

# The Man With the Shaven Skull

By Sax Rohmer

## I

### A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

“Pull that light lower,” ordered Inspector Wessex. “There you are, Mr. Harley; what do you make of it?”

Paul Harley and I bent gingerly over the ghastly exhibit to which the C.I.D. official had drawn our attention, and to view which we had journeyed from Chancery Lane to Wapping.

This was the body of a man dressed solely in ragged shirt and trousers. But the remarkable feature of his appearance lay in the fact that every scrap of hair from chin, lip, eyebrows and skull had been *shaved off!*

There was another facial disfigurement, peculiarly and horribly Eastern, which my pen may not describe.

“Impossible to identify!” murmured Harley. “Yes, you were right, Inspector; this is a victim of Oriental deviltry. Look here, too!”

He indicated three small wounds, one situated on the left shoulder and the others on the forearm of the dead man.

“The divisional surgeon cannot account for them,” replied Wessex. “They are quite superficial, and he thinks they may be due to the fact that the body got entangled with something in the river.”

“They are due to the fact that the man had a birthmark on his shoulder and something—probably a name or some device—tattooed on his arm,” said Harley quietly. “Some few years ago, I met with a similar case in the neighbourhood of Stambûd. A woman,” he added, significantly.

Detective-Inspector Wessex listened to my companion with respect, for apart from his established reputation as a private inquiry-agent which had made his name familiar in nearly every capital of the civilized world, Paul Harley’s work in Constantinople during the six months preceding war with Turkey had merited higher reward than it had ever received. Had his recommendations been adopted the course of history must have been materially changed.

“You think it’s a Chinatown case, then, Mr. Harley?”

“Possibly,” was the guarded answer.

Paul Harley nodded to the constable in charge, and the ghastly figure was promptly covered up again. My friend stood staring vacantly at Wessex, and presently:

“The chief actor, I think, will prove to be not Chinese,” he said, turned, and walked out.

“If there’s any development,” remarked Wessex as the three of us entered Harley’s car, which stood at the door, “I will, of course, report to you, Mr. Harley. But in the absence of any clue or mark of identification, I fear the verdict will be, ‘Body of a man unknown,’ etc., which has marked the finish of a good many in this cheerful quarter of London.”

“Quite so,” said Harley, absently. “It presents extraordinary features, though, and may not end as you suppose. However—where do you want me to drop you, Wessex; at the Yard?”

“Oh no,” answered Wessex. “I made a special visit to Wapping just to get your opinion on the shaven man. I’m really going down to Deepbrow to look into that new disappearance case; the daughter of the gamekeeper. You’ll have read of it?”

“I have,” said Harley shortly.

Indeed, readers of the daily press were growing tired of seeing on the contents bills: “Another girl missing.” The circumstance (which might have been no more than coincidence) that three girls had disappeared within the last eight weeks leaving no trace behind, had stimulated the professional scribes to link the cases, although no visible link had been found, and to enliven a somewhat dull journalistic season with theories about “a new Mormon menace.”

The vanishing of this fourth girl had inspired them to some startling headlines, and the case had interested me personally for the reason that I was acquainted with Sir Howard Hepwell, one of whose gamekeepers was the stepfather of the missing Molly Clayton. Moreover, it was hinted that she had gone away in the company of Captain Ronald Vane, at that time a guest of Sir Howard’s at the Manor.

In fact, Sir Howard had ’phoned to ask me if I could induce Harley to run down, but my friend had expressed himself as disinterested in a common case of elopement. Now, as Wessex spoke, I glanced aside at Harley, wondering if the fact that so celebrated a member of the C.I.D. as Detective-Inspector Wessex had been put in charge would induce him to change his mind.

We were traversing a particularly noisy and unsavoury section of the Commercial Road, and although I could see that Wessex was anxious to impart particulars of the case to Harley, so loud ~was the din that I recognized the impossibility of conversing, and therefore:

“Have you time to call at my rooms, Wessex?” I asked.

“Well,” he replied, “I have three-quarters of an hour.”

“You can do it in the car,” said Harley suddenly.

“I have been asked to look into this case myself, and before I definitely decline I should like to hear your version of the matter.”

Accordingly, we three presently gathered in my chambers, and Wessex, with one eye on the clock, outlined the few facts at that time in his possession respecting the missing girl.

Two days before the news of the disappearance had been published broadcast under such headings as I have already indicated, a significant scene had been enacted in the gamekeeper’s cottage.

Molly Clayton, a girl whose remarkable beauty had made her a central figure in numerous scandalous stories, for such is the charity of rural neighbours, was detected by her stepfather, about eight in the evening, slipping out of the cottage.

“Where be ye goin’, hussy?” he demanded, grasping her promptly by the arm.

“For a walk!” she replied defiantly.

“A walk wi’ that fine soger from t’ Manor!” roared Bramber furiously. “You’ll be sorry yet, you barefaced gadabout! Must I tell you again that t’ man’s a villain?”

The girl wrenched her arm from Bramber’s grasp, and blazed defiance from her beautiful eyes.

“He knows how to respect a woman—what you don’t!” she retorted hotly.

“So I don’t respect you, my angel?” shouted her stepfather. “Then you know what you can do! The door’s open and there’s few’ll miss you!”

Snatching her hat, the girl, very white, made to go out. Whereat the gamekeeper, a brutal man with small love for Molly, and maddened by her taking him at his word, seized her suddenly by her abundant fair hair and hauled her back into the room.

A violent scene followed, at the end of which Molly fainted and Bramber came out and locked the door.

When he came back about half-past nine the girl was missing. She did not reappear that night, and the police were advised in the morning. Their most significant discovery was this:

Captain Ronald Vane, on the night of Molly's disappearance, had left the Manor House, after dining alone with his host, Sir Howard Hepwell, saying that he proposed to take a stroll as far as the Deep Wood.

He never returned!

From the moment that Gamekeeper Bramber left his cottage, and the moment when Sir Howard Hepwell parted from his guest after dinner, the world to which these two people, Molly Clayton and Captain Vane, were known, knew them no more!

I was about to say that they were never seen again. But to me has fallen the task of relating how and where Paul Harley and I met with Captain Vane and Molly Clayton.

At the end of the Inspector's account:

"H'm," said Harley, glancing under his thick brows in my direction, "could you spare the time, Knox?"

"To go to Deepbrow?" I asked with interest.

"Yes; we have ten minutes to catch the train.

"I'll come," said I. "Sir Howard will be delighted to see you, Harley."

## II

### THE CLUE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS

What do you make of it, Inspector?" asked my friend.

Detective-Inspector Wessex smiled, and scratched his chin.

"There was no need for me to come down!" he replied. "And certainly no need for *you*, Mr. Harley!"

Harley bowed, smiling, at the implied compliment.

"It's a common or garden elopement!" continued the detective. "Vane's reputation is absolutely rotten, and the girl was clearly infatuated. He must have cared a good bit, too. He'll be cashiered, as sure as a gun!"

Leaving Sir Howard at the Manor, we had joined Inspector Wessex at a spot where the baronet's preserves bordered a narrow lane. Here the ground was soft, and the detective drew Harley's attention to a number of footprints by a stile.

"I've got evidence that he was seen here with the girl on other occasions. Now, Mr. Harley, I'll ask you to look over these footprints."

Harley dropped to his knees and made a brief but close examination of the ground round about. One particularly clear imprint of a pointed toe he noticed especially; and Wessex, diving into the pocket of his light overcoat, produced a patent-leather shoe, such as is used for evening wear.

"He had a spare pair in his bag," he explained nonchalantly, "and his man did not prove incorruptible!" Harley took the shoe and placed it in the impression. It fitted perfectly!

"This is Molly Clayton, I take it?" he said, indicating the prints of a woman's foot.

"Yes," assented Wessex. "You'll notice that they stood for some little time and then walked off, very close together."

Harley nodded absently.

“We lose them along here,” continued Wessex, leading up the lane; “but at the corner by the big haystack they join tip with the tracks of a motor-car! I ask for nothing clearer! There was rain that afternoon, but there’s been none since.”

“What does the Captain’s man think?”

“The same as I do! He’s not surprised at any madness on Vane’s part, with a pretty woman in the case!”

“The girl left nothing behind—no note?”

“Nothing.”

“Traced the car?”

“No. It must have been hired or borrowed from a long distance off.”

Where the tracks of the tires were visible we stopped, and Harley made a careful examination of the marks.

“Seems to have had a struggle with her,” he said, dryly.

“Very likely!” agreed ‘Wessex, without interest.

Harley crawled about on the ground for some time, to the great detriment of his Harris tweeds, but finally arose, a curious expression on his face—which, however, the detective evidently failed to observe.

We returned to the Manor House where Sir Howard was awaiting us, his good-humoured red face more red than usual; and in the library, with its sporting prints and its works for the most part dealing with riding, hunting, racing, and golf (except for a sprinkling of Nat Gould’s novels and some examples of the older workmanship of Whyte-Melville), we were presently comfortably ensconced. On a side table were placed a generous supply of liquid refreshments, cigars and cigarettes; so that we made ourselves quite comfortable, and Sir Howard restrained his indignation, until each had a glass before him and all were smoking.

“Now,” he began, “what have you got to report, gentlemen? You, Inspector,” he pointed with his cigar toward ‘Wessex, “have seen Vane’s man and all of you have been down to look at these damned tracks. I only want to hear one thing; that you expect to trace the disgraceful couple. I’ll see to it”—his voice rose almost to a shout—“that Vane is kicked out of the service, and as to that shameless brat of Bramber’s, I wish her no worse than the blackguard’s company!”

“One moment, Sir Howard, one moment,” said Harley quietly; “there are always two sides to a case.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Harley? There’s only one side that interests me—the outrage inflicted upon my hospitality by this dirty guest of mine. For the girl I don’t give twopence; she was bound to come to a bad end.”

“Well,” said Harley, “before we pronounce the final verdict upon either of them I should like to interview Bramber. Perhaps,” he added, turning to Wessex, “it would be as well if Mr. Knox and I went alone. The presence of an official detective sometimes awes this class of witness.”

“Quite right, quite right!” agreed Sir Howard, waving his cigar vigorously. “Go and see Bramber, Mr. Harley; tell him that no blame attaches to himself whatever; also, tell him with my compliments that his stepdaughter is—”

“Quite so, quite so,” interrupted Harley, endeavouring to hide a smile. “I understand your feelings, Sir Howard, but again I ask you to reserve your verdict until all the facts are before us.”

As a result, Harley and I presently set out for the gamekeeper’s cottage, and as the man had been warned that we should visit him, he was on the porch smoking his pipe. A big, dark, ugly fellow he proved to be, of a very forbidding cast of countenance. Having introduced ourselves:

"I always knowed she'd come to a bad end!" declared Gamekeeper Bramber, almost echoing Sir Howard's words. "One o' these gentlemen o' hers was sure to be the finish of her!"

"She had other admirers—before Captain Vane?"

"Aye! the hussy! There was a black-faced villain not six months since! He got t' vain cat to go to London an' have her photograph done in a dress any decent woman would 'a' blushed to look at! Like one o' these Venuses up at t' Manor! Good riddance! She took after her mother!"

The violent old ruffian was awkward to examine, but Harley persevered.

"This previous admirer caused her to be photographed in that way, did he? Have you a copy?"

"No!" blazed Bramber. "What I found I burnt! He ran off, like I told her he would—an' her cryin' her eyes out! But the pretty soger dried her tears quick enough!"

"Do you know this man's name?"

"No. A foreigner, he was."

"Where were the photographs done—in London, you say?"

"Aye."

"Do you know by what photographer?"

"I don't! An' I don't care! Piccadilly they had on 'em, which was good enough for me."

"Have you her picture?"

"No!"

"Did she receive a letter on the day of her disappearance?"

"Maybe."

"Good day!" said Harley. "And let me add that the atmosphere of her home was hardly conducive to ideal conduct!"

Leaving Bramber to digest this rebuke, we came out of the cottage. Dusk was falling now, and by the time that we regained the Manor the place was lighted up. Inspector Wessex was waiting for us in the library, and:

"Well?" he said, smiling slightly as we entered.

"Nothing much," replied Harley dryly, "except that I don't wonder at the girl's leaving such a home."

"What's that! What!" roared a big voice, and Sir Howard came into the room. "I tell you, Bramber only had one fault as a stepfather; he wasn't heavy-handed enough. A bad lot, sir, a bad lot!"

"Well, sir," said Inspector Wessex, looking from one to another, "personally, beyond the usual inquiries at railway stations, etc., I cannot see that we can do much here. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Harley?"

Harley nodded.

"Quite," he replied. "There is a late train to town which I think we could catch if we started at once."

"Eh?" roared Sir Howard; "you're not going back to-night? Your rooms are ready for you, damn it!"

"I quite appreciate the kindness, Sir Howard," replied Harley; "but I have urgent business to attend to in London. Believe me, my departure is unavoidable."

The blue eyes of the baronet gleamed with the simple cunning of his kind.

"You've got something up your sleeve," he roared. "I know you have, I know you have!"

Inspector Wessex looked at me significantly, but I could only shrug my shoulders in reply; for in these moods Harley was as inscrutable as the Sphinx.

However, he had his way, and Sir Howard hurriedly putting a car in commission, we raced for the local station and just succeeded in picking up the express at Claybury.

Wessex was rather silent throughout the journey, often glancing in my friend's direction, but Harley made no further reference to the case beyond outlining the interview with Bramber, until, as we were parting at the London terminus, Wessex to report to Scotland Yard and I to go to Harley's rooms:

"How long do you think it will take you to find that photographer, Wessex?" he asked. "Piccadilly is a sufficient clue."

"Well," replied the Inspector, "nothing can be done to-night, of course, but I should think by mid-day tomorrow the matter should be settled."

"Right," said Harley shortly. "May I ask you to report the result to me, Wessex?"

"I will report without fail."

### III

#### ALI OF CAIRO

It was not until the evening of the following day that Harley rang me up, and:

"I want you to come round at once," he said urgently. "The Deepbrow case is developing along lines which I confess I had anticipated, but which are dramatic nevertheless."

Knowing that Harley did not lightly make such an assertion, I put aside the work upon which I was engaged and hurried around to Chancery Lane. I found my friend, pipe in mouth, walking up and down his smoke-laden study in a state which I knew to betoken suppressed excitement, and:

"Did Wessex find your photographer?" I asked on entering.

"Yes," he replied. "A first-class man, as I had anticipated. As I had further anticipated he did a number of copies of the picture for the foreign gentleman—about fifty, in fact!"

"Fifty!"

"Yes! Does the significance of that fact strike you?" asked Harley, a queer smile stealing across his tanned, clean-shaven face.

"It is an extraordinary thing for even an ardent admirer to have so many reproductions done of the same picture!"

"It is! I will show you now what I found trodden into one of the footprints where the struggle took place beside the car."

Harley produced a piece of thick silk twine.

"What is it?"

"It is a link, Knox—a link to seek which I really went down to Deepbrow." He stared at me quizzically, but my answering look must have been a blank one. "It is part of the tassel of one of those red cloth caps commonly called in England, a fez!"

He continued to stare at me and I to stare at the piece of silk; then:

"What is the next move?" I demanded. "Your new clue rather bewilders me."

"The next move," he said, "is to retire to the adjoining room and make ourselves look as much like a couple of Oriental commercial travellers as our correctly British appearance will allow!"

"What!" I cried.

"That's it!" laughed Harley. "I have a perpetual tan, and I think I can give you a temporary one which I keep in a bottle for the purpose."

Twenty minutes later, then, having quitted Harley's chambers by a back way opening into one of those old-world courts which abound in this part of the metropolis, two quietly attired Eastern gentlemen got into a cab at the corner of Chancery Lane and proceeded in the direction of Limehouse.

There are haunts in many parts of London whose very existence is unsuspected by all but the few; haunts unvisited by the tourist and even unknown to the copy-hunting pressman. Into a quiet thoroughfare not three minutes' walk from the busy life of West India Dock Road, Harley led the way. Before a door sandwiched in between the entrance to a Greek tobacconist's establishment and a boarded shop-front, he paused and turned to me.

"Whatever you see or hear," he cautioned, "express no surprise. Above all, show no curiosity."

He rang the bell beside the door, and almost immediately it was opened by a Negress, grossly and repellently ugly.

Harley pattered something in what sounded like Arabic, whereat the Negress displayed the utmost servility, ushering us into an ill-lighted passage with every evidence of respect. Following this passage to its termination, an inner door was opened, and a burst of discordant music greeted us, together with a wave of tobacco smoke. We entered.

Despite my friend's particular injunctions to the contrary I gave a start of amazement.

We stood in the doorway of a fairly large apartment having a divan round three of its sides. This divan was occupied by ten or a dozen men of nationalities—Arabs, Greeks, lascars, and others. They smoked cigarettes for the most part and sipped *Mokha* from little cups. A girl was performing a wriggling dance upon the square carpet occupying the centre of the floor, accompanied by a Nubian boy who twanged upon a guitar, and by most of the assembled company, who clapped their hands to the music or droned a low, tuneless dirge.

Shortly after our entrance the performance terminated, and the girl retired through a curtained doorway at the farther end of the room. Our presence being now observed, suspicious glances were cast in our direction, and a very aged man, who sat smoking a *narghli* near the door by which the girl had made her exit, gravely waved towards us the amber mouthpiece which he held in his hand.

Harley walked straight across to him, I close at his heels. The light of a lamp which hung close by fell fully upon my friend's face; and, rising from his seat, the old man greeted him with the dignified and graceful salutation of the East. At his request we seated ourselves beside him, and, while we all three smoked excellent Turkish cigarettes, Harley and he conversed in a low tone. Suddenly, at some remark of my friend's, our strange host rose to his feet, an angry frown contracting his heavy eyebrows.

Silence fell upon the company.

In a loud and peremptory voice he called out something in Arabic.

Instantly I detected a fellow near the entrance door, and whom I had not hitherto observed, slipping furtively into the shadow, with a view, as I thought, to secret departure. He seemed to be deformed in some way and had the most evil, pock-marked face I had ever beheld in my life. Angrily, the majestic old man recalled him. Whereupon, with a sort of animal snarl quite indescribable, the fellow plucked out a knife! Two men who had been on the point of seizing him fell back, and:

"Hold him!" shouted Harley, springing forward—"hold him! It's Ali of Cairo!"

But Harley was too late. Turning, the strange and formidable-looking Oriental ran like the wind! Ere hand could be raised to stay him he was through the doorway!

“That settles it,” said Harley grimly, as once more I found myself in a cab beside him. “I was right; but he’ll forestall us!”

“*Who* will forestall us?” I asked in bewilderment.

“The biggest villain in Europe, Asia, or Africa!” cried my companion. I have wasted precious time to-day. I might have known.” He drummed irritably upon his knees. “The place we have just left is a sort of club, you understand, Knox, and Hákîm is the proprietor or host as well as being an old gentleman of importance and authority in the Moslem world. I told him of my suspicions—which step I should have taken earlier—and they were instantly confirmed. My man was there—recognized me—and bolted! He’ll forestall us.”

“But my dear fellow,” I said patiently—“who is this man, and what has he to do with the Deepbrow case?”

“He is the blackest scoundrel breathing!” answered Harley bitterly. “As to what he has to do with the case—why did he bolt? At any rate, I know where to find him now—and we *may* not be too late after all.”

“But who and what is this man?”

“He is Ali of Cairo! As to *what* he is—you will soon learn.”

#### IV

#### THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER

On quitting the singular Oriental club, Harley had first raced off to a public telephone, where he had spoken for some time—as I now divined—to Scotland Yard. For when we presently arrived at the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police, I was surprised to find Inspector Wessex awaiting us. Leaning out of the cab window:

“Yes?” called Harley excitedly. “Was I right?”

“You were, Mr. Harley,” answered Wessex, who seemed to be no less excited than my companion. “I got the man’s reply an hour ago.”

“I knew it!” said Harley shortly. “Get in, Wessex; we haven’t a minute to waste.”

The Inspector joined us in the cab, having first given instructions to the chauffeur. As we set out once more:

“You have had very little time to make the necessary arrangements,” continued my friend.

“Time enough,” replied Wessex. “They will not be expecting us.”

“I’m not so sure of it. One of the biggest villains in the civilized world recognized me three minutes before I called you up and then made good his escape. However, there is at least a fighting chance.”

Little more was said from that moment until the end of the drive, both my companions seeming to be consumed by an intense eagerness to reach our destination. At last the cab drew up in a deserted street. I had rather lost my bearings; but I knew that we were once more somewhere in the Chinatown area, and:

“Follow us until we get into the house,” Harley said to Inspector Wessex, “and wait out of sight. If you hear me blow this whistle, bring up the men you have posted—as quick as you like! But make it your particular business to see that *no one gets out!*”

Into a pitch-dark yard we turned, and I felt a shudder of apprehension upon observing that it was the entrance to a wharf. Dully gleaming in the moonlight, the Thames, that grave of many a



ghastly secret, flowed beneath us. Emerging from the shadow of the archway, we paused before a door in the wall on our left.

At that moment something gleamed through the air, whizzed past my car, and fell with a metallic jingle on the stones!

Instinctively we both looked up.

At an unlighted window on the first floor I caught a fleeting glimpse of a dark face.

“You were right!” I said. “Ali of Cairo has fore-stalled us!”

Harley stooped and picked up a knife with a broad and very curious blade. He slipped it into his pocket, nonchalantly.

“All evidence!” he said. “Keep in the shadow and bend down. I am going to stand on your shoulders and get into that window!”

Wondering at his daring, I nevertheless obeyed; and Harley succeeded, although not without difficulty, in achieving his purpose. A moment after he had disappeared in the blackness of the room above.

“Stand clear, Knox!” I heard.

Two of the cushion seats sometimes called “poof-ottomans” were thrown down, and:

“Up you come!” called Harley. “I’ll grasp your hands if you can reach.”

It proved no easy task, but I finally managed to scramble up beside my friend—to find myself in a dark and stuffy little room.

“This way!” said Harley rapidly—“upstairs.”

He led the way without more ado, but it was with serious misgivings that I stumbled up a darkened stair in the rear of my greatly daring friend.

A pistol cracked in the darkness—and my fez was no longer on my head!

Harley’s repeater answered, and we stumbled through a heavily curtained door into a heated room, the air of which was laden with some Eastern perfume. In the dim light from a silken-shaded lantern a figure showed, momentarily, darting across the place before us. Again Harley’s pistol spoke, but, as it seemed, ineffectively. I had little enough opportunity to survey my surroundings; yet even in those brief, breathless moments I saw enough of the place wherein we stood to make me doubt the evidence of my senses! Outside, I knew, lay a dingy wharf, amid a maze of mean streets; here was an opulently furnished apartment with a strong Oriental note in the decorations!

Snatching an electric torch from his pocket, Harley leaped through a doorway draped with rich Persian tapestry, and I came close on his heels. Outside was darkness. A strong draught met us; and, passing along a carpeted corridor, we never halted until we came to a room filled with the weirdest odds and ends, apparently collected from every quarter of the globe.

*Crack!*

A bullet flattened itself on the wall behind us!

“Good job he can’t shoot straight!” rapped Harley.

The ray of the torch suddenly picked out the head and shoulders of a man who was descending through a trap in the floor! Ere we had time to shoot he was gone! I saw his brown fingers relax their hold—and a bundle which he had evidently hoped to take with him was left lying upon the floor.

Together we ran to the trap and looked down.

Slowly moving tidal water flowed darkly beneath us! For twenty breathless seconds we watched—but nothing showed upon the surface.

“I hope his swimming is no better than his shooting,” I said.

“It can avail him little,” replied Harley grimly; “a river-police boat is waiting for anyone who tries to escape from that side of the house. We are by no means alone in this affair, Knox. But, firstly, what have we here!” he took up the bundle which the fugitive had deserted. “Something incriminating when Ali of Cairo dared not stay to face it out! He would never have deserted this place in the ordinary way. That fellow who was such a bad shot was left behind, when the news of our approach reached here, to make a desperate attempt to remove some piece of evidence! I’ll swear to it. But we were too soon for him!”

All the time he was busily removing the pieces of sacking and scraps of Oriental stuff with which the bundle was fastened; and finally he drew out a dress-suit, together with the linen, collar, shoes, and underwear—a complete outfit, in fact—and on top of the whole was a soft gray felt hat!

Eagerly Harley searched the garments for some name of a maker by which their owner might be identified. Presently, inside the lining of the breast pocket, where such a mark is usually found, he discovered the label of a well-known West End firm.

“The police can confirm it, Knox!” he said, looking up, his face slightly flushed with triumph; “but I, personally, have no doubt!”

“*You* may have no doubt, Harley,” I retorted, “but *I* am full of doubt! What is the significance of this discovery to which you seem to attach so much importance?”

“At the moment,” replied my friend, “never mind; I still have hopes—although they have grown somewhat slender—of making a much more important discovery.”

“Why not permit the police to aid in the search?”

“The police are more useful in their present occupation,” he replied. “We are dealing with the most cunning knave produced by East or West, and I don’t mean to let him slip through my fingers if he is in this house! Nevertheless, Knox, I am submitting you to rather an appalling risk, I know; for our man is desperate, and if he is still in the place will prove as dangerous as a cornered rat.”

“But the man who dropped through the trap?”

“The man who dropped through the trap,” said Harley, “was not Ali of Cairo—and it is Ali of Cairo for whom I am looking!”

“The hunchback we saw to-night?”

Harley nodded, and having listened intently for a few moments, proceeded again to search the singular apartments of the abode. In each was evidence of Oriental occupancy; indeed, some of the rooms possessed a sort of *Arabian Nights* atmosphere. But no living creature was to be seen or heard anywhere. It was while the two of us, having examined every inch of wall, I should think, in the building, were standing staring rather blankly at each other in the room with the lighted lantern, that I saw Harley’s expression change.

“Why,” he muttered, “is this one room illuminated—and all the others in darkness?”

Even then the significance of this circumstance was not apparent to me. But Harley stared critically at an electric switch which was placed on the immediate right of the door and then up at the silk-shaded lantern which lighted the room. Crossing, he raised and lowered the switch rapidly, but the lamp continued to burn uninterruptedly!

“Ah!” he said—“a good trick!”

Grasping the wooden block to which the switch was attached, he turned it bodily—and I saw that it was a masked knob; for in the next moment he had pulled open the narrow section of wall—which proved to be nothing less than a cunningly fitted door!

A small, dimly lighted apartment was revealed, the Oriental note still predominant in its appointments, which, however, were few, and which I scarcely paused to note. For lying upon a mattress in this place was a pretty, fair-haired girl!

She lay on her side, having one white arm thrown out and resting limply on the floor, and she seemed to be in a semi-conscious condition, for although her fine eyes were widely opened, they had a glassy, witless look, and she was evidently unaware of our presence.

“Look at her pupils,” rapped Harley. “They have drugged her with *bhang!* Poor, pretty fool!”

“Good God!” I cried. “Who is this, Harley?”

“*Molly Clayton!*” he answered. “Thank heaven we have saved *one* victim from Ali of Cairo.”

## V

### THE HAREM AGENCY

Owing to the instrumentality of Paul Harley, the public never learned that the awful riverside murder called by the Press in reference to the victim’s shaven skull “the barber atrocity” had any relation to the Deepbrow case. It was physically impossible to identify the victim, and Harley had his own reasons for concealing the truth. The house on the wharf with its choice Oriental furniture was seized by the police; but, strange to relate, no arrest was made in connection with this most gruesome outrage. The man who dropped through the trap had been wounded by one of Harley’s shots, and he sank for the last time under the very eyes of the crew of the police cutter.

It was at a late hour on the night of this concluding tragedy that I learned the amazing truth underlying the case. Wessex was still at work in the East End upon the hundred and one formalities which attached to his office, and Harley and I sat in the study of my friend’s chambers in Chancery Lane.

“You see,” Harley was explaining. “I got my first clue down at Deepbrow. The tracks leading to the motor-car. They showed—to anyone not hampered by a preconceived opinion—that the girl and Vane had not gone on together (since the man’s footprints proved him to have been *running*), but that *she* had gone first and that *he* had run after her! Arguments: (*a*) He heard the approach of the car; or (*b*) he heard her call for help. In fact, it almost immediately became evident to me that someone else had met her at the end of the lane; probably someone who expected her, and whom she was going to meet when she, *accidentally*, encountered Vane! The captain was not attired for an elopement, and, more significant still, he said he should stroll to the Deep Wood, and that was where he did stroll to; for it borders the road at this point!

“I had privately ascertained, from the postman, that Molly Clayton actually received a letter on that morning! This resolved my last doubt. She was not going to meet Vane on the night of her disappearance.

“Then whom?”

“The old love! He who some months earlier had had over fifty seductive pictures of this undoubtedly pretty girl prepared for a purpose of his own!”

“Vane interfered?”

“When the girl saw that they meant to take her away, she no doubt made a fuss! He ran to the rescue! They had not reckoned on his being there, but these are clever villains, who leave no clues—except for one who has met them on their own ground!”

“On their own ground! What do you mean, Harley? Who are these people?”

“Well—where do you suppose those fifty photographs went?”

“I cannot conjecture!”

“Then I will tell you. The turmoil in the East has put wealth and power into unscrupulous hands. But even before the war there were marts, Knox—open marts—at which a Negro girl might be purchased for some £30, and a Circassian for anything from £250 to £500! Ah! You stare! But I assure you it was so. Here is the point, though: there were, and still are, private dealers! Those photographs were circulated among the *nouveaux riches* of the East! They were employed in the same way that any other merchant employs a catalogue. They reached the hands of many an opulent and abandoned ‘profiteer’ of Damascus, Stambûl—where you will. Molly’s picture would be one of many. Remember that hundreds of pretty girls disappear from their homes—taking the whole of the world—every year. Clearly, English beauty is popular at the moment! And,” he added bitterly, “the arch-villain has escaped!”

“Ali of Cairo!” I cried. “Then Ali of Cairo—”

“Is the biggest *slave-dealer* in the East!”

“Good God! Harley—at last I understand!”

“I was slow enough to understand it myself, Knox. But once the theory presented itself I asked Wessex to get into immediate touch with the valet he had already interviewed at Deepbrow. It was the result of his inquiry to which he referred when we met him at Scotland Yard to-night. Captain Vane had a large mole *on his shoulder* and a girl’s name, together with a small device, tattooed *on his forearm*—a freak of his Sandhurst days—”

“Then ‘the man with the shaven skull’—”

“Is Captain Ronald Vane! May he rest in peace. But *I* never shall until the crook-back dealer in humanity has met his just deserts.”