

The New Catacomb

Arthur Conan Doyle

“Look here, Burger,” said Kennedy, “I do wish that you would confide in me.”

The two famous students of Roman remains sat together in Kennedy's comfortable room overlooking the Corso. The night was cold, and they had both pulled up their chairs to the unsatisfactory Italian stove which threw out a zone of stuffiness rather than of warmth. Outside under the bright winter stars lay the modern Rome, the long, double chain of the electric lamps, the brilliantly lighted cafes, the rushing carriages, and the dense throng upon the footpaths. But inside, in the sumptuous chamber of the rich young English archaeologist, there was only old Rome to be seen. Cracked and timeworn friezes hung upon the walls, grey old busts of senators and soldiers with their fighting heads and their hard, cruel faces peered out from the corners. On the centre table, amidst a litter of inscriptions, fragments, and ornaments, there stood the famous reconstruction by Kennedy of the Baths of Caracalla, which excited such interest and admiration when it was exhibited in Berlin. Amphorae hung from the ceiling, and a litter of curiosities strewed the rich red Turkey carpet. And of them all there was not one which was not of the most unimpeachable authenticity, and of the utmost rarity and value; for Kennedy, though little more than thirty, had a European reputation in this particular branch of research, and was, moreover, provided with that long purse which either proves to be a fatal handicap to the student's energies, or, if his mind is still true to its purpose, gives him an enormous advantage in the race for fame. Kennedy had often been seduced by whim and pleasure from his studies, but his mind was an incisive one, capable of long and concentrated efforts which ended in sharp reactions of sensuous languor. His handsome face, with its high, white forehead, its aggressive nose, and its somewhat loose and sensual mouth, was a fair index of the compromise between strength and weakness in his nature.

Of a very different type was his companion, Julius Burger. He came of a curious blend, a German father and an Italian mother, with the robust qualities of the North mingling strangely with the softer graces of the South. Blue Teutonic eyes lightened his sun-browned face, and above them rose a square, massive forehead, with a fringe of close yellow curls lying round it. His strong, firm jaw was clean-shaven, and his companion had frequently remarked how much it suggested those old Roman busts which peered out from the shadows in the corners of his chamber. Under its bluff German strength there lay always a suggestion of Italian subtlety, but the smile was so honest, and the eyes so frank, that one understood that this was only an indication of his ancestry, with no actual bearing upon his character. In age and in reputation, he was on the same level as his English companion, but his life and his work had both been far more arduous. Twelve years before, he had come as a poor student to Rome, and had lived ever since upon some small endowment for research which had been awarded to him by the University of Bonn. Painfully, slowly, and doggedly, with extraordinary tenacity and single-

mindedness, he had climbed from rung to rung of the ladder of fame, until now he was a member of the Berlin Academy, and there was every reason to believe that he would shortly be promoted to the Chair of the greatest of German Universities. But the singleness of purpose which had brought him to the same high level as the rich and brilliant Englishman, had caused him in everything outside their work to stand infinitely below him. He had never found a pause in his studies in which to cultivate the social graces. It was only when he spoke of his own subject that his face was filled with life and soul. At other times he was silent and embarrassed, too conscious of his own limitations in larger subjects, and impatient of that small talk which is the conventional refuge of those who have no thoughts to express.

And yet for some years there had been an acquaintanceship which appeared to be slowly ripening into a friendship between these two very different rivals. The base and origin of this lay in the fact that in their own studies each was the only one of the younger men who had knowledge and enthusiasm enough to properly appreciate the other. Their common interests and pursuits had brought them together, and each had been attracted by the other's knowledge. And then gradually something had been added to this. Kennedy had been amused by the frankness and simplicity of his rival, while Burger in turn had been fascinated by the brilliancy and vivacity which had made Kennedy such a favourite in Roman society. I say "had," because just at the moment the young Englishman was somewhat under a cloud. A love-affair, the details of which had never quite come out, had indicated a heartlessness and callousness upon his part which shocked many of his friends. But in the bachelor circles of students and artists in which he preferred to move there is no very rigid code of honour in such matters, and though a head might be shaken or a pair of shoulders shrugged over the flight of two and the return of one, the general sentiment was probably one of curiosity and perhaps of envy rather than of reprobation.

"Look here, Burger," said Kennedy, looking hard at the placid face of his companion, "I do wish that you would confide in me."

As he spoke he waved his hand in the direction of a rug which lay upon the floor. On the rug stood a long, shallow fruit-basket of the light wicker-work which is used in the Campagna, and this was heaped with a litter of objects, inscribed tiles, broken inscriptions, cracked mosaics, torn papyri, rusty metal ornaments, which to the uninitiated might have seemed to have come straight from a dustman's bin, but which a specialist would have speedily recognized as unique of their kind. The pile of odds and ends in the flat wicker-work basket supplied exactly one of those missing links of social development which are of such interest to the student. It was the German who had brought them in, and the Englishman's eyes were hungry as he looked at them.

"I won't interfere with your treasure-trove, but I should very much like to hear about it," he continued, while Burger very deliberately lit a cigar. "It is evidently a discovery of the first importance. These inscriptions will make a sensation throughout Europe."

“For every one here there are a million there!” said the German. “There are so many that a dozen savants might spend a lifetime over them, and build up a reputation as solid as the Castle of St. Angelo.”

Kennedy sat thinking with his fine forehead wrinkled and his fingers playing with his long, fair moustache.

“You have given yourself away, Burger!” said he at last. “Your words can only apply to one thing. You have discovered a new catacomb.”

“I had no doubt that you had already come to that conclusion from an examination of these objects.”

“Well, they certainly appeared to indicate it, but your last remarks make it certain. There is no place except a catacomb which could contain so vast a store of relics as you describe.”

“Quite so. There is no mystery about that. I HAVE discovered a new catacomb.”

“Where?”

“Ah, that is my secret, my dear Kennedy. Suffice it that it is so situated that there is not one chance in a million of anyone else coming upon it. Its date is different from that of any known catacomb, and it has been reserved for the burial of the highest Christians, so that the remains and the relics are quite different from anything which has ever been seen before. If I was not aware of your knowledge and of your energy, my friend, I would not hesitate, under the pledge of secrecy, to tell you everything about it. But as it is I think that I must certainly prepare my own report of the matter before I expose myself to such formidable competition.”

Kennedy loved his subject with a love which was almost a mania—a love which held him true to it, amidst all the distractions which come to a wealthy and dissipated young man. He had ambition, but his ambition was secondary to his mere abstract joy and interest in everything which concerned the old life and history of the city. He yearned to see this new underworld which his companion had discovered.

“Look here, Burger,” said he, earnestly, “I assure you that you can trust me most implicitly in the matter. Nothing would induce me to put pen to paper about anything which I see until I have your express permission. I quite understand your feeling and I think it is most natural, but you have really nothing whatever to fear from me. On the other hand, if you don’t tell me I shall make a systematic search, and I shall most certainly discover it. In that case, of course, I should make what use I liked of it, since I should be under no obligation to

you.”

Burger smiled thoughtfully over his cigar.

“I have noticed, friend Kennedy,” said he, “that when I want information over any point you are not always so ready to supply it.”

“When did you ever ask me anything that I did not tell you? You remember, for example, my giving you the material for your paper about the temple of the Vestals.”

“Ah, well, that was not a matter of much importance. If I were to question you upon some intimate thing would you give me an answer, I wonder! This new catacomb is a very intimate thing to me, and I should certainly expect some sign of confidence in return.”

“What you are driving at I cannot imagine,” said the Englishman, “but if you mean that you will answer my question about the catacomb if I answer any question which you may put to me I can assure you that I will certainly do so.”

“Well, then,” said Burger, leaning luxuriously back in his settee, and puffing a blue tree of cigar-smoke into the air, “tell me all about your relations with Miss Mary Saunderson.”

Kennedy sprang up in his chair and glared angrily at his impassive companion.

“What the devil do you mean?” he cried. “What sort of a question is this? You may mean it as a joke, but you never made a worse one.”

“No, I don’t mean it as a joke,” said Burger, simply. “I am really rather interested in the details of the matter. I don’t know much about the world and women and social life and that sort of thing, and such an incident has the fascination of the unknown for me. I know you, and I knew her by sight—I had even spoken to her once or twice. I should very much like to hear from your own lips exactly what it was which occurred between you.”

“I won’t tell you a word.”

“That’s all right. It was only my whim to see if you would give up a secret as easily as you expected me to give up my secret of the new catacomb. You wouldn’t, and I didn’t expect you to. But why should you expect otherwise of me? There’s Saint John’s clock striking ten. It is quite time that I was going home.”

“No; wait a bit, Burger,” said Kennedy; “this is really a ridiculous caprice of yours to wish to know about an old love-affair which has burned out months ago. You know we look upon a man who kisses and tells as the greatest coward and villain possible.”

“Certainly,” said the German, gathering up his basket of curiosities, “when he tells anything about a girl which is previously unknown he must be so. But in this case, as you must be aware, it was a public matter which was the common talk of Rome, so that you are not really doing Miss Mary Saunderson any injury by discussing her case with me. But still, I respect your scruples; and so good night!”

“Wait a bit, Burger,” said Kennedy, laying his hand upon the other’s arm; “I am very keen upon this catacomb business, and I can’t let it drop quite so easily. Would you mind asking me something else in return—something not quite so eccentric this time?”

“No, no; you have refused, and there is an end of it,” said Burger, with his basket on his arm. “No doubt you are quite right not to answer, and no doubt I am quite right also—and so again, my dear Kennedy, good night!”

The Englishman watched Burger cross the room, and he had his hand on the handle of the door before his host sprang up with the air of a man who is making the best of that which cannot be helped.

“Hold on, old fellow,” said he; “I think you are behaving in a most ridiculous fashion; but still; if this is your condition, I suppose that I must submit to it. I hate saying anything about a girl, but, as you say, it is all over Rome, and I don’t suppose I can tell you anything which you do not know already. What was it you wanted to know?”

The German came back to the stove, and, laying down his basket, he sank into his chair once more.

“May I have another cigar?” said he. “Thank you very much! I never smoke when I work, but I enjoy a chat much more when I am under the influence of tobacco. Now, as regards this young lady, with whom you had this little adventure. What in the world has become of her?”

“She is at home with her own people.”

“Oh, really—in England?”

“Yes.”

“What part of England—London?”

“No, Twickenham.”

“You must excuse my curiosity, my dear Kennedy, and you must put it down to my ignorance of the world. No doubt it is quite a simple thing to persuade a young lady to go off with you for three weeks or so, and then to hand her over to her own family at—what did you call the place?”

“Twickenham.”

“Quite so—at Twickenham. But it is something so entirely outside my own experience that I cannot even imagine how you set about it. For example, if you had loved this girl your love could hardly disappear in three weeks, so I presume that you could not have loved her at all. But if you did not love her why should you make this great scandal which has damaged you and ruined her?”

Kennedy looked moodily into the red eye of the stove.

“That’s a logical way of looking at it, certainly,” said he. “Love is a big word, and it represents a good many different shades of feeling. I liked her, and—well, you say you’ve seen her—you know how charming she could look. But still I am willing to admit, looking back, that I could never have really loved her.”

“Then, my dear Kennedy, why did you do it?”

“The adventure of the thing had a great deal to do with it.”

“What! You are so fond of adventures!”

“Where would the variety of life be without them? It was for an adventure that I first began to pay my attentions to her. I’ve chased a good deal of game in my time, but there’s no chase like that of a pretty woman. There was the piquant difficulty of it also, for, as she was the companion of Lady Emily Rood, it was almost impossible to see her alone. On the top of all the other obstacles which attracted me, I learned from her own lips very early in the proceedings that she was engaged.”

“Mein Gott! To whom?”

“She mentioned no names.”

“I do not think that anyone knows that. So that made the adventure more alluring, did it?”

“Well, it did certainly give a spice to it. Don’t you think so?”

“I tell you that I am very ignorant about these things.”

“My dear fellow, you can remember that the apple you stole from your neighbour’s tree was always sweeter than that which fell from your own. And then I found that she cared for me.”

“What—at once?”

“Oh, no, it took about three months of sapping and mining. But at last I won her over. She understood that my judicial separation from my wife made it impossible for me to do the right thing by her—but she came all the same, and we had a delightful time, as long as it lasted.”

“But how about the other man?”

Kennedy shrugged his shoulders.

“I suppose it is the survival of the fittest,” said he. “If he had been the better man she would not have deserted him. Let’s drop the subject, for I have had enough of it!”

“Only one other thing. How did you get rid of her in three weeks?”

“Well, we had both cooled down a bit, you understand. She absolutely refused, under any circumstances, to come back to face the people she had known in Rome. Now, of course, Rome is necessary to me, and I was already pining to be back at my work—so there was one obvious cause of separation. Then, again, her old father turned up at the hotel in London, and there was a scene, and the whole thing became so unpleasant that really—though I missed her dreadfully at first—I was very glad to slip out of it. Now, I rely upon you not to repeat anything of what I have said.”

“My dear Kennedy, I should not dream of repeating it. But all that you say interests me very much, for it gives me an insight into your way of looking at things, which is entirely different from mine, for I have seen so little of life. And now you want to know about my new catacomb. There’s no use my trying to describe it, for you would never find it by that. There is only one thing, and that is for me to take you there.”

“That would be splendid.”

“When would you like to come?”

“The sooner the better. I am all impatience to see it.”

“Well, it is a beautiful night—though a trifle cold. Suppose we start in an hour. We must be

very careful to keep the matter to ourselves. If anyone saw us hunting in couples they would suspect that there was something going on.”

“We can’t be too cautious,” said Kennedy. “Is it far?”

“Some miles.”

“Not too far to walk?”

“Oh, no, we could walk there easily.”

“We had better do so, then. A cabman’s suspicions would be aroused if he dropped us both at some lonely spot in the dead of the night.”

“Quite so. I think it would be best for us to meet at the Gate of the Appian Way at midnight. I must go back to my lodgings for the matches and candles and things.”

“All right, Burger! I think it is very kind of you to let me into this secret, and I promise you that I will write nothing about it until you have published your report. Good-bye for the present! You will find me at the Gate at twelve.”

The cold, clear air was filled with the musical chimes from that city of clocks as Burger, wrapped in an Italian overcoat, with a lantern hanging from his hand, walked up to the rendezvous. Kennedy stepped out of the shadow to meet him.

“You are ardent in work as well as in love!” said the German, laughing.

“Yes; I have been waiting here for nearly half an hour.”

“I hope you left no clue as to where we were going.”

“Not such a fool! By Jove, I am chilled to the bone! Come on, Burger, let us warm ourselves by a spurt of hard walking.”

Their footsteps sounded loud and crisp upon the rough stone paving of the disappointing road which is all that is left of the most famous highway of the world. A peasant or two going home from the wine-shop, and a few carts of country produce coming up to Rome, were the only things which they met. They swung along, with the huge tombs looming up through the darkness upon each side of them, until they had come as far as the Catacombs of St. Calistus, and saw against a rising moon the great circular bastion of Cecilia Metella in front of them. Then Burger stopped with his hand to his side.

“Your legs are longer than mine, and you are more accustomed to walking,” said he, laughing. “I think that the place where we turn off is somewhere here. Yes, this is it, round the corner of the trattoria. Now, it is a very narrow path, so perhaps I had better go in front and you can follow.”

He had lit his lantern, and by its light they were enabled to follow a narrow and devious track which wound across the marshes of the Campagna. The great Aqueduct of old Rome lay like a monstrous caterpillar across the moonlit landscape, and their road led them under one of its huge arches, and past the circle of crumbling bricks which marks the old arena. At last Burger stopped at a solitary wooden cow-house, and he drew a key from his pocket. “Surely your catacomb is not inside a house!” cried Kennedy.

“The entrance to it is. That is just the safeguard which we have against anyone else discovering it.”

“Does the proprietor know of it?”

“Not he. He had found one or two objects which made me almost certain that his house was built on the entrance to such a place. So I rented it from him, and did my excavations for myself. Come in, and shut the door behind you.”

It was a long, empty building, with the mangers of the cows along one wall. Burger put his lantern down on the ground, and shaded its light in all directions save one by draping his overcoat round it.

“It might excite remark if anyone saw a light in this lonely place,” said he. “Just help me to move this boarding.”

The flooring was loose in the corner, and plank by plank the two savants raised it and leaned it against the wall. Below there was a square aperture and a stair of old stone steps which led away down into the bowels of the earth.

“Be careful!” cried Burger, as Kennedy, in his impatience, hurried down them. “It is a perfect rabbits’-warren below, and if you were once to lose your way there the chances would be a hundred to one against your ever coming out again. Wait until I bring the light.”

“How do you find your own way if it is so complicated?”

“I had some very narrow escapes at first, but I have gradually learned to go about. There is a certain system to it, but it is one which a lost man, if he were in the dark, could not possibly find out. Even now I always spin out a ball of string behind me when I am going far into the

catacomb. You can see for yourself that it is difficult, but every one of these passages divides and subdivides a dozen times before you go a hundred yards.”

They had descended some twenty feet from the level of the byre, and they were standing now in a square chamber cut out of the soft tufa. The lantern cast a flickering light, bright below and dim above, over the cracked brown walls. In every direction were the black openings of passages which radiated from this common centre.

“I want you to follow me closely, my friend,” said Burger. “Do not loiter to look at anything upon the way, for the place to which I will take you contains all that you can see, and more. It will save time for us to go there direct.”

He led the way down one of the corridors, and the Englishman followed closely at his heels. Every now and then the passage bifurcated, but Burger was evidently following some secret marks of his own, for he neither stopped nor hesitated. Everywhere along the walls, packed like the berths upon an emigrant ship, lay the Christians of old Rome. The yellow light flickered over the shrivelled features of the mummies, and gleamed upon rounded skulls and long, white armbones crossed over fleshless chests. And everywhere as he passed Kennedy looked with wistful eyes upon inscriptions, funeral vessels, pictures, vestments, utensils, all lying as pious hands had placed them so many centuries ago. It was apparent to him, even in those hurried, passing glances, that this was the earliest and finest of the catacombs, containing such a storehouse of Roman remains as had never before come at one time under the observation of the student.

“What would happen if the light went out?” he asked, as they hurried onwards.

“I have a spare candle and a box of matches in my pocket. By the way, Kennedy, have you any matches?”

“No; you had better give me some.”

“Oh, that is all right. There is no chance of our separating.”

“How far are we going? It seems to me that we have walked at least a quarter of a mile.”

“More than that, I think. There is really no limit to the tombs—at least, I have never been able to find any. This is a very difficult place, so I think that I will use our ball of string.”

He fastened one end of it to a projecting stone and he carried the coil in the breast of his coat, paying it out as he advanced. Kennedy saw that it was no unnecessary precaution, for the passages had become more complex and tortuous than ever, with a perfect network of intersecting corridors. But these all ended in one large circular hall with a square pedestal of

tufa topped with a slab of marble at one end of it.

“By Jove!” cried Kennedy in an ecstasy, as Burger swung his lantern over the marble. “It is a Christian altar—probably the first one in existence. Here is the little consecration cross cut upon the corner of it. No doubt this circular space was used as a church.”

“Precisely,” said Burger. “If I had more time I should like to show you all the bodies which are buried in these niches upon the walls, for they are the early popes and bishops of the Church, with their mitres, their croziers, and full canonicals. Go over to that one and look at it!”

Kennedy went across, and stared at the ghastly head which lay loosely on the shredded and mouldering mitre.

“This is most interesting,” said he, and his voice seemed to boom against the concave vault. “As far as my experience goes, it is unique. Bring the lantern over, Burger, for I want to see them all.”

But the German had strolled away, and was standing in the middle of a yellow circle of light at the other side of the hall.

“Do you know how many wrong turnings there are between this and the stairs?” he asked. “There are over two thousand. No doubt it was one of the means of protection which the Christians adopted. The odds are two thousand to one against a man getting out, even if he had a light; but if he were in the dark it would, of course, be far more difficult.”

“So I should think.”

“And the darkness is something dreadful. I tried it once for an experiment. Let us try it again!” He stooped to the lantern, and in an instant it was as if an invisible hand was squeezed tightly over each of Kennedy’s eyes. Never had he known what such darkness was. It seemed to press upon him and to smother him. It was a solid obstacle against which the body shrank from advancing. He put his hands out to push it back from him.

“That will do, Burger,” said he, “let’s have the light again.”

But his companion began to laugh, and in that circular room the sound seemed to come from every side at once.

“You seem uneasy, friend Kennedy,” said he.

“Go on, man, light the candle!” said Kennedy impatiently.

“It’s very strange, Kennedy, but I could not in the least tell by the sound in which direction you stand. Could you tell where I am?”

“No; you seem to be on every side of me.”

“If it were not for this string which I hold in my hand I should not have a notion which way to go.”

“I dare say not. Strike a light, man, and have an end of this nonsense.”

“Well, Kennedy, there are two things which I understand that you are very fond of. The one is an adventure, and the other is an obstacle to surmount. The adventure must be the finding of your way out of this catacomb. The obstacle will be the darkness and the two thousand wrong turns which make the way a little difficult to find. But you need not hurry, for you have plenty of time, and when you halt for a rest now and then, I should like you just to think of Miss Mary Saunderson, and whether you treated her quite fairly.”

“You devil, what do you mean?” roared Kennedy. He was running about in little circles and clasping at the solid blackness with both hands.

“Good-bye,” said the mocking voice, and it was already at some distance. “I really do not think, Kennedy, even by your own showing that you did the right thing by that girl. There was only one little thing which you appeared not to know, and I can supply it. Miss Saunderson was engaged to a poor ungainly devil of a student, and his name was Julius Burger.”

There was a rustle somewhere, the vague sound of a foot striking a stone, and then there fell silence upon that old Christian church—a stagnant, heavy silence which closed round Kennedy and shut him in like water round a drowning man.

Some two months afterwards the following paragraph made the round of the European Press:

“One of the most interesting discoveries of recent years is that of the new catacomb in Rome, which lies some distance to the east of the well-known vaults of St. Calixtus. The finding of this important burial-place, which is exceeding rich in most interesting early Christian remains, is due to the energy and sagacity of Dr. Julius Burger, the young German

specialist, who is rapidly taking the first place as an authority upon ancient Rome. Although the first to publish his discovery, it appears that a less fortunate adventurer had anticipated Dr. Burger. Some months ago Mr. Kennedy, the well-known English student, disappeared suddenly from his rooms in the Corso, and it was conjectured that his association with a recent scandal had driven him to leave Rome. It appears now that he had in reality fallen a victim to that fervid love of archaeology which had raised him to a distinguished place among living scholars. His body was discovered in the heart of the new catacomb, and it was evident from the condition of his feet and boots that he had tramped for days through the tortuous corridors which make these subterranean tombs so dangerous to explorers. The deceased gentleman had, with inexplicable rashness, made his way into this labyrinth without, as far as can be discovered, taking with him either candles or matches, so that his sad fate was the natural result of his own temerity. What makes the matter more painful is that Dr. Julius Burger was an intimate friend of the deceased. His joy at the extraordinary find which he has been so fortunate as to make has been greatly marred by the terrible fate of his comrade and fellow-worker.”

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