


***ST. GEORGE
RATHBORNE***



***OLD BROADBRIM
INTO THE HEART
OF AUSTRALIA
OR, A STRANGE
BARGAIN AND ITS
CONSEQUENCES***

St. George Rathborne

Old Broadbrim Into the Heart of Australia or, A Strange Bargain and Its Consequences

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CHAPTER I.

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OLD BROADBRIM'S STRANGE BARGAIN.

The 12th of April, 189—, as Old Broadbrim, the famous Quaker detective, will ever remember, fell on a Thursday.

Just after the noon hour on that day he received a letter asking him to come to one of the most elegant private residences on Fifth Avenue.

He was sure no crime had been committed, and he was puzzled to guess just what the invitation meant.

The owner of the mansion was Custer Kipp, one of the richest and best-known dwellers on the avenue, a man who counted his wealth almost by the tens of millions, so it was said at least, and the detective had seen him often on the street and in his elegant turnout in the parks.

Old Broadbrim answered the letter in person, as was his wont.

He reached the door of the mansion, and his ring was answered immediately, as if he was expected, and a servant conducted him into the library.

In an armchair at the mahogany desk sat the millionaire.

Custer Kipp was a man of sixty-three, a tall, slim, but handsome, person, and withal a person who was approachable to a fault.

He was a widower at the time, and his only child was a son named Foster.

This young man was not in at the time of the detective's call, and the only other person in the house who belonged

to the household was the nabob's ward, Miss Nora Doon, a young lady just quitting her teens and the pet of the mansion.

Custer Kipp smiled drearily when the figure of the Quaker crossed the threshold, and invited him to a seat near the desk.

"I am glad you came," said he. "I sent word to my friend, the inspector, to send me one of his best men, and I am rejoiced that he saw fit to send you, of whom I have heard."

Old Broadbrim bowed and waited.

"My case is a peculiar one, and, perhaps, a little out of the line of your business. Do you ever play the part of Cerberus, Mr. Broadbrim?"

"Not very often."

"I thought not," smiled the millionaire. "I have no crime for you to unravel, but if things are permitted to drift as they are going just now, you will have a first-class mystery on your hands ere long."

"You do not want me to wait, I see," said Old Broadbrim.

"That is it exactly. I don't care to wait to be foully murdered."

"I would think not. It isn't a very pleasant prospect, but perhaps it is not as bad as you suppose."

"It is very bad. I am in the shadow of death, but I don't care to go into details just now. I want you to guard my person for one year, and if at the end of that time I am still in the land of the living, why, your work ceases."

"It's a strange commission," replied the detective.

"I thought you would call it such. I am to be guarded against an enemy insidious and merciless. I am on the 'black list.'"

"On the black list, eh?"

"Exactly," and the rich man turned a shade paler. "I will give you twenty-five thousand dollars if you guard me for one year. You will not be required to make your home under my roof—I could not ask that—but you will be asked to take care of my foe if he should prove too aggressive."

"But, sir, to be able to do that I shall have to know something about this enemy."

"Just so. You don't know him now—have never seen him, perhaps, although you may have passed him fifty times on the street within the last six months since he landed in this city."

"Oh, he's a foreigner, is he?"

"I can't say that he is, though he has passed some years under a foreign sky. This man is not alone in his dark work; he has a confederate, a person whose beauty years ago nearly proved my ruin."

Old Broadbrim did not speak.

Already the traditional woman had entered the case.

"For one year, Mr. Broadbrim," continued Custer Kipp, coming back to the original proposition. "Is it a bargain?"

The detective sat silent and rigid for a few seconds.

Never before had a proposition of that sort been made to him.

It would take him from cases that might spring up to demand his attention.

After all, the man before him might have no enemy at all, and the time spent in watching him might prove lost time, though twenty-five thousand dollars would be his at the end of the year.

"If you accept, remember that for one year you belong to me, will be subject to my commands, will have to go whither I send you, and you will not be permitted to follow your calling beyond them."

"It binds one rather close," said Old Broadbrim.

"I want a man who will belong to me. He must devote his whole time to keeping the hand of death away from me, and —"

Custer Kipp leaned forward and opened the desk.

Running his hand into it, he pulled out a package and untied it before the detective's eyes.

"This is a picture of the man as he looked twenty years ago," he said, throwing a photograph on the desk. "He has changed some, of course, but he is the same cool-headed demon he was then."

"And the other—the woman?"

The nabob started.

"I have no picture of her save the one I carry in my memory. I haven't seen her since a fatal night at Monaco."

He laid the picture down and looked squarely at the detective.

"No more now. Will you accept?"

It was a novel and romantic engagement and appealed strongly to the detective's curiosity.

He thought rapidly for ten seconds, after which he looked into Custer Kipp's eyes and said:

"I accept."

"A thousand thanks! I feel younger already—I feel that I will yet escape this vendetta, that I have years of useful life ahead and that I will die in my house when my time comes.

But one word. Not a whisper of this bargain beyond the walls of my house. Not a word to my children, for I call Nora my child the same as Foster. It must be our secret, Mr. Broadbrim."

"It shall be ours."

"That's right. Now, sir, if you will come back to-morrow I will give you the commission in detail. I will study up all the points you should know, and then you will see into your task and will know just what you will be expected to do."

Old Broadbrim, a man of brevity, picked up his hat.

"I will be here," he said. "Thee can trust me," using, as he did at times, the Quaker formula.

In another moment he had turned his back on the millionaire and was walking toward the hall.

At the door he glanced over his shoulder and saw the figure of Custer Kipp bent over the desk, and the face was buried in the arms.

Old Broadbrim closed the door and went away.

Down in his office, in the room in which he had thought out more than one tangle of crime, he threw himself into his armchair and took up a cigar.

"What have I done?" he asked himself. "Is the man mad? What is this invisible fear which almost paralyzes him? Why does he send for me to watch him for a year when he could fly to the ends of the world, for he has money to take him anywhere, and thus escape the enemy? But I'll do my part."

The day deepened, and the shadows of night fell over the city.

Old Broadbrim came forth, and walked a few squares after which he turned suddenly and rapped at a door belonging to a small house in a quiet district.

The portal was opened by a man not very young, but wiry and keen-eyed.

"Come in. I've been waiting for you," said this person. "I have a case for you—one which the police have not yet discovered. It will produce rich results."

The detective's countenance seemed to drop.

Here it was already.

He began to see how foolish he had been to make a bargain with Custer Kipp.

"What is it, Clippers?" he asked.

"It's just the sort o' case you've been looking for," was the reply. "On the next street is a dead man—a man whose life must have gone out violently yesterday or last night. You don't know him, but I do. Jason Marrow has been a study and a puzzle to me for three years. We have met occasionally, but never got on familiar terms. Now he's dead and is there yet, in his little room, with marks of violence on his throat and the agony in his glassy eyes. Won't you come with me? I have been holding the matter for you."

Old Broadbrim said he would at once take a look at the mystery, and Clippers, his friend, offered to conduct him to the scene of the tragedy.

The two entered a little house near the mouth of an alley, and Clippers led the way to a room to the left of the hall.

"He's a mystery—got papers of importance hid in the house, but we'll find them in course of time," he chattered. "It's going to be a deep case, just to your liking, Mr. Broadbrim, but you'll untangle it, for you never fail."

At this moment the pair entered the room and the hand of Clippers pointed to a couch against the wall.

Old Broadbrim stepped nimbly forward and bent over the bed.

A rigid figure lay upon it, and the first glance told him that death had been busy there.

"Who is he?" asked the detective.

"It's Jason Marrow. You didn't know him. Precious few people did. The papers which he has hidden will tell us more and we'll find them. It's your case, Mr. Broadbrim."

"I can't take it, Clippers."

The other fell back with a cry of amazement.

"You can't take it?" he gasped. "In the name of Heaven, are you mad, Mr. Broadbrim?"

"I hope not."

"But it's just the sort o' case you like. There's mystery in it. Killed by some one as yet unknown. Strangled by a hand unseen and dead in his little den."

"Yes, I know, Clippers, but it's not for me."

"Why not?"

"I'm engaged."

"On something better? On a deeper mystery than the death of Jason Marrow?"

"I don't know. I only know that I can't take this matter into my hands."

"Well, I'm stumped!" cried Clippers.

"And I'm sorry," answered the great detective. "I'll tell the police. I'll see that Hargraves or Irwin get the job. That's all I can do. For one year I belong to—to another master."

There was no reply to this; Clippers showed that he was "stumped."

CHAPTER II.

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THE MIDNIGHT MURDER.

"Come!" said Clippers, when he got second wind, "maybe you can get the other one to release you."

"He won't do that. The bargain's been sealed."

"You're not going to retire?"

"Well, hardly."

"That's good, anyhow. If the other fellows, Hargraves or Irwin, get at fault you won't refuse to join in the hunt for the murderer of poor Marrow?"

"I will be free at the end of a year under certain contingencies—perhaps a good deal sooner."

"Well, I wish it was to-morrow," cried Clippers. "I want you to take this case; but we'll have to see the others and let Tom or Pappy reap new fame."

Half an hour later the two detectives named Hargraves and Irwin knew all there was to know at the time of the death of Jason Marrow.

It was not much, for the slayer had done his work with great secrecy and had left no clues behind.

The matter was destined to become a mystery to the department, a deep puzzle to the best men on the force for months.

Old Broadbrim went back to his room after the find in the house near the mouth of the alley.

"Confound it all! why did I bind myself for a year to play Cerberus for Custer Kipp?" he mused. "Here's the very sort of case I've been looking for, but my hands are tied, and I can't get out of the matter unless I go to his house and absolutely back out of the bargain. In that case I would lose the twenty-five thousand dollars and— No, I'll stick!"

For long into the night there was a light in the detective's room, and he might have been found at the table at work.

It was near midnight when a footstep came to the door and stopped there.

Old Broadbrim heard the noise and waited for the rap.

When it sounded he crossed the room and opened the door.

A young man with a very white face and a figure that trembled a little stepped forward.

"You're the gentleman, I guess? You're Josiah Broadbrim?"

"I am."

"You are wanted at once at Custer Kipp's home on Fifth Avenue. Miss Nora sent me and I didn't go in to look at him."

"To look at whom?" asked the detective.

"Why, at Mr. Kipp. He was found dead in the library an hour ago."

The detective started violently and looked at the man in his chair.

"Is it murder?" he asked.

"I can't say. Miss Nora didn't tell me, but from the aspects of the case I think it's serious."

"I'll come."

The young man arose and hastened from the room.

"Not so soon, I hope?" said the detective to himself. "Can it be that my espionage ends almost before the bargain is cold? Dead in the library? It's marvelous."

Old Broadbrim soon appeared at the Kipp door and was admitted.

He found the parlor well filled with strange people, for the most part neighbors in the upper circles of city life, but here and there was a representative of the lower classes who had edged their way into the mansion.

The moment the detective crossed the threshold he was approached by a young girl, with clear blue eyes and a good carriage, who instantly addressed him.

"You are Josiah Broadbrim?" she said questioningly. "Yes, you are the detective whom I sent for?"

Old Broadbrim nodded.

"Then, come with me. He is in the library and I have locked the door."

The detective was conducted from the parlor and the nabob's ward opened the door of the library.

In another instant she had closed it and they stood in the large chamber, elegantly furnished, and containing rows of books magnificently bound, for Custer Kipp had spared no pains with his tastes.

"There he is," said the girl with lowered voice, as she pointed toward a figure in the armchair. "No one has touched him, for I forbade it, and you are the first person to see him dead beside myself and the person who did the deed."

The detective stepped forward, and the hand of Nora Doon turned the gas a little higher.

Custer Kipp was leaning back in the chair with his white face turned toward the ceiling.

The arms hung downward as if they had slipped over the sides of the seat, and the face showed traces of the death agony.

"I heard but little," said Nora, while the detective looked at the dead. "I go upstairs early when I am not at the opera or elsewhere. I remained at home to-night for I had letters to write, and he came home from a ride about seven.

"I heard him in the library bustling about for an hour while I read in my room, and then everywhere silence seemed to come down over the house. When I arose to retire I thought I would look downstairs, as is my wont, and see if all was snug. As I came down the stairs I peeped over the transom of the library, as one can do from the head of the flight, and to my horror I saw him in the position you see him now.

"There was something so unnatural in the pose, something suggestive of sickness if not death—for I must own that the thought of sudden death interposed itself—that I bounded to the foot of the stair and opened the door, which was not locked.

"In another moment I knew all. I saw that he was dead, and, what is more, I saw that he had been killed. You will notice the dark marks which linger still at the throat, as if he had been strangled like the thugs serve their victims. Isn't it terrible? To have him taken away in this manner, and tomorrow was to be his birthday."

She ceased and glanced at the man in the chair, while a shadow of fear and inward dread seemed to take possession of her soul.

"I don't know just where Foster is," she went on. "He went away nearly a week ago, and I never heard papa say where he is. However, he will see the news in the papers, and will

be here in a short time. I told Simpson, the servant, as soon as I recovered, for I lost all control of myself under the terrible discovery, and there's no telling how long I lay in a swoon on the carpet here. As soon as I could I sent him after you."

"But," smiled Old Broadbrim, "how did you know where to find me?"

"I found your card in the desk. I remember seeing you in the house to-day, though I knew nothing of the nature of your mission. He has been in fear of something for some time. I have noticed this, and think it has not escaped Foster's eye. But we'll know about this when he returns."

"My card was all you found, miss?"

"Yes; but I'll admit that I did not look thoroughly. The front door was unlocked when I went thither after the discovery in this room, but—— What is it, Simpson?"

The servant had entered the room and stood near the door with his eyes riveted upon the young girl.

When she spoke his name he came forward and extended his hand.

"I picked this up in the hall just now. It's a curious bit of paper, part of a letter."

Nora took the find and glanced at it, then handed it to the Quaker man-hunter.

Old Broadbrim looked at it, going over to the desk where the droplight swung.

"Tell the people in the parlor that they can go now, Simpson," said Nora. "The police will be here in a little while. The detective is already here."

Old Broadbrim looked up at Nora as Simpson left the room, and his look drew her toward him.

"Is it anything?" she asked.

The detective still held the bit of paper in his hand.

"It may not be of any use," said he, slightly elevating the paper. "Some one of the people out there may have dropped it."

The gaze of the young girl fell upon the paper, and Old Broadbrim continued:

"Did Mr. Kipp ever have any correspondents in Australia?" he asked.

Nora shook her head, but the next instant she lost some color.

"Stay!" she cried. "I remember now that he received a letter some months ago, which seemed to trouble him a great deal. That letter was from Australia."

"Do you remember from what particular part, Miss Nora?"

"I do not."

"Could we find it among his effects, think you?"

"I am sure we cannot. Of that I say I am very positive. He destroyed it."

"That is bad."

"Is that message from that part of the world?"

And the hand of Nora Doon pointed at the paper in the detective's hand.

"It is merely the fragment of a letter. It is little better than an address. It is—— But you shall see it for yourself."

Old Broadbrim extended the paper, and the girl took it eagerly, but with some show of fear.

He watched her as she leaned forward and looked at the writing in the light of the dropjet.

Suddenly the young lady uttered a cry, and then turned upon the man-hunter with a frightened face absolutely colorless.

"It's from the same part of the world; I remember now!" she exclaimed. "The postmark on that letter was Perth. The whole thing comes back to me. The postman brought the letter to the house, and I carried it to his desk to await his coming home. It the same name—Perth. Where is it?"

"You mean in what part of Australia, miss?"

"Yes, yes."

"It is in West Australia, and beyond it lie the barren and death lands of the great island. But what is the name?"

"Merle Macray," spoke Nora, in a whisper. "What a strange name it is, and don't you see that the handwriting is that of one of my sex? And the line above the address—just look at it in the light of this murderous deed. 'Don't let him see sixty-four!' That means that the command to kill Custer Kipp comes from that far part of the globe. It makes it all the more terrible."

Old Broadbrim took the paper and put it away.

"Not a word about this, please," he said to the girl.

"I am your secret keeper," she answered. "This matter is in your hands. When Foster comes home you can tell him about the torn letter if you wish, but I will not without your authority. The slayer of my benefactor must be found."

"He shall be."

"Even if the trail leads across the sea?"

"Yes, even if it leads around the world and into the heart of the wild Australian bush."