces of having been submitted to the action of some strong chemical agent. It was a prospectus of the "African Exploration, Trading and Mining Company, Limited." It was addressed to "Henry Howard, Esq., 11, Granville Terrace, Belfast."

Hedford read out the name and address, and asked the holder in your company?"

The manager touched an electric bell and spoke through a tube. The sharp r-r-r-r-r of the bell broke the silence, and Mr. Montagu Scott applied his ear to the tube.

"In difficulties--life assured for two thousand pounds. Policy sold six months ago to Sir William Huntington," said the manager, as he dropped the flexible tube.

"Wonderful, marvelous, monstrous, fiendish!" he added, five minutes later.

"What will you do now?"

"Pardon me," answered the specialist, "what will you do now?"

Mr. Scott pondered for fully five minutes, and then said slowly and impressively:

"I think, Colonel Hedford, you had better finish this yourself. We have dropped an immense sum of money. It would be a bonus year, and I don't see how we are going to pay it. We cannot compound with the creditors. Your circumstantial evidence is still very weak. It may hang the woman, but that would not enable the 'Royal Standard' and the other two companies to recover the money. You may be very sure that Sir William Huntington has been secured."

"To cut the matter short," said Hedford, deliberately, "you will leave the matter in my hands."

Mr. Montagu Scott looked straight into the other's eyes, and said slowly: "That is the only way. I will leave it in your hands."

"Then you will pay your bonus," said the specialist.

"And you have five thousand pounds," said the managing director.

Sir William Huntington turned over thoughtfully a visiting card bearing this inscription:

"Surgeon Colonel J. Hedford, (Late Indian Medical Service) United Service Club, Pall Mall."

"Show him up," he said, and the specialist in poisons entered the room.

"Your business, sir," said the baronet, shortly. Hedford had neither bowed nor accepted Sir William's outstretched hand.

"To make you an offer."

"About what?"

"Some 'Royal Standard' and other life policies you hold."

"Sir, your intrusion is most unwarrantable. My secretary transacts business of this nature for me. Good day!" Sir William moved towards the bell. The specialist interposed.

"Will your secretary go as far as to hang for you should we prove our case?"

"Your case--what case? Are you mad or drunk?"

"Neither. I am here to tell you, firstly," said the specialist, clicking his fingers on the fingers of one hand, "that you have swindled three insurance companies out of £150,000; secondly, that you have murdered three policy-holders who sold to you, and, thirdly, that you carried out this system of prodigious crime by means of your accomplice."

"That will do. Leave the house!" commanded Sir William.

The muscles of his face never moved, but it was death-like in its pallor.

"But Nurse Hudson?"

"Never heard of her."

"Stranger. She knows you well."

"How should she know me?"

"She is in custody. She has confessed."

Sir William Huntington sank back in his chair.

Half an hour afterwards Hedford, accompanied by the baronet, drove to the Bank of England. Some mysterious operations took place there which resulted in the transfer of a large sum in consols to "John Hedford."

They drove back to Park Lane. The specialist remained about ten minutes, then he left the house, leaving a few paces down the street and stopped. This is what he was saying to himself: "One hundred and fifteen thousand pounds. A hundred thousand for the insurance people, ten for the Hamilton girls, and five for myself. No proceeding, no trouble, no chance of losing the pile, and all on condition of allowing the dead to live."

The bang of a pistol-shot rang out on the stillness of the aristocratic street. A small group of people began to gather round Sir William Huntington's door.

Surgeon-Colonel John Hedford called a cab.

Nurse Hudson's body was found in the Thames a week afterwards. No more typhus or smallpox-infected prospectuses were posted in Dullwich.

The Poet.

In loud approval of his art They turn him to look, For he can touch a nation's heart, But not his pocketbook.

Washington Star.

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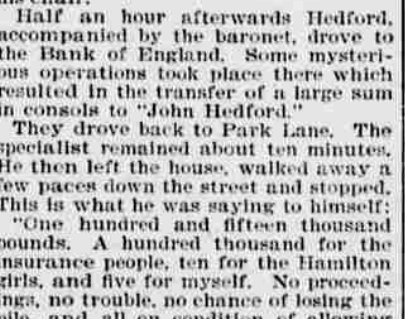
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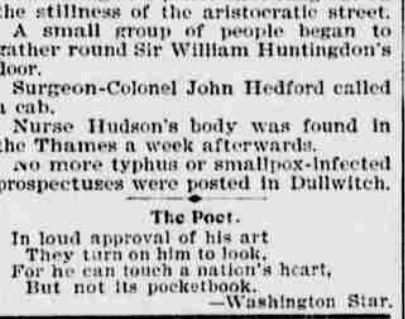
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