

АРТУР КОНАН ДОЙЛ

MY FRIEND THE
MURDERER

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Arthur Conan Doyle

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“Number 481 is no better, doctor,” said the head-warder, in a slightly reproachful accent, looking in round the corner of my door.

“Confound 481” I responded from behind the pages of the *Australian Sketcher*.

“And 61 says his tubes are paining him. Couldn’t you do anything for him?”

“He is a walking drug-shop,” said I. “He has the whole British pharmacopæ inside him. I believe his tubes are as sound as yours are.”

“Then there’s 7 and 108, they are chronic,” continued the warder, glancing down a blue slip of paper. “And 28 knocked off work yesterday – said lifting things gave him a stitch in the side. I want you to have a look at him, if you don’t mind, doctor. There’s 81, too – him that killed John Adamson in the Corinthian brig – he’s been carrying on awful in the night, shrieking and yelling, he has, and no stopping him either.”

“All right, I’ll have a look at him afterward,” I said, tossing my paper carelessly aside, and pouring myself out a cup of coffee. “Nothing else to report, I suppose, warder?”

The official protruded his head a little further into the room. “Beg pardon, doctor,” he said, in a confidential tone, “but I notice as 82 has a bit of a cold, and it would be a good excuse for you to visit him and have a chat, maybe.”

The cup of coffee was arrested half-way to my lips as I stared in amazement at the man’s serious face.

“An excuse?” I said. “An excuse? What the deuce are you talking about, McPherson? You see me trudging about all day at my practise, when I’m not looking after the prisoners, and coming back every night as tired as a dog, and you talk about finding an excuse for doing more work.”

“You’d like it, doctor,” said Warder McPherson, insinuating one of his shoulders into the room. “That man’s story’s worth listening to if you could get him to tell it, though he’s not what you’d call free in his speech. Maybe you don’t know who 82 is?”

“No, I don’t, and I don’t care either,” I answered, in the conviction that some local ruffian was about to be foisted upon me as a celebrity.

“He’s Maloney,” said the warder, “him that turned Queen’s evidence after the murders at Bluemansdyke.”

“You don’t say so?” I ejaculated, laying down my cup in astonishment. I had heard of this ghastly series of murders, and read an account of them in a London magazine long before setting foot in the colony. I remembered that the atrocities committed had thrown the Burke and Hare crimes completely into the shade, and that one of the most villainous of the gang had saved his own skin by betraying his companions. “Are you sure?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, it’s him right enough. Just you draw him out a bit, and he’ll astonish you. He’s a man to know, is Maloney; that’s to say, in moderation;” and the head grinned, bobbed, and disappeared, leaving me to finish my breakfast and ruminate over what I had heard.

The surgeons’hip of an Australian prison is not an enviable position. It may be endurable in Melbourne or Sydney, but the little town of Perth has few attractions to recommend it, and those few had been long exhausted. The climate was detestable, and the society far from congenial. Sheep and cattle were the staple support of the community; and their prices, breeding, and diseases the principal topic of conversation. Now as I, being an outsider, possessed neither the one nor the other, and was utterly callous to the new “dip” and the “rot” and other kindred topics, I found myself in a state of mental isolation, and was ready to hail anything which might relieve the monotony of my existence. Maloney, the murderer, had at least some distinctiveness and individuality in his character, and might act as a tonic to a mind sick of the commonplaces of existence. I determined that I should follow

the warder's advice, and take the excuse for making his acquaintance. When, therefore, I went upon my usual matutinal round, I turned the lock of the door which bore the convict's number upon it, and walked into the cell.

The man was lying in a heap upon his rough bed as I entered, but, uncoiling his long limbs, he started up and stared at me with an insolent look of defiance on his face which augured badly for our interview. He had a pale, set face, with sandy hair and a steely-blue eye, with something feline in its expression. His frame was tall and muscular, though there was a curious bend in his shoulders, which almost amounted to a deformity. An ordinary observer meeting him in the street might have put him down as a well-developed man, fairly handsome, and of studious habits – even in the hideous uniform of the rottenest convict establishment he imparted a certain refinement to his carriage which marked him out among the inferior ruffians around him.

"I'm not on the sick-list," he said, gruffly. There was something in the hard, rasping voice which dispelled all softer illusions, and made me realize that I was face to face with the man of the Lena Valley and Bluemansdyke, the bloodiest bushranger that ever stuck up a farm or cut the throats of its occupants.

"I know you're not," I answered. "Warder McPherson told me you had a cold, though, and I thought I'd look in and see you."

"Blast Warder McPherson, and blast you, too!" yelled the convict, in a paroxysm of rage. "Oh, that's right," he added in a quieter voice; "hurry away; report me to the governor, do! Get me another six months or so – that's your game."

"I'm not going to report you," I said.

"Eight square feet of ground," he went on, disregarding my protest, and evidently working himself into a fury again. "Eight square feet, and I can't have that without being talked to and stared at, and – oh, blast the whole crew of you!" and he raised his two clinched hands above, his head and shook them in passionate invective.

"You've got a curious idea of hospitality," I remarked, determined not to lose my temper, and saying almost the first thing that came to my tongue.

To my surprise the words had an extraordinary effect upon him. He seemed completely staggered at my assuming the proposition for which he had been so fiercely contending – namely, that the room in which he stood was his own.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "I didn't mean to be rude. Won't you take a seat?" and he motioned toward a rough trestle, which formed the head-piece of his couch.

I sat down, rather astonished at the sudden change. I don't know that I liked Maloney better under this new aspect. The murderer had, it is true, disappeared for the nonce, but there was something in the smooth tones and obsequious manner which powerfully suggested the witness of the queen, who had stood up and sworn away the lives of his companions in crime.

"How's your chest?" I asked, putting on my professional air.

"Come, drop it, doctor – drop it!" he answered, showing a row of white teeth as he resumed his seat upon the side of the bed. "It wasn't anxiety after my precious health that brought you along here; that story won't wash at all. You came to have a look at Wolf Tone Maloney, forger, murderer, Sydney-slider, ranger, and government peach. That's about my figure, ain't it? There it is, plain and straight; there's nothing mean about me."

He paused as if he expected me to say something; but as I remained silent, he repeated once or twice, "There's nothing mean about me."

"And why shouldn't I?" he suddenly yelled, his eyes gleaming and his whole satanic nature reasserting itself. "We were bound to swing, one and all, and they were none the worse if I saved myself by turning against them. Every man for himself, say I, and the devil take the luckiest. You haven't a plug of tobacco, doctor, have you?"

He tore at the piece of “Barrett’s” which I handed him, as ravenously as a wild beast. It seemed to have the effect of soothing his nerves, for he settled himself down in the bed and re-assumed his former deprecating manner.

“You wouldn’t like it yourself, you know, doctor,” he said: “it’s enough to make any man a little queer in his temper. I’m in for six months this time for assault, and very sorry I shall be to go out again, I can tell you. My mind’s at ease in here; but when I’m outside, what with the government and what with Tattooed Tom, of Hawkesbury, there’s no chance of a quiet life.”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“He’s the brother of John Grimthorpe, the same that was condemned on my evidence; and an infernal scamp he was, too! Spawn of the devil, both of them! This tattooed one is a murderous ruffian, and he swore to have my blood after that trial. It’s seven year ago, and he’s following me yet; I know he is, though he lies low and keeps dark. He came up to me in Ballarat in ‘75; you can see on the back of my hand here where the bullet clipped me. He tried again in ‘76, at Port Philip, but I got the drop on him and wounded him badly. He knifed me in ‘79, though, in a bar at Adelaide, and that made our account about level. He’s loafing round again now, and he’ll let daylight into me – unless – unless by some extraordinary chance some one does as much for him.” And Maloney gave a very ugly smile.

“I don’t complain of *him* so much,” he continued. “Looking at it in his way, no doubt it is a sort of family matter that can hardly be neglected. It’s the government that fetches me. When I think of what I’ve done for this country, and then of what this country has done for me, it makes me fairly wild – clean drives me off my head. There’s no gratitude nor common decency left, doctor!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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