

Voodoo Vengeance

by Aidan de Brune, 1879-1946

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„AWFULLY glad to welcome you back to London, doctor.” Inspector Basil Frost, of New Scotland Yard, beamed across the well-decorated table at his guest.

There was a great contrast between the two men. Arnold Colven, sitting well forward on his chair, could hardly reach the ground with his toes. Above the napkin he had tucked into his winged collar rose a round, boyish face, with full red lips and wide, round eyes of baby-blue. On the other side of the table sat Inspector Basil Frost, big, burly, with a full, ruddy face and firm, thin lips, over which shadowed a thick, slightly-grey moustache. To the casual observer the pair might have been father and son, the latter enjoying a respite from school routine.

„Most kind of you, my dear Inspector.” The American Secret Service operative wriggled more comfortably into his chair. „As you know, I delight in London—and especially those hours I spend at Luigi’s.”

„Guessed that.” Frost's big voice matched his burly person. „I don't believe I've had a letter from you since you were here last that you haven't mentioned Luigi's.

So I thought here would be the proper setting to welcome you back in. Let's see, it must be quite a couple of years since you were last here."

"Two years and two days, Inspector—and the place has changed little; you not at all." A twinkle came in the wide-open eyes. Colven had not missed the involuntary movement that had run through some of the diners in that room when he had entered. Luigi's was known for its cosmopolitan character, and some of those there that night the American knew—and they knew him—professionally.

"I guess I take you, doctor." Frost laughed heartily. He glanced up the room. "There's *Cash* Dunlop over there, entertaining a lady friend. He knows you, or our cable service is at fault. Then there's *Flipper* Aaron. By the bye, I hope you're not interested in either of them this trip? They've become almost old identities here, and we might miss them."

"For this journey, no." Dr. Colven shook his head. His voice dropped a tone. "My friend, this time I have a quest that is unique—one that will take all your clever brain to help me solve."

Frost grinned and waited. He knew the American, of old, and admired him greatly. At his personal request the Assistant Commissioner had detailed him to act as associate to the famous secret service operative on this visit.

For some moments Colven toyed with his plate; then looked up quickly. For a brief moment his eyes searched the room, lingering more particularly on the curtained recesses that formed the private rooms of this popular and fashionable restaurant.

"Yes, my friend, I have a quest; a quest that is almost bizarre. I seek the Collar of Damballa Ouedda."

A slight commotion drew attention down the long room. A couple of waiters had gathered outside one of the curtained recesses. Standing just within the curtains could be seen the forms of men. Up the room, stepping quickly and lightly between the tables came Luigi, his dark, brilliant black eyes flashing angrily.

Arnold Colven slid forward on his chair, as if attracted by a magnet. His hand came up to the table to support his rounded chin. Frost had turned in his chair, and would have risen but for a slight detaining motion from his guest.

A few minutes and the unrest before the recess ended; yet two waiters remained before the drawn curtains. Luigi came to a stop before the detective's table. But for a slight tenseness about his mouth he appeared unconcerned.

"What is the matter, Luigi?" asked the Scotland Yard man abruptly.

The restaurateur shrugged. "A guest is ill." The words, indifferent in tone, were spoken in faultless English.

"You want me?" Frost gathered that much lay behind the careless words.

"If the signor will be so good." The man's shrug was expressive. "May I request that the signors reach the place with as little attention as possible. With my guests..."

Luigi looked round the well-filled restaurant. "The Rialto", or; as it was more popularly known, "Luigi's", was then in the height of its fame. Nightly it was thronged with that queer cosmopolitan gathering that composes London's smart society.

"Who are they?" The Inspector's nod indicated the recess.

„A Mr. Prichard, of Chicago—of your country, signor.” Luigi bowed to Colven. „To-night he entertains M. Serge Borov, of Moscow, and the Marquis de Vieumont and another.”

Frost nodded a dismissal, and the restaurateur strolled away. A few seconds and Colven caught the Inspector’s eyes. They rose together and sauntered carelessly down the room.

Outside the recess the eyes of the detectives met again. Frost took the lead, pulling back the curtains, quickly, and entered the private room. A tall man, almost equalling the Scotland Yard man in bulk, turned swiftly.

„This room is private, sir.”

„Containing—that?” Arnold Colven nodded towards a red-plush settee on which sprawled a loose figure. „And—your friend is—ill?”

Illustration:

Arnold Colven nodded towards a red-plush settee
on which sprawled a loose figure.

„He was taken ill during dinner.” The big man answered involuntarily. „Say, who are you?”

„Allow me.” The American spoke before Frost could reply. „May I make known Inspector Basil Frost, of New Scotland Yard, to—”

„James Prichard, of Chicago, U.S.A.” A pronounced drawl had crept into the man’s tones. „Good of you to look us up, Inspector, but I believe it is merely a case of indigestion. The waiter has telephoned for a doctor.”

„The medical examiner would be more to the point.” The secret service operative was rubbing his rounded cheek reflectively.

„Why?” The eyes of the four men turned towards the settee involuntarily.

„Because he died one minute before Inspector Frost and I entered this room.” Dr. Colven explained carefully. „See, the limbs have not yet relaxed from the—the final convulsion.”

For a minute there was silence in the room; then Inspector Frost moved to the small table in the corner on which stood a telephone. A few seconds—and he gained connection with „the Yard,” and gave a few terse orders in a low tone. As he replaced the instrument on the table he glanced inquiringly at the American.

Colven had moved from before the curtains, and was now standing at the head on the table. As he looked around he picked up a napkin, placing it carelessly on the table. As he looked around the room he had Frost on his left, in the far corner of the room. The settee containing the dead man was close by where the detective stood. The three remaining members of the dinner party were gathered in a knot on the opposite side of the room.

„And—a man dies!” The secret service operative paused, musingly. „And—of indigestion!” Again he paused. „Will you not introduce me to your friends. Mister Jim Prichard—of Chicago, U.S.A.?”

„M. Serge Borov and the Marquis de Vieumont.” The Chicagoan spoke surlily. „I don’t know your name.”

„N—o?” The wide blue eyes opened wider. „And once I gave nearly three hours of my time to explaining certain activities you had been guilty of to the district attorney—and your—lawyer! Then you do not re—“

„Damn you, Colven!” The man advanced threateningly. „You’re not in N’York now, remember.”

„Shall we return together?” The secret service man spoke softly.

„You’ve got nothing on me.”

For a brief moment Colven’s eyes wandered to the dead man.

„By God, I’d nothing to do with that!” The words came suddenly.

„Nor, I suppose, had M. Serge Borov—whom I seem to remember under the more romantic name of *Majerski*. May I also be permitted to recall myself to the Marquis de Vieumont? He may remember our previous meeting when he was—plain *Flash Dungan*.”

The men shifted uneasily in the following silence. Frost smiled, under his moustache. It was sheer delight to him to watch Arnold Colven handle a situation.

„A dinner for four friends.” The slow, precise tones broke the silence. „Let me reconstruct the scene, gentlemen. If I guess right, please be seated; if wrong, I trust you will remain standing. Now; will M. le Marquis be seated—there.” He pointed to the end of the table opposite where he stood. „Fortunately, I remembered your habit of crumbling bread when engaged in interesting discussion. Again I guess, M. Borov was seated on his noble friend’s right. Ah, I thought so. I remembered your taste for pungent condiments, my Russian friend. Luigi must have been grieved to see his most excellent viands treated so. Only one place remains—for James Prichard, of Chicago, U.S.A.—opposite Borov.”

Again the eyes of the detectives met.

Colven slightly indicated the chair before which he stood. Frost shook his head.

„And, to complete our reconstruction.” pursued the secret service operative. „Baxter Lee sat—here.”

Again came the oppressive silence. Slowly Colven searched the faces of the men upturned to him.

„A dinner for four.” There was slight mockery in his voice. „A social gathering? No, I think not. A business gathering. Then there should have been at this table—a fifth.”

„Who?” Borov leaned forward, threateningly.

„Arthur Bishop, of New York.” The American’s tones changed suddenly. „Now, gentlemen, what do you know of the Collar of Bamballa Ouedda?”

„This room is private, sir.”

„Containing that?” Arnold Colven nodded towards a red plush settee on which sprawled a loose figure.

„By God, Colven, I’ll—”

„Sit down.” The words were barely more than a whisper, yet the crook obeyed. „Perhaps, for the information of my good friend. Inspector Frost, the story should be told. Here then is the latest history of *The Collar of Bamballa Ouedda*.

„Many years ago, in the days of the kings of Ashanti, Bamballa Ouedda, the god, stood in the blood-stained royal square, before the king’s golden stool. Around the god’s neck, hung a necklace composed of eleven stones—stones of fabulous value.”

The secret service operative paused a moment, then continued:

„The British Government determined that the orgies of blood that shamed the country could no longer be allowed in a British protectorate. Representations being unavailing, they sent an expedition that captured the blood-stained king and his capital. But before the soldiers of Great Britain arrived, Bamballa Ouedda and his famous necklace, the golden stool of the king, and other precious and rare tokens of royalty disappeared. For some time it was assumed that the *Collar of Bamballa Ouedda* had been hidden with the golden stool and other treasures. That was not so.

„Years passed and then the *Collar* turned up in Haiti. There, again, it hung on the neck of the god. Again it disappeared. Through Voodoo-land ran the news that it had been stolen by Americans. True or false, the rumor caused very great trouble to the U.S. Government, for the numerous *Blacktowns* of the country were in ferment.

„Time passed and the *Collar* was supposed lost. The negroes became quieter, yet never relaxed their vigilant watch for the thieves. What would have become of them, if they had been traced, I shudder to think.“ Voodooism is not... not nice.

„Through underground channels, into the gem markets, came the Great Mogul—and following it the rumor that it had, in its rough state, formed part of the *Collar of Bamballa Ouedda*. Cyril Q. Allerson purchased the stone—and died. It was stolen and Martin T. Dreed followed it, intent on its acquisition—to die.“

His quick eyes caught the momentary flinch Prichard gave at the mention of Dreed's name. Colven turned quickly.

„You knew him, Jim?“

„I knew him.“ The crook sneered. „If that's any good to you. Quite a nice little bed-time story—this Collar of Bamballa Ouedda.“

„I have spoken facts.“ The secret service operative answered, gravely. Suddenly he leaned forward, his voice hardening.

„Eleven stones, all different, composed the Collar of Bamballa Ouedda. One has been recovered. Of the other ten, one should be here. I want it—the Rajah's eye, once the blood-red ruby that hung in the collar of the Voodoo god!“

Before anyone could answer a couple of men from Scotland Yard entered, escorting the doctor. Arnold Colven went with them to the settee on which still lay the dead man. Frost crossed, significantly, until he stood before the drawn curtains.

For long minutes there was silence, while the doctor examined the body; Arnold Colven, but a pace behind him, watching eagerly. Suddenly he moved, pushing aside the medical man and stripped the dead of collar and tie. A quick wrench and he tore the shirt down the back, laying the neck bare.

„What's this?“ The doctor's fingers rested on a queer stain at the base of the skull, flowing down the back, as if a bottle of red ink had been spilt on the flesh.

„This man was poisoned!“ The American spoke as if to himself.

„And this?“ The medical man's finger rested a moment on the strange stain.

„That is the cause of his death.“

„What's this?“ Frost's exclamation brought Colven quickly to the table. The Inspector was staring down on the cloth, on which rested two burnt matches, tied together in a cross by a piece of red cotton.

„A voodoo warning.“ The secret service man answered gravely.

„But... Where did it come from? It wasn't...“

„It lay beside Baxter Lee's plate when we entered. I covered it with the napkin, for I believed the others had not seen it.“

He parted the curtains and beckoned Luigi into the room.

„My friend,” Colven laid his hand on the restauranteur's shoulder. „Somewhere in the big room without is a negro. Will you find him? Do not let him see that you are watching him. Stand close by and look at him when I come out of this room.“

Luigi departed and Colven again turned to the men in the room. For a moment he meditated, then idly picked up the little cross of matches.

„The voodoo sign of vengeance, Inspector.” He smiled, then dropped the cross on the table and turned to the medical man.

„Finished, doctor?“

„I must have an autopsy before I can determine the cause of death.”

„Just so.” Colven shrugged slightly. „Yet there is no reason for us to delay?“

The doctor shook his head and stepped back from the settee. Colven took his place and ran his fingers lightly through the man's pockets. With a sudden exclamation he drew from a side pocket of the jacket a small bag. For a moment he stood regarding it thoughtfully; then placed it on the table and slit it open. From out of it tumbled a strange litter of articles.

„What the hell...” Frost exclaimed, astonished.

„A voodoo hate-onanga. These? Snakebones, lizard-jaws, black-hen feathers, black-lamb's wool. This dust? I'll guess sulphur grains, mud, salt, alum, and certain vegetable poisons.“

He glanced up, questioningly at his companion's face.

„You don't have these things in Merrie England, Frost. No? Then you would not understand. An *onanga* is a charm. There are many. The love-onanga; the Vate-onanga; the protective-onanga; many others. Place an onanga about the person you wish to influence and your desires become facts.“

Again he turned to the men in the room.

„I want the real story, Jim?“

„I don't know it,” Prichard answered flatly; yet there was no antagonism in his voice. „Baxter Lee asked us here to dinner tonight. He said that he had a proposition for us. When we sat down to table he didn't mention it. We supposed he wanted to wait until after dinner when the waiters wouldn't be about and... when there wouldn't be the crowd outside.”

„Then Baxter Lee had the Rajah's Eye?“

„I don't know. I suppose so.“

A slight motion of the American's hand brought Frost alert. He followed out into the general restaurant.

A glance showed Luigi standing some twenty feet from the curtained recess in which lay the dead man. When he saw them looking at him he turned towards a table.

„Georges Vallenois.” There was a sting in the American's voice. „I want the Rajah's Eye.”

Illustration:

„Georges Vallenois.” There was a sting in the American's voice.

„I want the Rajah’s Eye.”

The big negro at the table, clad in irreproachable dinner dress, sprang to his feet. For a minute he hesitated. Then at the urge of the automatic pressed against his side his hands slowly went above his head. A moment and Colven’s quick fingers drew from the man’s waistcoat pocket a splendid ruby. He dropped it carelessly on the cloth.

„Here is your prisoner, Inspector.” He spoke formally. „Georges Vallenois, of Haiti.“

„How was Baxter Lee killed?” asked Frost, as the two men resumed their long interrupted dinner. Luigi was hovering about their table intent that the two men should have the best his establishment could give them.

„Baxter Lee was killed with manchineel sap,” said the American quickly. „Manchineel sap is one of the most deadly poisons known. It comes only from Haiti. It is a distillation from the manchineel tree, the fruit of which resembles small crab apples.“

„And that strange mark on his neck?”

„Manchineel sap kills almost instantly. Apply but two drops on the tongue and there is instant death. Drop it on the skin and it takes longer to work, but it is certainly fatal.“

„I think I have the picture clear.” The wide baby-blue eyes were half closed as the secret service operative sat back, musing. „Georges Vallenois trailed Baxter Lee and the Rajah’s Eye to England. Tonight came his opportunity. He found that Lee was sitting with his back to those curtains. He learned that he carried the ruby on his person.

„It was easy for him to slip through the curtains and crouch behind his victim’s chair. A magician of Voodooism, it was easy for him to explore Baxter Lee’s pockets—if he did not know exactly where the crook carried his treasure. Then he had only to complete the vengeance of his cult. He raised his hand holding the metal vial containing the machineel sap to his victim’s collar and poured the deadly drug down his neck.”

„You say he’s a Voodoo priest?” asked Frost, curiously.

„Georges Vallenois is more than a papalol of voodooism.” Colven replied gravely. „In Haiti, he is High Nebo of the *culte des mortes*.” He paused a moment, then added, gravely, „Basil Frost, my friend. In the States we could not hold Georges one single month. Here, perhaps—“

He shrugged, and waited a moment; then added:

„But even England will never hang Georges Vallenois—alive.”

