

The Luck of Keith-Martin

By Richard Middleton

London does not change. Every now and then large-minded authorities or ambitious capitalists hew down streets and squares of houses and build marble hotels and theatres on the sites, and yet their efforts do not alter London, as Londoners know it, in the smallest degree. It stands where it did.

Hugh Ingleby returned from six years' hard work in Malta with a heart steeled against the wounds Time might have dealt to his city. He had thought that at first he would find himself a stranger in a new land; he had feared some aloofness, some coldness born of his long absence.

But as he drove up from the Docks he saw that his fears had been groundless; the dome of St. Pauls, the Monument, Big Ben, all were there; the hansoms and omnibuses still performed miracles of execution in the still narrow streets; the Londoners were still hurrying nowhere in particular with nothing in particular upon their tongues.

The old smells were in his nostrils, the old soots on his cuffs, the old cries in his ears. Even the catchwords sounded familiar. Hugh felt the London spirit creeping into his veins once more; the feeling that he had been there at the beginning and would be there at the end; the knowledge that here and here only was his home.

He wondered whether Keith-Martin, too, had remained unchanged. His brief note of welcome in answer to Hugh's letter announcing his visit had been characteristic of the old Keith-Martin, his friend. And he was still at his old rooms, which was pleasant. Hugh would see again the great room, originally intended for a studio but changed by Keith-Martin to a place of Bohemian luxury, the luxury that dirty boots and bottled beer and tobacco ash do not spoil.

Would it all be just the same, even to Keith's bed half-hidden in an alcove behind a pair of Oriental curtains, scorched and rent by frequent mishaps?

And could the old days, the old times come back again? It seemed too good to be possible, and yet London had not altered, it was just the same. Dear old London!

He drove to an hotel where he could leave his luggage, feeling the exhilaration and the excitement of a schoolboy back for the Christmas holidays. What a time he would have!

He kept the cab waiting while he took his rooms and refused lunch. He could not wait.

How like Keith it was, he thought, not to meet him at the Docks. Always afraid of appearing sentimental and yet what a welcome he would have!

"Drive fast, cabby!" he cried and they slid along to Chelsea splendidly.

The house had not altered.

"Shall I wait, sir?" said the cabman. Hugh paid him, smiling.

Wait! Why—

He ran upstairs and stopped before the old brass plate, James Keith-Martin, to enjoy his suspense.

Then he knocked.

"Who's there?" said a voice, a woman's voice, within.

Hugh's heart sank as he gave his name. If Keith had married!

"Come in," said the voice.

He opened the door and went in.

The room was perfectly dark.

“Shut the door, please,” said the voice. “My eyes—are very weak.”

He shut the door behind him and stood there wondering. He could see absolutely nothing.

“I think there must be some mistake,” he said. “I wish to see my old friend, Mr. Keith-Martin; I did not know—”

“Just in front of you there is a chair,” said the voice politely. “Please sit down. You will see Keith presently perhaps.”

Hugh sat down as directed.

Keith! What did that mean? The voice was the voice of a pretty woman, that much he knew.

“You are an old friend of Keith’s are you not, Mr. Ingleby?” she went on.

“I am his oldest friend,” said Hugh.

“Ah! That is very nice.”

The voice sounded mocking, like the voices heard in a bad dream.

“When do you expect him back?” said Hugh, not liking the silence that then ensued.

The answer surprised him alike by its certainty and its purport.

“Never!”

“I don’t understand,” he said angrily. “You said I might see him presently.”

“Not here, though. You had better go away. Keith will write to you perhaps.”

“I do not understand you. I don’t know to whom I am speaking.”

“Please go away. Keith has gone.”

“I don’t believe it. Who are you?”

“So chivalrous,” murmured the voice.

“Who are you?” repeated Hugh.

The woman at first made no reply, then she said abruptly. “I am Keith’s luck.”

Hugh was beginning to feel really anxious. Was he sitting in the dark with a mad woman? And Keith—

“Where is Keith?” he asked.

There was again no answer, so he repeated the question.

“Keith is dead. Now please go away.”

“I am his oldest friend,” said Hugh, “and again I say I do not believe you!”

“Yes, I know,” said the voice. “The women tell lies in Malta!”

So she knew all about him.

“Who are you?” he repeated.

“Mary Stuart,” said the voice inconsequently. “She killed Darnley.”

Carrying on a long conversation in the dark with an unknown woman of doubtful sanity is trying for the nerves.

“Damn you!” cried Hugh. “You are fooling. I’m here to see Keith.”

“Those poor Maltese ladies, what they have to put up with!”

“I think you must be mad.”

“That’s right. Quite mad. Keith will write to you about it. It’s very sad. Now please go away.”

“I will,” said Hugh, getting up, “but first we’ll have a little light on the scene.” He fumbled for the switch.

“I strongly advise you not to,” said the voice dispassionately.

“Cover your eyes if it hurts them,” said Hugh. There was a scornful laugh in the blackness.

Then Hugh found the switch and the room blazed with light.

Before him on the sofa lay the body of Keith-Martin, stabbed to the heart.

Hugh looked at the woman dully, her dress was covered with blood.
“I advised you not to,” was all she said.