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Complete Works



Series Fourteen

The Complete Works of

H. C. MCNEILE

(1888-1937)



Contents

The Bulldog Drummond Series

Bulldog Drummond (1920)
The Black Gang (1922)
The Third Round (1924)
The Final Count (1926)
The Female of the Species (1928)
Temple Tower (1929)
The Return of Bulldog Drummond (1932)
Knock Out (1933)
Bulldog Drummond at Bay (1935)
Challenge (1937)
Uncollected Bulldog Drummond Stories

The Ronald Standish Series

The Saving Clause (1927)
Tiny Carteret (1930)
Ronald Standish (1933)
Ask for Ronald Standish (1936)

The Jim Maitland Series

Jim Maitland (1923)
The Island of Terror (1931)
Miscellaneous Stories

A Novel

Mufti (1919)

The Short Story Collections

The Lieutenant and Others (1915)
Sergeant Michael Cassidy, R.E. (1915)
Men, Women and Guns (1916)
No Man's Land (1917)

The Human Touch (1918)
The Man in Ratcatcher and Other Stories (1921)
The Dinner Club (1923)
Out of the Blue (1925)
Word of Honour (1926)
When Carruthers Laughed (1927)
The Finger of Fate (1930)

The Short Stories

List of Short Stories in Chronological Order
List of Short Stories in Alphabetical Order

The Non-Fiction

Introduction to 'The Best of O. Henry' (1930)

The Delphi Classics Catalogue

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "H. C. McNeice". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with a prominent flourish on the 'e' at the end.

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Version 1

The Complete Works of

H. C. MCNEILE



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Complete Works of H. C. McNeile



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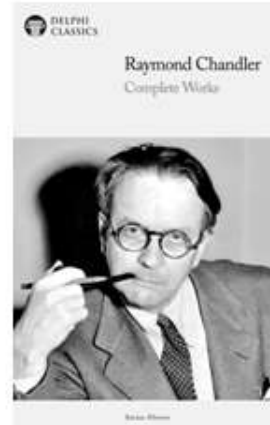
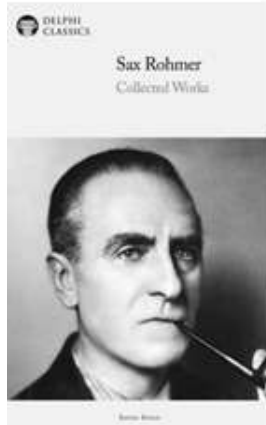
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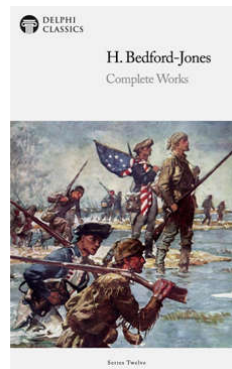
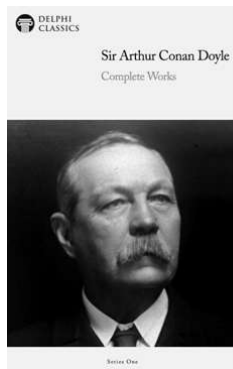
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The Bulldog Drummond Series



Bodmin, Cornwall, 1916 — H. C. McNeile's birthplace



Bodmin today

Bulldog Drummond (1920)



H. C. McNeile was born in Bodmin, Cornwall and was the son of Malcolm McNeile, a captain in the Royal Navy serving as governor of Bodmin's naval prison, and Christiana Mary (née Sloggett). The McNeile family had ancestral roots from both Belfast and Scotland, including a general in the British Indian Army among their members. After attending a prep school in Eastbourne in East Sussex, he was educated at Cheltenham College. On leaving education, he joined the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, from which he was commissioned into the Royal Engineers as a second lieutenant in July 1907. He underwent further training at the Royal School of Military Engineering before a short posting to Aldershot Garrison. McNeile received promotion to lieutenant in June 1910 and was posted to Canterbury, serving three years with the 3rd Field Troop, until January 1914, when he was posted to Malta.

Promoted to the rank of captain, he was still stationed in Malta when World War I broke out and he was ordered to France in October 1914. He travelled via England to marry his sweetheart Violet Evelyn Baird, the daughter of a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Cameron Highlanders. In early November he travelled to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force. Few details are known about his wartime service, as his records were destroyed by incendiary bombs during the World War II. He spent time with a number of Royal Engineer units on the Western Front, including 1st Field Squadron RE, 15th Field Company RE and RE elements of the 33rd Division.

McNeile had started writing stories under the pseudonym Sapper for the *Daily Mail* in early 1915. By the end of that year, he had written two collections of short stories, published by Hodder & Stoughton. During his time with the Royal Engineers, he saw action at the First and Second Battles of Ypres — he was gassed at the second battle — and the Battle of the Somme. In 1916 he was awarded the Military Cross and was mentioned in dispatches. In November of that year he was gazetted to acting major. From April to October 1918, he commanded a battalion of the Middlesex Regiment and was promoted to acting lieutenant-colonel. It was unusual for an engineer to command an infantry regiment at that time. The 18th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment under McNeile saw action for the remainder of his command and were involved in fighting during the Hundred Days Offensive in the St. Quentin-Cambrai sector in September 1918. On 2 October 1918 McNeile broke his ankle and was briefly hospitalised, forcing him to relinquish his command of the battalion. He was on convalescent leave when the war ended in November 1918. During the course of the war, he had spent a total of 32 months in France and had likely been gassed more than once. His literary output from 1915 to 1918 accounted for more than 80 stories. His brother — also serving in the Royal Engineers — had been killed earlier in the war.

After the war, McNeile had a mostly quiet and uneventful life, differing greatly from the heroes of his novels. He suffered from delicate health, though he was noted as a loud and hearty companion. He and his wife had two sons. In June 1919 he retired on to the reserve officer list and was confirmed in the rank of major.

In 1920 McNeile published *Bull-Dog Drummond*, featuring the eponymous hero — a member of “the Breed” — that would become his most famous creation. He had first introduced Drummond as a detective for a short story in *The Strand Magazine*, but the character was not successful and was changed for the novel, which was structured as a thriller. Captain Hugh “Bulldog” Drummond DSO, MC was described

in the novel's sub-title as "a demobilised officer who found peace dull" after service during the World War I with the fictional Loamshire Regiment. Drummond went on to appear in ten full-length novels by McNeile and a further seven by his friend Gerard Fairlie. The character was an amalgam of Fairlie, McNeile himself, and his idea of an English gentleman. Drummond was also partly inspired by Sherlock Holmes, Sexton Blake, Richard Hannay and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Interestingly, Ian Fleming stated that James Bond was influenced partially by the Drummond character.

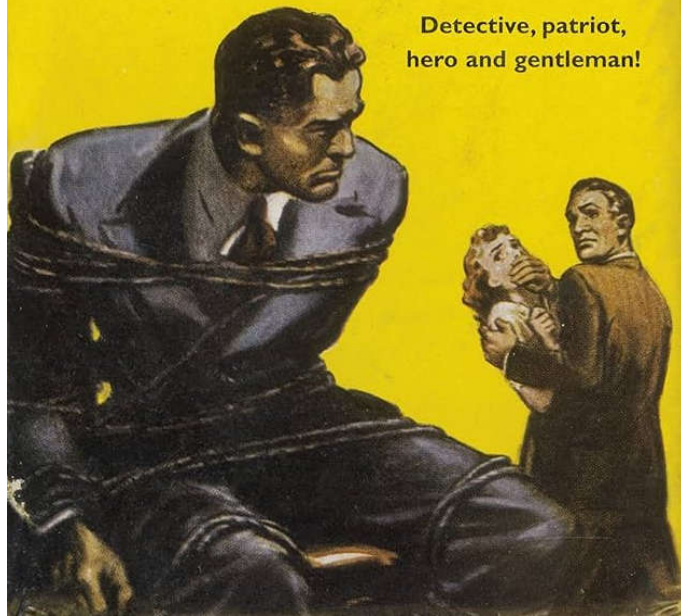
Like the author, Drummond is a war veteran who, brutalised by his experiences in the trenches and bored with his post-war lifestyle. He seeks excitement and becomes a gentleman adventurer. Drummond is characterised as large, strong, physically unattractive and an "apparently brainless hunk of a man", who was also a gentleman with a private income. He could also be interpreted as "a brutalized ex-officer whose thirst for excitement is also an attempt to re-enact the war". The character was later described by Cecil Day-Lewis, author of rival gentleman detective *Nigel Strangeways*, as an "unspeakable public school bully".

Drummond publishes an advertisement looking for adventure, and soon finds himself embroiled in a series of exploits, many of which involve Carl Peterson — who becomes his nemesis — and Peterson's mistress, the *femme fatale* Irma. After his first adventure, Drummond marries his client, Phyllis Benton. In later episodes, Benton becomes involved in Drummond's exploits, often as the victim of kidnapping by Drummond's enemies.

The hero's wartime experiences have given him a series of abilities akin to that of a hunter: stealth— "he could move over ground without a single blade of grass rustling" — and the ability to incapacitate others— "he could kill a man with his bare hands in a second". During his time on the Western Front he would take himself on solitary raids through no man's land. Drummond is also proficient in jujutsu and boxing, is a crack shot, plays cricket for the Free Foresters and is an excellent poker player. In addition to Drummond's physical attributes there is his undoubted common sense, enabling him to equal and overcome his opponents, even if they have a superior intellect.

SAPPER BULLDOG DRUMMOND

Detective, patriot,
hero and gentleman!



The first edition

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I. IN WHICH HE TAKES TEA AT THE CARLTON AND IS SURPRISED

CHAPTER II. IN WHICH HE JOURNEYS TO GODALMING AND THE GAME BEGINS

CHAPTER III. IN WHICH THINGS HAPPEN IN HALF MOON STREET

CHAPTER IV. IN WHICH HE SPENDS A QUIET NIGHT AT THE ELMS

CHAPTER V. IN WHICH THERE IS TROUBLE AT GORING

CHAPTER VI. IN WHICH A VERY OLD GAME TAKES PLACE ON THE HOG'S BACK

CHAPTER VII. IN WHICH HE SPENDS AN HOUR OR TWO ON A ROOF

CHAPTER VIII. IN WHICH HE GOES TO PARIS FOR A NIGHT

CHAPTER IX. IN WHICH HE HAS A NEAR SHAVE

CHAPTER X. IN WHICH THE HUN NATION DECREASES BY ONE

CHAPTER XI. IN WHICH LAKINGTON PLAYS HIS LAST "COUP"

CHAPTER XII. IN WHICH THE LAST ROUND TAKES PLACE

EPILOGUE



The 1929 film adaptation



Lilyan Tashman and Ronald Colman in 'Bulldog Drummond'

PROLOGUE



IN THE MONTH of December 1918, and on the very day that a British Cavalry Division marched into Cologne, with flags flying and bands playing as the conquerors of a beaten nation, the manager of the Hotel Nationale in Berne received a letter. Its contents appeared to puzzle him somewhat, for having read it twice he rang the bell on his desk to summon his secretary. Almost immediately the door opened, and a young French girl came into the room.

“Monsieur rang?” She stood in front of the manager’s desk, awaiting instructions.

“Have we ever had staying in the hotel a man called le Comte de Guy?” He leaned back in his chair and looked at her through his pince-nez.

The secretary thought for a moment and then shook her head.

“Not as far as I can remember,” she said.

“Do we know anything about him? Has he ever fed here, or taken a private room?”

Again the secretary shook her head.

“Not that I know of.”

The manager handed her the letter, and waited in silence until she had read it.

“It seems on the face of it a peculiar request from an unknown man,” he remarked as she laid it down. “A dinner of four covers; no expense to be spared. Wines specified and if not in hotel to be obtained. A private room at half-past seven sharp. Guests to ask for room X.”

The secretary nodded in agreement.

“It can hardly be a hoax,” she remarked after a short silence.

“No.” The manager tapped his teeth with his pen thoughtfully. “But if by any chance it was, it would prove an expensive one for us. I wish I could think who this Comte de Guy is.”

“He sounds like a Frenchman,” she answered. Then after a pause: “I suppose you’ll have to take it seriously?”

“I must.” He took off his pince-nez and laid them on the desk in front of him. “Would you send the *maître d’hôtel* to me at once.”

Whatever may have been the manager’s misgivings, they were certainly not shared by the head waiter as he left the office after receiving his instructions. War and short rations had not been conducive to any particularly lucrative business in his sphere; and the whole sound of the proposed entertainment seemed to him to contain considerable promise. Moreover, he was a man who loved his work, and a free hand over preparing a dinner was a joy in itself. Undoubtedly he personally would meet the three guests and the mysterious Comte de Guy; he personally would see that they had nothing to complain of in the matter of the service at dinner....

And so at about twenty minutes past seven the *maître d’hôtel* was hovering round the hall-porter, the manager was hovering round the *maître d’hôtel*, and the secretary was hovering round both. At five-and-twenty minutes past the first guest arrived....

He was a peculiar-looking man, in a big fur coat, reminding one irresistibly of a cod-fish.

“I wish to be taken to Room X.” The French secretary stiffened involuntarily as the *maître d’hôtel* stepped obsequiously forward. Cosmopolitan as the hotel was, even now she could never hear German spoken without an inward shudder of disgust.

“A Boche,” she murmured in disgust to the manager as the first arrival disappeared through the swing doors at the end of the lounge. It is to be regretted that that worthy man was more occupied in shaking himself by the hand, at the proof that the letter was *bona fide*, than in any meditation on the guest’s nationality.

Almost immediately afterwards the second and third members of the party arrived. They did not come together, and what seemed peculiar to the manager was that they were evidently strangers to one another.

The leading one — a tall gaunt man with a ragged beard and a pair of piercing eyes — asked in a nasal and by no means an inaudible tone for Room X. As he spoke a little fat man who was standing just behind him started perceptibly, and shot a bird-like glance at the speaker.

Then in execrable French he too asked for Room X.

“He’s not French,” said the secretary excitedly to the manager as the ill-assorted pair were led out of the lounge by the head waiter. “That last one was another Boche.”

The manager thoughtfully twirled his pince-nez between his fingers.

“Two Germans and an American.” He looked a little apprehensive. “Let us hope the dinner will appease everybody. Otherwise — —”

But whatever fears he might have entertained with regard to the furniture in Room X, they were not destined to be uttered. Even as he spoke the door again swang open, and a man with a thick white scarf around his neck, so pulled up as almost completely to cover his face, came in. A soft hat was pulled down well over his ears, and all that the manager could swear to as regards the newcomer’s appearance was a pair of deep-set, steel-grey eyes which seemed to bore through him.

“You got my letter this morning?”

“M’sieur le Comte de Guy?” The manager bowed deferentially and rubbed his hands together. “Everything is ready, and your three guests have arrived.”

“Good. I will go to the room at once.”

The *maître d’hôtel* stepped forward to relieve him of his coat, but the Count waved him away.

“I will remove it later,” he remarked shortly. “Take me to the room.”

As he followed his guide his eyes swept round the lounge. Save for two or three elderly women of doubtful nationality, and a man in the American Red Cross, the place was deserted; and as he passed through the swing doors he turned to the head waiter.

“Business good?” he asked.

No — business decidedly was not good. The waiter was voluble. Business had never been so poor in the memory of man.... But it was to be hoped that the dinner would be to Monsieur le Comte’s liking.... He personally had superintended it.... Also the wines.

“If everything is to my satisfaction you will not regret it,” said the Count tersely. “But remember one thing. After the coffee has been brought in, I do not wish to be disturbed under any circumstances whatever.” The head waiter paused as he came to a door, and the Count repeated the last few words. “Under no circumstances whatever.”

“Mais certainement, Monsieur le Comte.... I, personally, will see to it....”

As he spoke he flung open the door and the Count entered. It cannot be said that the atmosphere of the room was congenial. The three occupants were regarding one another in hostile silence, and as the Count entered they, with one accord, transferred their suspicious glances to him.

For a moment he stood motionless, while he looked at each one in turn. Then he stepped forward....

“Good evening, gentlemen” — he still spoke in French— “I am honoured at your presence.” He turned to the head waiter. “Let dinner be served in five minutes exactly.”

With a bow the man left the room, and the door closed.

“During that five minutes, gentlemen, I propose to introduce myself to you, and you to one another.” As he spoke he divested himself of his coat and hat. “The business which I wish to discuss we will postpone, with your permission, till after the coffee, when we shall be undisturbed.”

In silence the three guests waited while he unwound the thick white muffler; then, with undisguised curiosity, they studied their host. In appearance he was striking. He had a short dark beard, and in profile his face was aquiline and stern. The eyes, which had so impressed the manager, seemed now to be a cold grey-blue; the thick brown hair, flecked slightly with grey, was brushed back from a broad forehead. His hands were large and white; not effeminate, but capable and determined: the hands of a man who knew what he wanted, knew how to get it, and got it. To even the most superficial observer the giver of the feast was a man of power: a man capable of forming instant decisions and of carrying them through....

And if so much was obvious to the superficial observer, it was more than obvious to the three men who stood by the fire watching him. They were what they were simply owing to the fact that they were not superficial servers of humanity; and each one of them, as he watched his host, realised that he was in the presence of a great man. It was enough: great men do not send fool invitations to dinner to men of international repute. It mattered not what form his greatness took — there was money in greatness, big money. And money was their life....

The Count advanced first to the American.

“Mr. Hocking, I believe,” he remarked in English, holding out his hand. “I am glad you managed to come.”

The American shook the proffered hand, while the two Germans looked at him with sudden interest. As the man at the head of the great American cotton trust, worth more in millions than he could count, he was entitled to their respect....

“That’s me, Count,” returned the millionaire in his nasal twang. “I am interested to know to what I am indebted for this invitation.”

“All in good time, Mr. Hocking,” smiled the host. “I have hopes that the dinner will fill in that time satisfactorily.”

He turned to the taller of the two Germans, who without his coat seemed more like a cod-fish than ever.

“Herr Steinemann, is it not?” This time he spoke in German.

The man whose interest in German coal was hardly less well known than Hocking’s in cotton, bowed stiffly.

“And Herr von Gratz?” The Count turned to the last member of the party and shook hands. Though less well known than either of the other two in the realms of international finance, von Gratz’s name in the steel trade of Central Europe was one to conjure with.

“Well, gentlemen,” said the Count, “before we sit down to dinner, I may perhaps be permitted to say a few words of introduction. The nations of the world have recently been engaged in a performance of unrivalled stupidity. As far as one can tell that performance is now over. The last thing I wish to do is to discuss the war — except in so far as it concerns our meeting here to-night. Mr. Hocking is an American, you two gentlemen are Germans. I” — the Count smiled slightly— “have no nationality. Or rather, shall I say, I have every nationality. Completely

cosmopolitan.... Gentlemen, the war was waged by idiots, and when idiots get busy on a large scale, it is time for clever men to step in... That is the *raison d'être* for this little dinner.... I claim that we four men are sufficiently international to be able to disregard any stupid and petty feelings about this country and that country, and to regard the world outlook at the present moment from one point of view and one point of view only — our own.”

The gaunt American gave a hoarse chuckle.

“It will be my object after dinner,” continued the Count, “to try and prove to you that we have a common point of view. Until then — shall we merely concentrate on a pious hope that the Hôtel Nationale will not poison us with their food?”

“I guess,” remarked the American, “that you’ve got a pretty healthy command of languages, Count.”

“I speak four fluently — French, German, English, and Spanish,” returned the other. “In addition, I can make myself understood in Russia, Japan, China, the Balkan States, and — America.”

His smile, as he spoke, robbed the words of any suspicion of offence. The next moment the head waiter opened the door, and the four men sat down to dine.

It must be admitted that the average hostess, desirous of making a dinner a success, would have been filled with secret dismay at the general atmosphere in the room. The American, in accumulating his millions, had also accumulated a digestion of such an exotic and tender character that dry rusks and Vichy water were the limit of his capacity.

Herr Steinemann was of the common order of German, to whom food is sacred. He ate and drank enormously, and evidently considered that nothing further was required of him.

Von Gratz did his best to keep his end up, but as he was apparently in a chronic condition of fear that the gaunt American would assault him with violence, he cannot be said to have contributed much to the gaiety of the meal.

And so to the host must be given the credit that the dinner was a success. Without appearing to monopolise the conversation he talked ceaselessly and well. More — he talked brilliantly. There seemed to be no corner of the globe with which he had not a nodding acquaintance at least; while with most places he was as familiar as a Londoner with Piccadilly Circus. But to even the most brilliant of conversationalists the strain of talking to a hypochondriacal American and two Germans — one greedy and the other frightened — is considerable; and the Count heaved an inward sigh of relief when the coffee had been handed round and the door closed behind the waiter. From now on the topic was an easy one — one where no effort on his part would be necessary to hold his audience. It was the topic of money — the common bond of his three guests. And yet, as he carefully cut the end of his cigar, and realised that the eyes of the other three were fixed on him expectantly, he knew that the hardest part of the evening was in front of him. Big financiers, in common with all other people, are fonder of having money put into their pockets than of taking it out. And that was the very thing the Count proposed they should do — in large quantities....

“Gentlemen,” he remarked, when his cigar was going to his satisfaction, “we are all men of business. I do not propose therefore to beat about the bush over the matter which I have to put before you, but to come to the point at once. I said before dinner that I considered we were sufficiently big to exclude any small arbitrary national distinctions from our minds. As men whose interests are international, such things are beneath us. I wish now to slightly qualify that remark.” He turned to the American on

his right, who with his eyes half closed was thoughtfully picking his teeth. “At this stage, sir, I address myself particularly to you.”

“Go right ahead,” drawled Mr. Hocking.

“I do not wish to touch on the war — or its result; but though the Central Powers have been beaten by America and France and England, I think I can speak for you two gentlemen” — he bowed to the two Germans— “when I say that it is neither France nor America with whom they desire another round. England is Germany’s main enemy; she always has been, she always will be.”

Both Germans grunted assent, and the American’s eyes closed a little more.

“I have reason to believe, Mr. Hocking, that you personally do not love the English?”

“I guess I don’t see what my private feelings have got to do with it. But if it’s of any interest to the company you are correct in your belief.”

“Good.” The Count nodded his head as if satisfied. “I take it then that you would not be averse to seeing England down and out.”

“Wal,” remarked the American, “you can assume anything you feel like. Let’s get to the show-down.”

Once again the Count nodded his head; then he turned to the two Germans.

“Now you two gentlemen must admit that your plans have miscarried somewhat. It was no part of your original programme that a British Army should occupy Cologne....”

“The war was the act of a fool,” snarled Herr Steinemann. “In a few years more of peace, we should have beaten those swine....”

“And now — they have beaten you.” The Count smiled slightly. “Let us admit that the war was the act of a fool if you like, but as men of business we can only deal with the result ... the result, gentlemen, as it concerns us. Both you gentlemen are sufficiently patriotic to resent the presence of that army at Cologne I have no doubt. And you, Mr. Hocking, have no love on personal grounds for the English.... But I am not proposing to appeal to financiers of your reputation on such grounds as those to support my scheme.... It is enough that your personal predilections run with and not against what I am about to put before you — the defeat of England ... a defeat more utter and complete than if she had lost the war....”

His voice sank a little, and instinctively his three listeners drew closer.

“Don’t think that I am proposing this through motives of revenge merely. We are business men, and revenge is only worth our while if it pays. This will pay. I can give you no figures, but we are not of the type who deal in thousands, or even hundreds of thousands. There is a force in England which, if it be harnessed and led properly, will result in millions coming to you.... It is present now in every nation — fettered, inarticulate, unco-ordinated.... It is partly the result of the war — the war that the idiots have waged.... Harness that force, gentlemen, co-ordinate it, and use it for your own ends.... That is my proposal. Not only will you humble that cursed country to the dirt, but you will taste of power such as few men have tasted before....” The Count stood up, his eyes blazing. “And I — I will do it for you.”

He resumed his seat, and his left hand, slipping off the table, beat a tattoo on his knee.

“This is our opportunity — the opportunity of clever men. I have not got the money necessary: you have....” He leaned forward in his chair, and glanced at the intent faces of his audience. Then he began to speak...

Ten minutes later he pushed back his chair.

“There is my proposal, gentlemen, in a nutshell. Unforeseen developments will doubtless occur; I have spent my life overcoming the unexpected. What is your answer?”

He rose and stood with his back to them by the fire, and for several minutes no one spoke. Each man was busy with his own thoughts, and showed it in his own particular way. The American, his eyes shut, rolled his toothpick backwards and forwards in his mouth slowly and methodically; Steinemann stared at the fire, breathing heavily after the exertions of dinner: von Gratz walked up and down — his hands behind his back — whistling under his breath. Only the Comte de Guy stared unconcernedly at the fire, as if indifferent to the result of their thoughts. In his attitude at that moment he gave a true expression to his attitude on life. Accustomed to play with great stakes, he had just dealt the cards for the most gigantic gamble of his life.... What matter to the three men, who were looking at the hands he had given them, that only a master criminal could have conceived such a game? The only question which occupied their minds was whether he could carry it through. And on that point they had only their judgment of his personality to rely on.

Suddenly the American removed the toothpick from his mouth, and stretched out his legs.

“There is a question which occurs to me, Count, before I make up my mind on the matter. I guess you’ve got us sized up to the last button; you know who we are, what we’re worth, and all about us. Are you disposed to be a little more communicative about yourself? If we agree to come in on this hand, it’s going to cost big money. The handling of that money is with you. Wal — who are you?”

Von Gratz paused in his restless pacing and nodded his head in agreement; even Steinemann, with a great effort, raised his eyes to the Count’s face as he turned and faced them....

“A very fair question, gentlemen, and yet one which I regret I am unable to answer. I would not insult your intelligence by giving you the fictitious address of — a fictitious Count. Enough that I am a man whose livelihood lies in other people’s pockets. As you say, Mr. Hocking, it is going to cost big money; but compared to the results the costs will be a flea-bite.... Do I look — and you are all of you used to judging men — do I look the type who would steal the baby’s money-box which lay on the mantelpiece, when the pearls could be had for opening the safe.... You will have to trust me, even as I shall have to trust you.... You will have to trust me not to divert the money which you give me as working expenses into my own pocket.... I shall have to trust you to pay me when the job is finished....

“And that payment will be — how much?” Steinemann’s guttural voice broke the silence.

“One million pounds sterling — to be split up between you in any proportion you may decide, and to be paid within one month of the completion of my work. After that the matter will pass into your hands ... and may you leave that cursed country grovelling in the dirty...” His eyes glowed with a fierce, vindictive fury; and then, as if replacing a mask which had slipped for a moment, the Count was once again the suave, courteous host. He had stated his terms frankly and without haggling: stated them as one big man states them to another of the same kidney, to whom time is money and indecision or beating about the bush anathema.

“Take them or leave them.” So much had he said in effect, if not in actual words, and not one of his audience but was far too used to men and matters to have dreamed of suggesting any compromise. All or nothing: and no doctrine could have appealed more to the three men in whose hands lay the decision....

“Perhaps, Count, you would be good enough to leave us for a few minutes.” Von Gratz was speaking. “The decision is a big one, and...”

“Why, certainly, gentlemen.” The Count moved towards the door. “I will return in ten minutes. By that time you will have decided — one way or the other.”

Once in the lounge he sat down and lit a cigarette. The hotel was deserted save for one fat woman asleep in a chair opposite, and the Count gave himself up to thought. Genius that he was in the reading of men’s minds, he felt that he knew the result of that ten minutes’ deliberation.... And then ... What then? ... In his imagination he saw his plans growing and spreading, his tentacles reaching into every corner of a great people — until, at last, everything was ready. He saw himself supreme in power, glutted with it — a king, an autocrat, who had only to lift his finger to plunge his kingdom into destruction and annihilation.... And when he had done it, and the country he hated was in ruins, then he would claim his million and enjoy it as a great man should enjoy a great reward.... Thus for the space of ten minutes did the Count see visions and dream dreams. That the force he proposed to tamper with was a dangerous force disturbed him not at all: he was a dangerous man. That his scheme would bring ruin, perhaps death, to thousands of innocent men and women, caused him no qualm: he was a supreme egoist. All that appealed to him was that he had seen the opportunity that existed, and that he had the nerve and the brain to turn that opportunity to his own advantage. Only the necessary money was lacking ... and ... With a quick movement he pulled out his watch. They had had their ten minutes ... the matter was settled, the die was cast....

He rose and walked across the lounge. At the swing doors was the head waiter, bowing obsequiously....

It was to be hoped that the dinner had been to the liking of Monsieur le Comte ... the wines all that he could wish ... that he had been comfortable and would return again....

“That is improbable.” The Count took out his pocket-book. “But one never knows; perhaps I shall.” He gave the waiter a note. “Let my bill be prepared at once, and given to me as I pass through the hall.”

Apparently without a care in the world the Count passed down the passage to his private room, while the head waiter regarded complacently the unusual appearance of an English five-pound note.

For an appreciable moment the Count paused by the door, and a faint smile came to his lips. Then he opened it, and passed into the room....

The American was still chewing his toothpick; Steinemann was still breathing hard. Only von Gratz had changed his occupation, and he was sitting at the table smoking a long thin cigar. The Count closed the door, and walked over to the fireplace....

“Well, gentlemen,” he said quietly, “what have you decided?”

It was the American who answered.

“It goes. With one amendment. The money is too big for three of us: there must be a fourth. That will be a quarter of a million each.”

The Count bowed.

“Have you any suggestions as to who the fourth should be?”

“Yep,” said the American shortly. “These two gentlemen agree with me that it should be another of my countrymen — so that we get equal numbers. The man we have decided on is coming to England in a few weeks — Hiram C. Potts. If you get him in, you can count us in too. If not, the deal’s off.”

The Count nodded, and if he felt any annoyance at this unexpected development he showed no sign of it on his face.

“I know of Mr. Potts,” he answered quietly. “Your big shipping man, isn’t he? I agree to your reservation.”

“Good,” said the American. “Let’s discuss some details.”

Without a trace of emotion on his face the Count drew up a chair to the table. It was only when he sat down that he started to play a tattoo on his knee with his left hand....

* * * * *

Half an hour later he entered his luxurious suite of rooms at the Hotel Magnificent.

A girl, who had been lying by the fire reading a French novel, looked up at the sound of the door. She did not speak, for the look on his face told her all she wanted to know.

He crossed to the sofa and smiled down at her.

“Successful ... on our own terms. To-morrow, Irma, the Comte de Guy dies, and Carl Peterson and his daughter leave for England. A country gentleman, I think, is Carl Peterson. He might keep hens, and possibly pigs.”

The girl on the sofa rose, yawning.

“Mon Dieu! what a prospect! Pigs and hens — and in England! How long is it going to take?”

The Count looked thoughtfully into the fire.

“Perhaps a year — perhaps six months ... It is on the lap of the gods....”

CHAPTER I. IN WHICH HE TAKES TEA AT THE CARLTON AND IS SURPRISED

I



CAPTAIN HUGH DRUMMOND, D.S.O., M.C., late of His Majesty's Royal Loamshires, was whistling in his morning bath. Being by nature of a cheerful disposition, the symptom did not surprise his servant, late private of the same famous regiment, who was laying breakfast in an adjoining room.

After a while the whistling ceased, and the musical gurgle of escaping water announced that the concert was over. It was the signal for James Denny — the square-jawed ex-batman — to disappear into the back regions and get from his wife the kidneys and bacon which that most excellent woman had grilled to a turn. But on this particular morning the invariable routine was broken. James Denny seemed preoccupied, distraught.

Once or twice he scratched his head, and stared out of the window with a puzzled frown. And each time, after a brief survey of the other side of Half Moon Street, he turned back again to the breakfast table with a grin.

"What's you looking for, James Denny?" The irate voice of his wife at the door made him turn round guiltily. "Them kidneys is ready and waiting these five minutes."

Her eyes fell on the table, and she advanced into the room wiping her hands on her apron.

"Did you ever see such a bunch of letters?" she said.

"Forty-five," returned her husband grimly, "and more to come." He picked up the newspaper lying beside the chair and opened it out.

"Them's the result of that," he continued cryptically, indicating a paragraph with a square finger, and thrusting the paper under his wife's nose.

"Demobilised officer," she read slowly, "finding peace incredibly tedious, would welcome diversion. Legitimate, if possible; but crime, if of a comparatively humorous description, no objection. Excitement essential. Would be prepared to consider permanent job if suitably impressed by applicant for his services. Reply at once Box X10."

She put down the paper on a chair and stared first at her husband and then at the rows of letters neatly arranged on the table.

"I calls it wicked," she announced at length. "Fair flying in the face of Providence. Crime, Denny — crime. Don't you get 'aving nothing to do with such mad pranks, my man, or you and me will be having words." She shook an admonitory finger at him, and retired slowly to the kitchen. In the days of his youth James Denny had been a bit wild, and there was a look in his eyes this morning — the suspicion of a glint — which recalled old memories.

A moment or two later Hugh Drummond came in. Slightly under six feet in height, he was broad in proportion. His best friend would not have called him good-looking, but he was the fortunate possessor of that cheerful type of ugliness which inspires immediate confidence in its owner. His nose had never quite recovered from the final one year in the Public Schools Heavy Weights; his mouth was not small. In fact, to be

strictly accurate, only his eyes redeemed his face from being what is known in the vernacular as the Frozen Limit.

Deep-set and steady, with eyelashes that many a woman had envied, they showed the man for what he was — a sportsman and a gentleman. And the combination of the two is an unbeatable production.

He paused as he got to the table, and glanced at the rows of letters. His servant, pretending to busy himself at the other end of the room, was watching him surreptitiously, and noted the grin which slowly spread over Drummond's face as he picked up two or three and examined the envelopes.

"Who would have thought it, James?" he remarked at length. "Great Scot! I shall have to get a partner."

With disapproval showing in every line of her face, Mrs. Denny entered the room, carrying the kidneys, and Drummond glanced at her with a smile.

"Good morning, Mrs. Denny," he said. "Wherefore this worried look on your face? Has that reprobate James been misbehaving himself?"

The worthy woman snorted. "He has not, sir — not yet, leastwise. And if so be that he does" — her eyes travelled up and down the back of the hapless Denny, who was quite unnecessarily pulling books off shelves and putting them back again — "if so be that he does," she continued grimly, "him and me will have words — as I've told him already this morning." She stalked from the room, after staring pointedly at the letters in Drummond's hand, and the two men looked at one another.

"It's that there reference to crime, sir, that's torn it," said Denny in a hoarse whisper.

"Thinks I'm going to lead you astray, does she, James?"

Hugh helped himself to bacon. "My dear fellow, she can think what she likes so long as she continues to grill bacon like this. Your wife is a treasure, James — a pearl amongst women; and you can tell her so with my love." He was opening the first envelope, and suddenly he looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. "Just to set her mind at rest," he remarked gravely, "you might tell her that, as far as I can see at present, I shall only undertake murder in exceptional cases."

He propped the letter up against the toast-rack and commenced his breakfast. "Don't go, James." With a slight frown he was studying the typewritten sheet. "I'm certain to want your advice before long. Though not over this one.... It does not appeal to me — not at all. To assist Messrs. Jones & Jones, whose business is to advance money on note of hand alone, to obtain fresh clients, is a form of amusement which leaves me cold. The waste-paper basket, please, James. Tear the effusion up and we will pass on to the next."

He looked at the mauve envelope doubtfully, and examined the postmark. "Where is Pudlington, James? and one might almost ask — why is Pudlington? No town has any right to such an offensive name." He glanced through the letter and shook his head. "Tush! tush! And the wife of the bank manager too — the bank manager of Pudlington, James! Can you conceive of anything so dreadful? But I'm afraid Mrs. Bank Manager is a puss — a distinct puss. It's when they get on the soul-mate stunt that the furniture begins to fly."

Drummond tore up the letter and dropped the pieces into the basket beside him. Then he turned to his servant and handed him the remainder of the envelopes.

"Go through them, James, while I assault the kidneys, and pick two or three out for me. I see that you will have to become my secretary. No man could tackle that little bunch alone."

"Do you want me to open them, sir?" asked Denny doubtfully.

“You’ve hit it, James — hit it in one. Classify them for me in groups. Criminal; sporting; amatory — that means of or pertaining to love; stupid and merely boring; and as a last resort, miscellaneous.” He stirred his coffee thoughtfully. “I feel that as a first venture in our new career — ours, I said, James — love appeals to me irresistibly. Find me a damsel in distress; a beautiful girl, helpless in the clutches of knaves. Let me feel that I can fly to her succour, clad in my new grey suiting.”

He finished the last piece of bacon and pushed away his plate. “Amongst all that mass of paper there must surely be one from a lovely maiden, James, at whose disposal I can place my rusty sword. Incidentally, what has become of the damned thing?”

“It’s in the lumber-room, sir — tied up with the old umbreller and the niblick you don’t like.”

“Great heavens! Is it?” Drummond helped himself to marmalade. “And to think that I once pictured myself skewering Huns with it. Do you think anybody would be mug enough to buy it, James?”

But that worthy was engrossed in a letter he had just opened, and apparently failed to hear the question. A perplexed look was spreading over his face, and suddenly he sucked his teeth loudly. It was a sure sign that James was excited, and though Drummond had almost cured him of this distressing habit, he occasionally forgot himself in moments of stress.

His master glanced up quickly, and removed the letter from his hands. “I’m surprised at you, James,” he remarked severely. “A secretary should control itself. Don’t forget that the perfect secretary is an it: an automatic machine — a thing incapable of feeling....”

He read the letter through rapidly, and then, turning back to the beginning, he read it slowly through again.

“My dear Box X10, — I don’t know whether your advertisement was a joke: I suppose it must have been. But I read it this morning, and it’s just possible, X10, just possible, that you mean it. And if you do, you’re the man I want. I can offer you excitement and probably crime.

“I’m up against it, X10. For a girl I’ve bitten off rather more than I can chew. I want help — badly. Will you come to the Carlton for tea to-morrow afternoon? I want to have a look at you and see if I think you are genuine. Wear a white flower in your buttonhole.”

Drummond laid the letter down, and pulled out his cigarette-case. “To-morrow, James,” he murmured. “That is to-day — this very afternoon. Verily I believe that we have impinged upon the goods.” He rose and stood looking out of the window thoughtfully. “Go out, my trusty fellow, and buy me a daisy or a cauliflower or something white.”

“You think it’s genuine, sir?” said James thoughtfully.

His master blew out a cloud of smoke. “I know it is,” he answered dreamily. “Look at that writing; the decision in it — the character. She’ll be medium height, and dark, with the sweetest little nose and mouth. Her colouring, James, will be — —”

But James had discreetly left the room.

II

At four o’clock exactly Hugh Drummond stepped out of his two-seater at the Haymarket entrance to the Carlton. A white gardenia was in his button-hole; his grey suit looked the last word in exclusive tailoring. For a few moments after entering the

hotel he stood at the top of the stairs outside the dining-room, while his eyes travelled round the tables in the lounge below.

A brother-officer, evidently taking two country cousins round London, nodded resignedly; a woman at whose house he had danced several times smiled at him. But save for a courteous bow he took no notice; slowly and thoroughly he continued his search. It was early, of course, yet, and she might not have arrived, but he was taking no chances.

Suddenly his eyes ceased wandering, and remained fixed on a table at the far end of the lounge. Half hidden behind a plant a girl was seated alone, and for a moment she looked straight at him. Then with the faintest suspicion of a smile, she turned away, and commenced drumming on the table with her fingers.

The table next to her was unoccupied, and Drummond made his way towards it and sat down. It was characteristic of the man that he did not hesitate; having once made up his mind to go through with a thing, he was in the habit of going and looking neither to the right hand nor to the left. Which, incidentally, was how he got his D.S.O.; but that, as Kipling would say, is another story.

He felt not the slightest doubt in his mind that this was the girl who had written him, and, having given an order to the waiter, he started to study her face as unobtrusively as possible. He could only see the profile, but that was quite sufficient to make him bless the moment when more as a jest than anything else he had sent his advertisement to the paper.

Her eyes, he could see, were very blue; and great masses of golden brown hair coiled over her ears, from under a small black hat. He glanced at her feet — being an old stager; she was perfectly shod. He glanced at her hands, and noted, with approval, the absence of any ring. Then he looked once more at her face, and found her eyes were fixed on him.

This time she did not look away. She seemed to think that it was her turn to conduct the examination, and Drummond turned to his tea while the scrutiny continued. He poured himself out a cup, and then fumbled in his waistcoat pocket. After a moment he found what he wanted, and taking out a card he propped it against the teapot so that the girl could see what was on it. In large block capitals he had written Box X10. Then he added milk and sugar and waited.

She spoke almost at once. "You'll do, X10," she said, and he turned to her with a smile.

"It's very nice of you to say so," he murmured. "If I may, I will return the compliment. So will you."

She frowned slightly. "This isn't foolishness, you know. What I said in my letter is literally true."

"Which makes the compliment even more returnable," he answered. "If I am to embark on a life of crime, I would sooner collaborate with you than — shall we say — that earnest eater over there with the tomato in her hat."

He waved vaguely at the lady in question and then held out his cigarette-case to the girl. "Turkish on this side — Virginian on that," he remarked. "And as I appear satisfactory, will you tell me who I'm to murder?"

With the unlighted cigarette held in her fingers she stared at him gravely. "I want you to tell me," she said at length, and there was no trace of jesting in her voice, "tell me, on your word of honour, whether that advertisement was *bona fide* or a joke."

He answered her in the same vein. "It started more or less as a joke. It may now be regarded as absolutely genuine."

She nodded as if satisfied. "Are you prepared to risk your life?"

Drummond's eyebrows went up and then he smiled. "Granted that the inducement is sufficient," he returned slowly, "I think that I may say that I am."

She nodded again. "You won't be asked to do it in order to obtain a halfpenny bun," she remarked. "If you've a match, I would rather like a light."

Drummond apologised. "Our talk on trivialities engrossed me for the moment," he murmured. He held the lighted match for her, and as he did so he saw that she was staring over his shoulder at someone behind his back.

"Don't look round," she ordered, "and tell me your name quickly."

"Drummond — Captain Drummond, late of the Loamshires." He leaned back in his chair, and lit a cigarette himself.

"And are you going to Henley this year?" Her voice was a shade louder than before.

"I don't know," he answered casually. "I may run down for a day possibly, but —"

"My dear Phyllis," said a voice behind his back, "this is a pleasant surprise. I had no idea that you were in London."

A tall, clean-shaven man stopped beside the table, throwing a keen glance at Drummond.

"The world is full of such surprises, isn't it?" answered the girl lightly. "I don't suppose you know Captain Drummond, do you? Mr. Lakington — art connoisseur and — er — collector."

The two men bowed slightly, and Mr. Lakington smiled. "I do not remember ever having heard my harmless pastimes more concisely described," he remarked suavely. "Are you interested in such matters?"

"Not very, I'm afraid," answered Drummond. "Just recently I have been rather too busy to pay much attention to art."

The other man smiled again, and it struck Hugh that rarely, if ever, had he seen such a cold, merciless face.

"Of course, you've been in France," Lakington murmured. "Unfortunately a bad heart kept me on this side of the water. One regrets it in many ways — regrets it immensely. Sometimes I cannot help thinking how wonderful it must have been to be able to kill without fear of consequences. There is art in killing, Captain Drummond — profound art. And as you know, Phyllis," he turned to the girl, "I have always been greatly attracted by anything requiring the artistic touch." He looked at his watch and sighed. "Alas! I must tear myself away. Are you returning home this evening?"

The girl, who had been glancing round the restaurant, shrugged her shoulders. "Probably," she answered. "I haven't quite decided. I might stop with Aunt Kate."

"Fortunate Aunt Kate." With a bow Lakington turned away, and through the glass Drummond watched him get his hat and stick from the cloakroom. Then he looked at the girl, and noticed that she had gone a little white.

"What's the matter, old thing?" he asked quickly. "Are you feeling faint?"

She shook her head, and gradually the colour came back to her face. "I'm quite all right," she answered. "It gave me rather a shock that man finding us here."

"On the face of it, it seems a harmless occupation," said Hugh.

"On the face of it, perhaps," she said. "But that man doesn't deal with face values." With a short laugh she turned to Hugh. "You've stumbled right into the middle of it, my friend, rather sooner than I anticipated. That is one of the men you will probably have to kill...."

Her companion lit another cigarette. "There is nothing like straightforward candour," he grinned. "Except that I disliked his face and his manner, I must admit

that I saw nothing about him to necessitate my going to so much trouble. What is his particular worry?"

"First and foremost the brute wants to marry me," replied the girl.

"I loathe being obvious," said Hugh, "but I am not surprised."

"But it isn't that that matters," she went on. "I wouldn't marry him even to save my life." She looked at Drummond quietly. "Henry Lakington is the second most dangerous man in England."

"Only the second," murmured Hugh. "Then hadn't I better start my new career with the first?"

She looked at him in silence. "I suppose you think that I'm hysterical," she remarked after a while. "You're probably even wondering whether I'm all there."

Drummond flicked the ash from his cigarette, then he turned to her dispassionately. "You must admit," he remarked, "that up to now our conversation has hardly proceeded along conventional lines. I am a complete stranger to you; another man who is a complete stranger to me speaks to you while we're at tea. You inform me that I shall probably have to kill him in the near future. The statement is, I think you will agree, a trifle disconcerting."

The girl threw back her head and laughed merrily. "You poor young man," she cried; "put that way it does sound alarming." Then she grew serious again. "There's plenty of time for you to back out now if you like. Just call the waiter, and ask for my bill. We'll say good-bye, and the incident will finish."

She was looking at him gravely as she spoke, and it seemed to her companion that there was an appeal in the big blue eyes. And they were very big: and the face they were set in was very charming — especially at the angle it was tilted at, in the half-light of the room. Altogether, Drummond reflected, a most adorable girl. And adorable girls had always been a hobby of his. Probably Lakington possessed a letter of hers or something, and she wanted him to get it back. Of course he would, even if he had to thrash the swine to within an inch of his life.

"Well!" The girl's voice cut into his train of thought and he hurriedly pulled himself together.

"The last thing I want is for the incident to finish," he said fervently. "Why — it's only just begun."

"Then you'll help me?"

"That's what I'm here for." With a smile Drummond lit another cigarette. "Tell me all about it."

"The trouble," she began after a moment, "is that there is not very much to tell. At present it is largely guesswork, and guesswork without much of a clue. However, to start with, I had better tell you what sort of men you are up against. Firstly, Henry Lakington — the man who spoke to me. He was, I believe, one of the most brilliant scientists who has ever been up at Oxford. There was nothing, in his own line, which would not have been open to him, had he run straight. But he didn't. He deliberately chose to turn his brain to crime. Not vulgar, common sorts of crime — but the big things, calling for a master criminal. He has always had enough money to allow him to take his time over any coup — to perfect his details. And that's what he loves. He regards a crime as an ordinary man regards a complicated business deal — a thing to be looked at and studied from all angles, a thing to be treated as a mathematical problem. He is quite unscrupulous; he is only concerned in pitting himself against the world and winning."

"An engaging fellah," said Hugh. "What particular form of crime does he favour?"

“Anything that calls for brain, iron nerve, and refinement of detail,” she answered. “Principally, up to date, burglary on a big scale, and murder.”

“My dear soul!” said Hugh incredulously. “How can you be sure? And why don’t you tell the police?”

She smiled wearily. “Because I’ve got no proof, and even if I had...” She gave a little shudder, and left her sentence unfinished. “But one day, my father and I were in his house, and, by accident, I got into a room I’d never been in before. It was a strange room, with two large safes let into the wall and steel bars over the skylight in the ceiling. There wasn’t a window, and the floor seemed to be made of concrete. And the door was covered with curtains, and was heavy to move — almost as if it was steel or iron. On the desk in the middle of the room lay some miniatures, and, without thinking, I picked them up and looked at them. I happen to know something about miniatures, and, to my horror, I recognised them.” She paused for a moment as a waiter went by their table.

“Do you remember the theft of the celebrated Vatican miniatures belonging to the Duke of Melbourne?”

Drummond nodded; he was beginning to feel interested.

“They were the ones I was holding in my hand,” she said quietly. “I knew them at once from the description in the papers. And just as I was wondering what on earth to do, the man himself walked into the room.”

“Awkward — deuced awkward.” Drummond pressed out his cigarette and leaned forward expectantly. “What did he do?”

“Absolutely nothing,” said the girl. “That’s what made it so awful.”

“‘Admiring my treasures?’ he remarked. ‘Pretty things, aren’t they?’ I couldn’t speak a word: I just put them back on the table.”

“‘Wonderful copies,’ he went on, ‘of the Duke of Melbourne’s lost miniatures. I think they would deceive most people.’

“‘They deceived me,’ I managed to get out.

“‘Did they?’ he said. ‘The man who painted them will be flattered.’

“All the time he was staring at me, a cold, merciless stare that seemed to freeze my brain. Then he went over to one of the safes and unlocked it. ‘Come here, Miss Benton,’ he said. ‘There are a lot more — copies.’

“I only looked inside for a moment, but I have never seen or thought of such a sight. Beautifully arranged on black velvet shelves were ropes of pearls, a gorgeous diamond tiara, and a whole heap of loose, uncut stones. And in one corner I caught a glimpse of the most wonderful gold chalice cup — just like the one for which Samuel Levy, the Jew moneylender, was still offering a reward. Then he shut the door and locked it, and again stared at me in silence.

“‘All copies,’ he said quietly, ‘wonderful copies. And should you ever be tempted to think otherwise — ask your father, Miss Benton. Be warned by me; don’t do anything foolish. Ask your father first.’”

“And did you?” asked Drummond.

She shuddered. “That very evening,” she answered. “And Daddy flew into a frightful passion, and told me never to dare to meddle in things that didn’t concern me again. Then gradually, as time went on, I realised that Lakington had some hold over Daddy — that he’d got my father in his power. Daddy — of all people — who wouldn’t hurt a fly: the best and dearest man who ever breathed.” Her hands were clenched, and her breast rose and fell stormily.

Drummond waited for her to compose herself before he spoke again. “You mentioned murder, too,” he remarked.

She nodded. "I've got no proof," she said, "less even than over the burglaries. But there was a man called George Dringer, and one evening, when Lakington was dining with us, I heard him discussing this man with Daddy.

"He's got to go," said Lakington. "He's dangerous!"

"And then my father got up and closed the door; but I heard them arguing for half an hour. Three weeks later a coroner's jury found that George Dringer had committed suicide while temporarily insane. The same evening Daddy, for the first time in his life, went to bed the worse for drink."

The girl fell silent, and Drummond stared at the orchestra with troubled eyes. Things seemed to be rather deeper than he had anticipated.

"Then there was another case." She was speaking again. "Do you remember that man who was found dead in a railway-carriage at Oxhey station? He was an Italian — Giuseppe by name; and the jury brought in a verdict of death from natural causes. A month before, he had an interview with Lakington which took place at our house: because the Italian, being a stranger, came to the wrong place, and Lakington happened to be with us at the time. The interview finished with a fearful quarrel." She turned to Drummond with a slight smile. "Not much evidence, is there? Only I know Lakington murdered him. I know it. You may think I'm fanciful — imagining things; you may think I'm exaggerating. I don't mind if you do — because you won't for long."

Drummond did not answer immediately. Against his saner judgment he was beginning to be profoundly impressed, and, at the moment, he did not quite know what to say. That the girl herself firmly believed in what she was telling him, he was certain; the point was how much of it was — as she herself expressed it — fanciful imagination.

"What about this other man?" he asked at length.

"I can tell you very little about him," she answered. "He came to The Elms — that is the name of Lakington's house — three months ago. He is about medium height and rather thick-set; clean-shaven, with thick brown hair flecked slightly with white. His forehead is broad, and his eyes are a sort of cold grey-blue. But it's his hands that terrify me. They're large and white and utterly ruthless." She turned to him appealingly. "Oh! don't think I'm talking wildly," she implored. "He frightens me to death — that man: far, far worse than Lakington. He would stop at nothing to gain his ends, and even Lakington himself knows that Mr. Peterson is his master."

"Peterson!" murmured Drummond. "It seems quite a sound old English name."

The girl laughed scornfully. "Oh! the name is sound enough, if it was his real one. As it is, it's about as real as his daughter."

"There is a lady in the case, then?"

"By the name of Irma," said the girl briefly. "She lies on a sofa in the garden and yawns. She's no more English than that waiter."

A faint smile flickered over her companion's face; he had formed a fairly vivid mental picture of Irma. Then he grew serious again.

"And what is it that makes you think there's mischief ahead?" he asked abruptly.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "What the novelists call feminine intuition, I suppose," she answered. "That — and my father." She said the last words very low. "He hardly ever sleeps at night now; I hear him pacing up and down his room — hour after hour, hour after hour. Oh! it makes me mad.... Don't you understand? I've just got to find out what the trouble is. I've got to get him away from those devils, before he breaks down completely."

Drummond nodded, and looked away. The tears were bright in her eyes, and, like every Englishman, he detested a scene. While she had been speaking he had made up his mind what course to take, and now, having outsat everybody else, he decided that it was time for the interview to cease. Already an early diner was having a cocktail, while Lakington might return at any moment. And if there was anything in what she had told him, it struck him that it would be as well for that gentleman not to find them still together.

“I think,” he said, “we’d better go. My address is 60A Half Moon Street; my telephone 1234 Mayfair. If anything happens, if ever you want me — at any hour of the day or night — ring me up or write. If I’m not in, leave a message with my servant Denny. He is absolutely reliable. The only other thing is your own address.”

“The Larches, near Godalming,” answered the girl, as they moved towards the door. “Oh! if you only knew the glorious relief of feeling one’s got someone to turn to...” She looked at him with shining eyes, and Drummond felt his pulse quicken suddenly. Imagination or not, so far as her fears were concerned, the girl was one of the loveliest things he had ever seen.

“May I drop you anywhere?” he asked, as they stood on the pavement, but she shook her head.

“No, thank you. I’ll go in that taxi.” She gave the man an address, and stepped in, while Hugh stood bareheaded by the door.

“Don’t forget,” he said earnestly. “Any time of the day or night. And while I think of it — we’re old friends. Can that be done? In case I come and stay, you see.”

She thought for a moment and then nodded her head. “All right,” she answered. “We’ve met a lot in London during the war.”

With a grinding of gear wheels the taxi drove off, leaving Hugh with a vivid picture imprinted on his mind of blue eyes, and white teeth, and a skin like the bloom of a sun-kissed peach.

For a moment or two he stood staring after it, and then he walked across to his own car. With his mind still full of the interview he drove slowly along Piccadilly, while every now and then he smiled grimly to himself. Was the whole thing an elaborate hoax? Was the girl even now chuckling to herself at his gullibility? If so, the game had only just begun, and he had no objection to a few more rounds with such an opponent. A mere tea at the Carlton could hardly be the full extent of the jest... And somehow deep down in his mind, he wondered whether it was a joke — whether, by some freak of fate, he had stumbled on one of those strange mysteries which up to date he had regarded as existing only in the realms of shilling shockers.

He turned into his rooms, and stood in front of the mantelpiece taking off his gloves. It was as he was about to lay them down on the table that an envelope caught his eye, addressed to him in an unknown handwriting. Mechanically he picked it up and opened it. Inside was a single half-sheet of notepaper, on which a few lines had been written in a small, neat hand.

“There are more things in Heaven and Earth, young man, than a capability for eating steak and onions, and a desire for adventure. I imagine that you possess both: and they are useful assets in the second locality mentioned by the poet. In Heaven, however, one never knows — especially with regard to the onions. Be careful.”

Drummond stood motionless for a moment, with narrowed eyes. Then he leaned forward and pressed the bell.

“Who brought this note, James?” he said quietly, as his servant came into the room.

“A small boy, sir. Said I was to be sure and see you got it most particular.” He unlocked a cupboard near the window and produced a tantalus. “Whisky, sir, or cocktail?”

“Whisky, I think, James.” Hugh carefully folded the sheet of paper and placed it in his pocket. And his face as he took the drink from his man would have left no doubt in an onlooker’s mind as to why, in the past, he had earned the name of “Bull-dog” Drummond.

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End of Sample