

# Dr Nikola's Vendetta

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UUID: 8fde31dc-c57e-11e8-964f-17532927e555

Published by BoD - Books on Demand, Norderstedt

ISBN: 9783748128717

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<http://write.streetlib.com>

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## PROLOGUE—DR NIKOLA

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THE manager of the new Imperial Restaurant on the Thames Embankment went into his luxurious private office and shut the door. Having done so, he first scratched his chin reflectively, and then took a letter from the drawer in which it had reposed for more than two months and perused it carefully. Though he was not aware of it, this was the thirtieth time he had read it since breakfast that morning. And yet he was not a whit nearer understanding it than he had been at the beginning. He turned it over and scrutinised the back, where not a sign of writing was to be seen; he held it up to the window, as if he might hope to discover something from the watermark; but there was evidently nothing in either of these places of a nature calculated to set his troubled mind at rest. Then, though he had a clock upon his mantelpiece in good working order, he took a magnificent repeater watch from his waistcoat pocket and glanced at the dial; the hands stood at half-past

seven. He immediately threw the letter on the table, and as he did so his anxiety found relief in words.

"It's really the most extraordinary affair I ever had to do with," he remarked to the placid face of the clock above mentioned. "And as I've been in the business just three-and-thirty years at eleven a.m. next Monday morning, I ought to know something about it. I only hope I've done right, that's all."

As he spoke, the chief bookkeeper, who had the treble advantage of being tall, pretty, and just eight-and-twenty years of age, entered the room. She noticed the open letter and the look upon her chief's face, and her curiosity was proportionately excited.

"You seem worried, Mr McPherson," she said tenderly, as she put down the papers she had brought in for his signature.

"You have just hit it, Miss O'Sullivan," he answered, pushing them farther on to the table. "I am worried about many things, but particularly about this letter."

He handed the epistle to her, and she, being desirous of impressing him with her business capabilities, read it with ostentatious care. But it was noticeable that when she reached the signature she too turned back to the beginning, and then deliberately read it over again. The manager rose, crossed to the mantelpiece, and rang for the head waiter. Having relieved his feelings in this way, he seated himself again at his writing-table, put on his



glasses, and stared at his companion, while waiting for her to speak.

"It's very funny," she said at length, seeing that she was expected to say something. "Very funny indeed!"

"It's the most extraordinary communication I have ever received," he replied with conviction. "You see it is written from Cuyaba, Brazil. The date is three months ago to a day. Now I have taken the trouble to find out where and what Cuyaba is."

He made this confession with an air of conscious pride, and having done so, laid himself back in his chair, stuck his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat, and looked at his fair subordinate for approval.

Nor was he destined to be disappointed. He was a bachelor in possession of a snug income, and she, besides being a pretty woman, was a lady with a keen eye to the main chance.

"And where is Cuyaba?" she asked humbly.

"Cuyaba," he replied, rolling his tongue with considerable relish round his unconscious mispronunciation of the name, "is a town almost on the western or Bolivian border of Brazil. It is of moderate size, is situated on the banks of the river Cuyaba, and is considerably connected with the famous Brazilian Diamond Fields."

"And does the writer of this letter live there?"

"I cannot say. He writes from there—that is enough for us."

"And he orders dinner for four—here, in a private room overlooking the river, three months ahead—punctually at eight o'clock, gives you a list of the things he wants, and even arranges the decoration of the table. Says he has never seen either of his three friends before; that one of them hails from (here she consulted the letter again) Hang-chow, another from Bloemfontein, while the third resides, at present, in England. Each one is to present an ordinary visiting card with a red dot on it to the porter in the hall, and to be shown to the room at once. I don't understand it at all."

The manager paused for a moment, and then said deliberately—

"Hang-chow is in China, Bloemfontein is in South Africa."

"What a wonderful man you are, to be sure, Mr McPherson! I never can think how you manage to carry so much in your head."

There spoke the true woman. And it was a move in the right direction, for the manager was susceptible to her gentle influence, as she had occasion to know.

At this juncture the head waiter appeared upon the scene, and took up a position just inside the doorway, as if he were afraid of injuring the carpet by coming further.

"Is No 22 ready, Williams?"

"Quite ready, sir. The wine is on the ice, and cook tells me he'll be ready to dish punctual to the moment."

"The letter says, 'no electric light; candles with red

shades.' Have you put on those shades I got this morning?"

"Just seen it done this very minute, sir."

"And let me see, there was one other thing." He took the letter from the chief bookkeeper's hand and glanced at it.

"Ah, yes, a porcelain saucer, and a small jug of new milk upon the mantelpiece. An extraordinary request, but has it been attended to?"

"I put it there myself, sir."

"Who wait?"

"Jones, Edmunds, Brooks, and Tomkins."

"Very good. Then I think that will do. Stay! You had better tell the hall porter to look out for three gentlemen presenting plain visiting cards with a little red spot on them. Let Brooks wait in the hall, and when they arrive tell him to show them straight up to the room."

"It shall be done, sir."

The head waiter left the room, and the manager stretched himself in his chair, yawned by way of showing his importance, and then said solemnly—

"I don't believe they'll any of them turn up; but if they do, this Dr Nikola, whoever he may be, won't be able to find fault with my arrangements."

Then, leaving the dusty high road of Business, he and his companion wandered in the shady bridle-paths of Love to the end that when the chief bookkeeper returned to her own department she had forgotten the strange

dinner party about to take place upstairs, and was busily engaged upon a calculation as to how she would look in white satin and orange blossoms, and, that settled, fell to wondering whether it was true, as Miss Joyce, a subordinate, had been heard to declare, that the manager had once shown himself partial to a certain widow with reputed savings and a share in an extensive egg and dairy business.

At ten minutes to eight precisely a hansom drew up at the steps of the hotel. As soon as it stopped, an undersized gentleman, with a clean-shaven countenance, a canonical corporation, and bow legs, dressed in a decidedly clerical garb, alighted. He paid and discharged his cabman, and then took from his ticket pocket an ordinary white visiting card, which he presented to the gold-laced individual who had opened the apron. The latter, having noted the red spot, called a waiter, and the reverend gentleman was immediately escorted upstairs.

Hardly had the attendant time to return to his station in the hall, before a second cab made its appearance, closely followed by a third. Out of the second jumped a tall, active, well-built man of about thirty years of age. He was dressed in evening dress of the latest fashion, and to conceal it from the vulgar gaze, wore a large Inverness cape of heavy texture. He also in his turn handed a white card to the porter, and, having done so, proceeded into the hall, followed by the occupant of the last cab, who

had closely copied his example. This individual was also in evening dress, but it was of a different stamp. It was old-fashioned and had seen much use. The wearer, too, was taller than the ordinary run of men, while it was noticeable that his hair was snow-white, and that his face was deeply pitted with smallpox. After disposing of their hats and coats in an ante-room, they reached room No 22, where they found the gentleman in clerical costume pacing impatiently up and down.

Left alone, the tallest of the trio, who for want of a better title we may call the Best Dressed Man, took out his watch, and having glanced at it, looked at his companions.

"Gentlemen," he said, with a slight American accent, "it is three minutes to eight o'clock. My name is Eastover!"

"I'm glad to hear it, for I'm most uncommonly hungry," said the next tallest, whom I have already described as being so marked by disease. "My name is Prendergast!"

"We only wait for our friend and host," remarked the clerical gentleman, as if he felt he ought to take a share in the conversation, and then, as if an afterthought had struck him, he continued, "My name is Baxter!"

They shook hands all round with marked cordiality, seated themselves again, and took it in turns to examine the clock.

"Have you ever had the pleasure of meeting our host before?" asked Mr Baxter of Mr Prendergast.

"Never," replied that gentleman, with a shake of his head.

"Perhaps Mr Eastover has been more fortunate?"

"Not I," was the brief rejoinder. "I've had to do with him off and on for longer than I care to reckon, but I've never set eyes on him up to date."

"And where may he have been the first time you heard from him?"

"In Nashville, Tennessee," said Eastover. "After that, Tahupapa, New Zealand; after that, Papeete, in the Society Islands; then Pekin, China. And you?"

"First time, Brussels; second, Monte Video; third, Mandalay, and then the Gold Coast, Africa. It's your turn, Mr Baxter."

The clergyman glanced at the timepiece. It was exactly eight o'clock.

"First time, Cabul, Afghanistan; second, Nijni Novgorod, Russia; third, Wilcannia, Darling River, Australia; fourth, Valparaiso, Chile; fifth, Nagasaki, Japan."

"He is evidently a great traveller and a most mysterious person."

"He is more than that," said Eastover with conviction; "he is late for dinner!"

Prendergast looked at his watch.

"That clock is two minutes fast. Hark, there goes Big Ben! Eight exactly."

As he spoke the door was thrown open and a voice announced "Dr Nikola."