

## *The Story of Herman*

SOME years ago, I was residing at the lovely island of Penang, in the Indian Archipelago, near the Malayan Peninsula.

It is the great entrepôt between the West and the far Orient, and here a motley population collects from all the world. The American and the Chinese, the English and the Indian, the French and the Arab, the Hottentot and the Malay, all meet as upon common ground.

It is a free port. Upon its broad anchorage float the junks of China and the proas of Malacca, along with the public and private vessels of all Christendom.

Nature has here wooed the adventurous. With an equable and balmy climate, the earth teems with every production of the tropics; the most luscious fruits, and a luxuriant vegetation to the water's edge; the bamboo, the palm, and the mangosteen, in graceful contrast with the nutmeg, the plantain, and the orange; while the impenetrable jungle-forests are bespangled with the brightest orchids. The scarlet coffee-berry adorns the hill-sides, the sugar-cane undulates in its valleys, and the rice plantations enrich the sea-coast.

Here lurk the fatal cobra, the crocodile, and the boa-constrictor; while the tiger roams secure in the tangled fastnesses. The bills of mortality number yearly, by hundreds, the human victims to this animal. Man is its *bonne bouche*, as the canvas-back is man's. But when tamed, and soon after capture, I have seen tigers as playful with their native keeper as he with his pet pariah-dog; while, than a young puppy (unless it be a plump rat) the tiger knows no greater dainty.

Thus much for the flora and fauna of the Straits settlements.

The principal European hotel in the settlement was called the "Albion," kept by a Frenchman. It was an immense tropical building, with deep verandas encircling each story, and its graceful lawn was tastefully adorned with the plants of the equatorial regions. Built on an eminence, it fronted the sea at the distance of about the sixteenth of a mile; and upon its balconies the guests were wont to assemble in the tranquil evenings, and enjoy their mocha and cheroots before a view of unsurpassed loveliness.

Among them was a man of wonderful attractions, Henry Herman by name. He was an Englishman, past the meridian of life, gentleman-like and imposing in his bearing. Tall and graceful, his forehead was slightly bald and his mustache dashed with gray. He had traveled much, and seemed to have profited by that travel. He spoke most of the European languages, and had a pretty taste for music and poetry. He was well versed on questions of science, and there seemed few subjects upon which he was not at home. He sang a good song, and was full of anecdote. In a word, he was a charming companion, and his unintermitting wit and agreeability thus whiled away many an evening. He knew the continent of Europe thoroughly, had visited the United States from Maine to California, and his views of our country seemed sound and just.

He appeared well to do in the world, and was collecting a number of Eastern curiosities for Christmas presents to distant friends. We regarded him as an affluent English gentleman of the

old school, whose hobby was travel, and who delved into novelties abroad, to reproduce them to admiring circles at his own hearthstone. I shall never forget the delightful evenings passed in his society, when, with almost spendthrift lavishness, he poured out the treasures of his brilliant mind.

I said that the “Albion” was surrounded by deep verandas. My own apartment was a front end one, on the second story. It was large and square, with three windows, closing with *jalousie* blinds, and a door opening upon the balcony. My bed was at the farther diagonal corner, and was covered with a thick musquito curtain. A communicating door with the adjoining room, which was occupied by Mr. Herman, was blocked by a heavy wardrobe, which, not being quite so high, showed a few slats of its Venetian blinds.

My room was a good deal strewed with *négligé* furniture, as a bachelor’s is apt to be — tables, chairs, sofas, etc., scattered about — and with little to tempt the rapacity of the robber. A few dispatches from our Government were kept in a safe; and, unless engaged with these, my habit was to retire to rest at about the hour of eleven.

It was the night but one before the New Year. At bed-time I had shut my door carefully, without locking it; closed the window-shutters, and, extinguishing the light, sought repose. The room was impenetrably dark.

I slept soundly for some hours, when, awaking, I seemed causelessly restless and disturbed, and was trying to recompose myself to sleep, when I fancied that I heard a slight stir upon the floor. I listened, but, there being no repetition, I thought it purely imaginary, and was resettling to rest, when I distinctly heard a chair jarred. I sprang to my bedside, and demanded, “Who is here?” when a voice, pitched in a stage-whisper—so as to be painfully distinct to me, yet inaudible without — hissed in my ear: “Hush, or I’ll cut your throat!”

I was utterly defenseless, and the threat implied that my antagonist was armed and desperate. The night was dark as Erebus. Glancing upward, I observed a light flickering from the adjoining room. I called loudly on Mr. Herman to the rescue. The same emphatic threat was more vehemently repeated. I renewed my call for aid, when all grew still. After a short lapse, Mr. Herman’s voice drowsily replied, “Wait; I am coming.” And soon, with a candle, he appeared. He was half dressed, without boots or coat. Finding me alone, he seemed surprised, and exclaimed, “Why, you have had the nightmare.” This I proved absurd, showing how he had entered at an *open* door, when I recollected closing it. He then musingly said: “Some one *did* try my own door, but I thought it accidental. I wish that I could have come earlier.”

“I wish so, too,” thought I; but, as nothing now could be done, we parted, and, locking my door, the night passed.

At my toilet, the next morning, I was surprised to hear, from a native servant of the establishment, that a gentleman lodging in the hotel, who was subject to fits of epilepsy, had accidentally, in one of these, stumbled into my apartment, and was anxious to apologize.

My answer was: "Francisco, nothing will induce me to credit this. Say to the individual that I deem it a case for a judicial investigation, and not for an apology, and that I shall proceed accordingly."

The breakfast-room was in a lovely summer-house, trellised with vines and tropical flowers, completely detached from the main building. Proceeding thither, I was confronted by an utter stranger, a burly Englishman, who suggested the idea of a prize-fighter aping the gentleman. With arms akimbo, and shambling gait, he accosted me with a stuttering apology for his accidental intrusion. Avoiding an interview I brushed past him, with the renewal of my message.

At the breakfast table I met Mr. Herman, who seemed interested in the development of the affair, and who willingly consented to accompany me to the chief magistrate, to corroborate my testimony.

On the way to my gharrio the stranger overtook us, and most vehemently implored me to receive his apology. I again declined, and gave my reasons. He denied the threats, but confessed his intrusion; and alluding to his epilepsy, besought me not to ruin him, as my course threatened. Finding me obdurate, he took quite a new tack:

"Indeed, sir, you do not know what you do. You do not know me, sir, or you never would do as you contemplate."

"Had we ever met before?"

He replied that we had not, nor had we the remotest association in common. I said, then, that I could not imagine how this knowledge could affect my purpose; but who was he?

"For Heaven's sake, do not force me to say, sir. I know that you are incited to this by others!"—glancing sternly at Herman.

This I denied; and saying that my purpose was only to elicit the truth, and not to prosecute, and that any explanation satisfactory to the chief magistrate would be equally so to me, was preparing to drive off, when, with desperation, he said:

"Then, sir, if you force me to declare myself, reluctantly I must: I am a detective from London."

I was surprised, but promptly rejoined: "Then this gives tenfold force to my resolution. I should like to learn why a London detective prowls about my room at the dead hour of night, and threatens my life if I sound the alarm!"

Herman and he scowled at each other, as might have happened if one of the neighboring tigers had unwittingly roused an antagonist.

"You are right," said the former. "If you knew as much about Bow Street as I do, you would know that these detectives are often taken from the dregs of the population. 'Set a thief to catch a thief,' is as true as it is old."

And we drove to the office of the chief magistrate. He received us in an anteroom. He was an accomplished gentleman, and an upright officer. His duties were executive as well as judicial, he being a committing magistrate and judge of one of the courts. My acquaintance afterward ripened into friendship, but at this time a few official transactions had bounded our intercourse. I was struck with a peculiar reserve in his deportment. Upon my introducing Mr. Herman he stiffly bowed; and having heard our statement, replied:

“This seems a case for police discipline. You had better see Mr. McIntosh Percival, the Commissary of Police.”

In vain I protested that it was not as such that I presented it — that it was as a burglarious invasion of my domicile, coupled with murderous assault. To no avail: we were bowed out, and redress seemed denied.

Then did Mr. Herman inveigh against this invasion of the rights of the subject and abnegation of justice, and inquired the course I now intended to pursue. I said that official duties would engross me for a time, but that during the day I would lay the case before the Governor. We then parted, and I was soon immersed in my morning routine.

Within an hour, however, I received a polite note from the magistrate, saying that as the court was in session, he was unable to call on me, but begged that, notwithstanding the recent interview, I would see him again during the morning, as he had something of importance to communicate.

At my earliest leisure I sought him. He was now holding his divan, or court, with a commingling of Oriental and European pomp. Seated on a dais, surmounted by the arms of England, entwined with the lotus, mantled in judicial ermine, he was attended by jemidars in scarlet turbans and white muslin robes, girdled with silken cord, who were gracefully waving the punkas, or fans. Their features were as dark as ebony, yet chiseled with Grecian regularity. In front were the costumed court officers—as accusers and witnesses in the trial—and facing these, a huddled group of wild Malays, not unlike a deputation at Washington of our Western Indians. The swarthy culprit, strictly guarded, seemed stoically indifferent to impending doom. In the rear was a very mixed assemblage as spectators — pig-tailed Celestials jostling Klings from the Coromandel coast, or an Arab Jew frowning resentment for indignity to his beard, upon some mischievous Jack Tar from Cape Cod.

At the open archway beyond, with shouldered musket, gravely patrolled the uniformed Madras Sepoy, emblematic at once of the power and the precariousness of British rule in India.

When my presence was announced, the chief magistrate motioned me to a seat beside him, and, suspending proceedings at a convenient opportunity, with his usual gracious manner, said:

“You think I owe you an apology for this morning; but tell me, who was your companion?”

I replied: “Mr. Herman, a gentleman whom I know, and who can substantiate some facts connected with the subject in question.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Some six or eight weeks.”

“Do you know any thing of his antecedents?”

I replied in the negative.

“I thought so,” said he, smiling; and turning to me, continued: “I have reason to believe him to be one of the veriest rascals that walks this world unhung. He is the notorious Percival Ashton, of London, a younger son of noble parentage, who, under the best auspices, commenced his career in England, but became both a fraudulent bankrupt and forger. His very life was forfeitable to the laws, when, by connivance, he managed to flee the realm. On the continent of Europe his course was tracked by villainies, but he escaped to America, where, in New York, and afterward in San Francisco, as Stanford Brown, he renewed his life of infamy. He has since turned up in Australia, and now here, where he assumes the name of Henry Herman.”

With this, he drew a voluminous package from a drawer, showing that, for a long time, the subject of our conversation had been under the espionage of the police of the world. The description of him in these papers tallied with what I have endeavored to portray, and proved that he was an intelligent and accomplished scoundrel, with intense plausibility, defrauding all — a fallen star, a second Lucifer.

The magistrate continued: “And I believe that it was he who threatened you. I have since seen the detective, who withdraws his statement; for he persists that he made no threat, but accidentally fell, and then found his way to his own room; that, naturally, he supposed himself the disturber, when hearing of it; but that he has since discovered the true locality, and his consequent error.”

I frankly said that I did not feel satisfied with this version; but that I was greatly shocked with the revelations concerning Herman, and asked the policy of the authorities in the case. He replied that there were difficulties in the way of any procedure; that no guilt against the local jurisdiction had been fastened on Herman, nor had they any requisition from the Crown for his person; that his detention would cause embarrassment and expense; and that, perhaps, the best course would be to rid the island of him as soon as possible. I then said that circumstances seemed to point to me as a fitting instrument to attain this end; and that, with his approval, I would essay it. This he gave, and the interview ended.

It was New Year’s eve. I was in my room, conversing with some friends, when there was a tap at the door, and Herman entered. He never appeared to greater advantage. He alluded to our singular reception in the morning, and then launched into a discursive criticism on public functionaries in general, and detectives in particular. I remember his telling an amusing anecdote connected with the first World’s Fair in London; how all the rogues in Europe were there to ply their nefarious trades, and how cleverly they were checkmated, at the outset, by having tickets of admission given them, with private marks. The result was, that upon the great opening day, they

found themselves all seated together in a corner devoted exclusively to their fraternity, with none to operate on but each other, which resulted in their utter discomfiture.

After all had taken leave, Herman still loitered. He remained, he said, to inquire the progress of the affair during the day. Without answering directly, I said: "We are nearing the close of the year."

He had taken a seat on a sofa, against the wall. He answered: "Yes; it is almost over."

I continued: "And, sir, I think it is about time that our *aliases* should be over, too."

He started, and said: "I do not understand you."

"I believe," said I, "I have the honor of addressing Mr. Percival Ashton, of London; *alias*, Mr. Stanford Brown, of New York and San Francisco; *alias*, Mr. Henry Herman, of Melbourne and Penang."

His face turned ashy pale. He dropped his cheroot, and a tremor overpowered him. He faltered out: "Well, sir, if you have the power, I yield myself a prisoner."

I had now bought the elephant; what was I to do with it?

"It is not my purpose to have you arrested," I said; "I merely wish you to abstain from evil to all, particularly toward my countrymen, and to leave the island at your earliest opportunity."

As I spoke, he collected courage. A ray of hope shot athwart his countenance, as he said: "But what do you take me for—a gambler?"

Here I was posed. With all his faults, he might not play for money; perhaps gambling was the least of his vices, and he wished to probe my knowledge. I regarded him fixedly, and emphatically said: "I know what you are, sir."

This was enough. After a pause, he said: "A ship is about to sail for Van Diemen's Land; is it agreeable to you that I leave in it?"

I assented.

He then said: "Men are the creatures of circumstance. Fate has precipitated my career. Will you listen to a brief review of my life?"

I had gained the desired end, and I, therefore, thought it best to decline, although I have since reflected what a graphic revelation it might have proved. He then thanked me, to use the words of this extraordinary man, for the very gentleman-like way in which I had broken the matter to him. Bidding me a final adieu, he extended his hand, which I had not the heart to refuse. He left me, and entering his own room, after double locking the door, I heard him burst into convulsive sobs. God grant that they were tears of repentance!

We never met again. In three days he sailed, as he promised, and the dropcurtain fell between us forever.

The mystery was never solved. The detective, still stoutly denying any complicity, was retained in the local police for a twelvemonth, when, for drunkenness, he was dismissed.

I omitted to mention that Herman, in his last interview, had solemnly declared his ignorance of the whole occurrence.

In the somewhat circumscribed community of Penang it became quite a tea table topic. Some thought it the one — some the other; but a belief gained ground that not improbably they were confederates, who, being unearthed, adopted the principle of *sauve qui peut*. The attributed motive was the possession of supposed important public papers which might aid the machinations of Herman, whose devices were as varied as his wanderings.

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