

Death's Devotion

By Frank Athelstane Swettenham

"How, Death's devotion ?

"'Twas he who drank the potion—"

"J'AI cinq cartes à carreaux."

"Combien ?"

"Quarante-neuf."

"C'est bon."

"Quinte au roi ?"

"Bon."

"Ça fait vingt. I have also quatorze de rois, which makes ninety-four, et trois as, ninety-seven—je joue carreaux, ninety-eight. That is yours and the rest are mine, making me one hundred and nineteen. You are Rubiconed, but, fortunately for you, for the smallest possible number—two hundred and twenty and three twenty-five, I win—five hundred and forty-five in the evening ; the luck has been all on my side to-night. Shall we play again ?"

"Well, I think as it is past two A.M., it is hardly worth while to begin another game. We will smoke one more cigarette, and you shall tell me of your interview with Death."

"Willingly, but another small brandy and soda will help the tale along."

The

The man who had so evilly entreated his friend over that last game of *piquet* was Raoul de Marenil, soldier, scientist, courtier and wanderer over the face of the earth, seeking fortune and adventure, and finding with them (for he had brains enough to be successful at almost any game) a great many friends of all nationalities. It was natural that he should have much in common with Englishmen, for his mother was an Englishwoman, and he spoke English and French equally well, and with his intimates mixed up the two languages with a charming but bewildering fluency, though it was evident to those who had more than a casual acquaintance with him that he was at heart a true Frenchman.

After wandering in many lands his business or his inclination had taken him to the furthest East, where for some time he had been the guest of a friend of no importance, named Michael Hardy. It was their nightly practice, when left alone for the evening, to play *piquet* till one or two in the morning, and then, before turning in, to smoke that "last cigarette," which usually meant at least an hour's talk on diverse subjects of mutual interest. This was one of many such evenings, and no circumstances could have been conceived better calculated to frame a tale of love, adventure, or weird experience. A waning Eastern moon, brilliant beyond description, and shining with that blue tinge which is its special peculiarity in the small hours of the morning when the light is most intense, shone over a wide valley, enclosed towards the East by lofty but distant mountains, while Westward the view was limited by the close approach of a broken chain of low hills with spurs projecting out into the valley.

On the summit of the highest of these spurs stood the house where the two men were sitting. Round the foot of the hill wound a river, and this was joined at a point rather to the right
front

front of the house by another stream of equal size. On the banks of these streams clustered the thickly built houses of a picturesque Eastern town, the red roofs striking a note of warm colour in that silvery sheen. On the outskirts of the town, scattered buildings served to relieve the green monotony of luxuriant foliage, while the eye caught here and there glints of water from river-reach or artificial lakelet. In the middle distance stood bold hills, covered with virgin forest and rocky limestone cliffs with vari-coloured sides, so sheer that no foliage would cling to them. Beyond these, haze—miles and miles of hazy distance, through which great mountains seemed to loom, grey and indistinct, and over all the blue heavens; that extraordinary Eastern night-sky, so wondrously blue, that when you see but a patch of it above the fountained courtyard of an Eastern dwelling, you cannot at first feel certain whether it is painted ceiling or the blue empyrean. Unlike those Northern latitudes, where the clearness of the atmosphere seems to invite the gazer to reach down the great stars from heaven, here, in this haze-charged night, they twinkle and glimmer from zenith to horizon, through many a veil of mist; and Venus, alone of all the constellations, dares to dispute the supremacy of the Queen of Night.

The subdued light within the room, the white walls, the lofty ceiling supported by heavy wooden beams resting on fluted, white pillars, the dark polished floor with its thick Persian rugs and skins of tiger and black leopard, the soft colours of the graceful Oriental hangings, the rare prints on the walls, the few but admirably chosen pieces of furniture, the beautiful carvings and embroideries, the best and newest books, all combined to make a singularly attractive interior, full of harmoniously blended colours in striking contrast to the all-pervading radiance of the silver night.

Across

Across the verandah with its tiers of lovely ferns and foliage plants, through the hanging baskets of many coloured orchids was wafted, on the scarce perceptible breeze, the intoxicating scent of jasmine and chempaka, while the only sound to break the silence was the occasional cry of the night-jar, that curious note which resembles nothing so much as the hollow rattle of a stone thrown across ice on a clear frosty night.

The friends pulled two comfortable chairs to one of the many wide doors that opened on to the marble-paved verandah, and with their backs to the attractions of the immediate surroundings and their faces to the moon-bathed valley beneath, Marenil told his tale.

“I was in Africa,” he said, “and had spent months exploring a buried city, where besides meeting with several strange adventures I contracted a horrible fever that completely prostrated me, and made it necessary to abandon my researches and seek the nearest hospital. Unfortunately for me my buried city was far beyond the confines of even comparative civilisation, and by the time my people had carried me to a Government Hospital, where I could get the help of a French surgeon and the nursing of a Sister of Mercy, I was very bad indeed.

“I was too ill to take much notice of the hospital, but you know what the place is like. A long, narrow, white-walled building of one storey with a row of windows on either side, a door at each end, and trestle beds at regular intervals down the sides, the patients' heads next the white-washed walls, their feet towards the vacant space which serves as passage between the beds. By each bed there was a small table and chair, and on the wall, in a tin frame, hung the bed ticket which told the name and date of arrival of the patient, the nature of his ailment and other particulars and possibly the treatment prescribed. I cannot say I noticed

noticed these particulars when I was carried into the ward; I was too sick of the deadly journey in the hammock through the scorching heat, too feverish and throat-parched, too weary and pain-wracked, perhaps too light-headed to care about anything. I realised that at last the journey was over, that at last that maddening sway of the hammock was exchanged for blessed stillness and cessation from movement, that I seemed to have gone out of burning sunlight into cool shade, and that the tall figures, the dark complexions of my white-robed Arab bearers were exchanged for the sympathetic faces and deft fingers of the hospital surgeon and his devoted attendants.

“I do not know how time went, how long I had lain there, nor how things had fared with me. I think I must have been unconscious for days, but one evening, about 7 P.M., I was vaguely sensible that the Doctor and a Sister were standing by my bed and in hushed voices discussing the probability of my being able to live much beyond the morning. I know that it was borne in on me that their fears were stronger than their hopes, and I was too weak and exhausted to take much interest in my own chances.

“I must have slept shortly after this, for it seemed to me that a long time had elapsed, that midnight had come and passed, and I awoke to see the door towards which I was looking, open slowly and quietly to admit a strange figure. A tall, gaunt skeleton, with unusually large bones, and some kind of weird light in his eye-sockets that made me feel he could see, entered without noise, gently closed the door, and walked rather slowly towards my bed. I realised instantly that he was coming to me, and I noticed that he carried under his left arm a large, leather-bound book which seemed of great age and was closed by two old-fashioned, heavy silver clasps. Over his right shoulder the

skeleton carried a heavy scythe which showed signs, both as to blade and handle, of much hard usage. Walking round the foot of my bed and stopping behind my little table, the skeleton fixed his curious eye-light on my face and said slowly and rather sadly : ' Je suis la Mort.'

"I was not surprised to hear that Death was my visitor, and I said : ' Bon soir, la Mort, asseyez-vous, s'il vous plait.'

"He thanked me and sat down ; then taking the book on his thigh-bone and placing it in a comfortable position by crossing his legs, he unclasped it and looked over the pages till he came to one where he stopped and opening the book wide he turned to me and said : ' This is your page, and herein is inscribed the record of your good and evil deeds since ever you were born. The good are on this side' (pointing to the left page, where I could see there were only two or three short lines of writing), ' the evil are here,' said he, as he laid his hand on the right page of the book. ' I will read the record to you,' he said, as he turned the front of his skull towards me, and I felt those two luminous eye-sockets transfix me. ' First,' said Death, ' I will read your good deeds.'

"The tale of my virtues was soon ended, and did not seem to me to possess any particular value. ' Now,' and again those lambent orbs were turned on me, ' I will read your evil deeds.'

"The catalogue was a long one and it struck me that many of the statements were not worth recording, but truth to tell I was paying little heed, for I was absorbed in watching Death, and wondering how all his bones hung together without any sinews or integuments or even so much as a strand or two of wire.

"You know how you feel when you are so ill that nothing surprises and nothing greatly affects you ? That was how I felt, and, while I regarded Death with a mitigated interest and some faint curiosity, while I speculated whether, when he got up, the scythe,

scythe, which was now leaning against the back of the chair, would knock it down and make a clatter that would wake every one in the Ward, I turned a practically deaf ear to the long list of my crimes, from concealing the truth and stealing sugar, to the robust misdemeanours of later years. There was a sort of rattle, as Death unwound his leg bones and closed the book, which he carefully fastened, saying as he did so, 'To-night your record is closed and you will be required to give an account of it. Now,' he continued, 'my mission is ended, my time is up, and I must leave you.'

"He said this in a tone of dispassionate weariness, but rather as though he regretted having to deliver such an unpleasant message. He stood up and placing the book under his left arm and the scythe over his right shoulder he prepared to go.

"Then, however, the feelings of a host asserted themselves and I said, 'I trust you will not leave without taking something, and I am sorry that there is nothing better to offer you, but pray drink my *tisane* which is on the table by you.' Death gravely thanked me and turning to the table he took the bottle of *tisane* and poured some into the graduated glass measure that stood at his hand. He looked at me for the last time with those curiously lighted eye-sockets and realising, I suppose, the over-grim humour of drinking to my health, he said nothing, but slowly poured the *tisane* through the cavity made by opening his jaws. I watched the liquid with great interest as it trickled down his ribs and back bone, crept along his leg bones and finally reaching the floor made a little pool by the side of the chair. As Death replaced the glass on the table and moved away I felt that his politeness in accepting my *tisane* must have made his bones very uncomfortable, but I hardly liked to suggest that he should dry himself.

"Whilst I still had this in my mind, I saw him reach the door,
open

open it and go out. It could scarce have closed ere I fell asleep.

"In that vague returning consciousness which comes with awakening, that dawn of mental and physical sensation which we can, at will, slightly prolong, but in cases of severe illness is always longer than in health, I heard the Doctor and the Sister talking by my bed, and speaking in eager tones of surprise and delight. I opened my eyes and I saw my friends with faces freed from anxiety smiling into mine.

"'You are safe,' the Doctor said, 'it is only a question of time now, the fever has left you. The change came about 3 A.M., you had been restless till then and we feared the worst, but suddenly you grew quiet and fell into a deep sleep from which we are not sorry to see you awake, for you ought to be fed, though the sleep has saved your life. Your temperature has gone down to almost normal and your pulse is stronger—all you want now is nourishment. You have had a very narrow escape and when you are strong enough you should leave the country for a change to a more temperate climate. You seem to have spilt your *tisane* some time during the night, but we don't know how you did it, for the potion has fallen out of your reach and yet neither bottle nor glass is upset and no one saw you do it.'

"I looked from the Doctor to the floor and there, close by the chair, exactly in the spot where Death had stood, was the still wet stain of the potion which had been so strangely diverted from its legitimate use."