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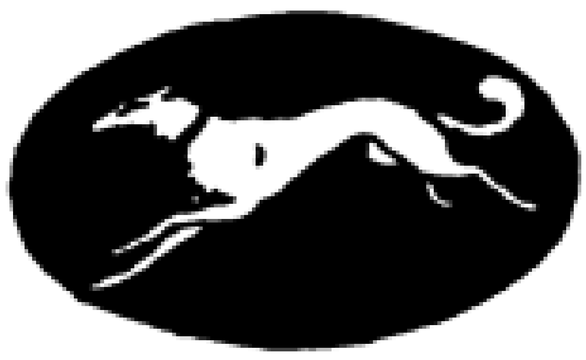
THE BITTERMEADS MYSTERY

By

E. R. PUNSHON



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THE BITTERMEADS MYSTERY

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CHAPTER I

THE LONE PASSENGER

That evening the down train from London deposited at the little country station of Ramsdon but a single passenger, a man of middle height, shabbily dressed, with broad shoulders and long arms and a most unusual breadth and depth of chest.

Of his face one could see little, for it was covered by a thick growth of dark curly hair, beard, moustache and whiskers, all overgrown and ill-tended, and as he came with a somewhat slow and ungainly walk along the platform, the lad stationed at the gate to collect tickets grinned amusedly and called to one of the porters near:—

"Look at this, Bill; here's the monkey-man escaped and come back along of us."

It was a reference to a travelling circus that had lately visited the place and exhibited a young chimpanzee advertised as "the monkey-man," and Bill guffawed appreciatively.

The stranger was quite close and heard plainly, for indeed the youth at the gate had made no special attempt to speak softly.

The boy was still laughing as he held out his hand for the ticket, and the stranger gave it to him with one hand and at the same time shot out a long arm,

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caught the boy—a well-grown lad of sixteen—by the middle and, with as little apparent effort as though lifting a baby, swung him into the air to the top of the gate-post, where he left him clinging with arms and legs six feet from the ground.

"Hi, what are you a-doing of?" shouted the porter, running up, as the amazed and frightened youth, clinging to his gate-post, emitted a dismal howl.

"Teaching a cheeky boy manners," retorted the stranger with an angry look and in a very gruff and harsh voice. "Do you want to go on top of the other post to make a pair?"

The porter drew back hurriedly.

"You be off," he ordered as he retreated. "We don't want none of your sort about here."

"I certainly have no intention of staying," retorted the other as gruffly as before. "But I think you'll remember Bobbie Dunn next time I come this way."

"Let me down; please let me down," wailed the boy, clinging desperately to the gate-post on whose top he had been so unceremoniously deposited, and Dunn laughed and walked away, leaving the porter to rescue his youthful colleague and to cuff his ears soundly as soon as he had done so, by way of a relief to his feelings.

"That will learn you to be a bit civil to folk, I hope," said the porter severely. "But that there chap must have an amazing strong arm," he added thoughtfully. "Lifting you up there all the same as you was a bunch of radishes."

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For some distance after leaving the station, Dunn walked on slowly.

He seemed to know the way well or else to be careless of the direction he took, for he walked along deep in thought with his eyes fixed on the ground and not looking in the least where he was going.

Abruptly, a small child appeared out of the darkness and spoke to him, and he started violently and in a very nervous manner.

"What was that? What did you say, kiddy?" he asked, recovering himself instantly and speaking this time not in the gruff and harsh tones he had used before but in a singularly winning and pleasant voice, cultivated and gentle, that was in odd contrast with his rough and battered appearance. "The time, was that what you wanted to know?"

"Yes, sir; please, sir," answered the child, who had shrunk back in alarm at the violent start Dunn had given, but now seemed reassured by his gentle and pleasant voice. "The right time," the little one added almost instantly and with much emphasis on the "right."

Dunn gravely gave the required imformation with the assurance that to the best of his belief it was "right," and the child thanked him and scampered off.

Resuming his way, Dunn shook his head with an air of grave dissatisfaction.

"Nerves all to pieces," he muttered. "That won't do. Hang it all, the job's no worse than following a wounded tiger into the jungle, and I've done that be-

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fore now. Only then, of course, one knew what to expect, whereas now—And I was a silly ass to lose my temper with that boy at the station. You aren't making a very brilliant start, Bobby, my boy."

By this time he had left the little town behind him and he was walking along a very lonely and dark road. On one side was a plantation of young trees, on the other there was the open ground, covered with furze bush, of the village common.

Where the plantation ended stood a low, two-storied house of medium size, with a veranda stretching its full length in front. It stood back from the road some distance and appeared to be surrounded by a large garden.

At the gate Dunn halted and struck a match as if to light a pipe, and by the flickering flame of this match the name "Bittermeads," painted on the gate became visible.

"Here it is, then," he muttered. "I wonder—"

Without completing the sentence he slipped through the gate, which was not quite closed, and entered the garden, where he crouched down in the shadow of some bushes that grew by the side of the gravel path leading to the house, and seemed to compose himself for a long vigil.

An hour passed, and another. Nothing had happened—he had seen nothing, heard nothing, save for the passing of an occasional vehicle or pedestrian on the road, and he himself had never stirred or moved, so that he seemed one with the night and one with the shadows where he crouched, and a pair of field-mice that had come from the common opposite went to and

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fro about their busy occupations at his feet without paying him the least attention.

Another hour passed, and at last there began to be signs of life about the house.

A light shone in one window and in another, and vanished, and soon the door opened and there appeared two people on the threshold, clearly visible in the light of a strong incandescent gas-burner just within the hall.

The watcher in the garden moved a little to get a clearer view.

In the paroxysm of terror at this sudden coming to life of what they had believed to be a part of the bushes, the two little field-mice scampered away, and Dunn bit his lip with annoyance, for he knew well that some of those he had had traffic with in the past would have been very sure, on hearing that scurrying-off of the frightened mice, that some one was lurking near at hand.

But the two in the lighted doorway opening on the veranda heard and suspected nothing.

One was a man, one a woman, both were young, both were extraordinarily good-looking, and as they stood in the blaze of the gas they made a strikingly handsome and attractive picture on which, however, Dunn seemed to look from his hiding-place with hostility and watchful suspicion.

"How dark it is, there's not a star showing," the girl was saying. "Shall you be able to find your way, even with the lantern? You'll keep to the road, won't you?"

Her voice was low and pleasant and so clear Dunn

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heard every word distinctly. She seemed quite young, not more than twenty or twenty-one, and she was slim and graceful in build and tall for a woman. Her face, on which the light shone directly, was oval in shape with a broad, low forehead on which clustered the small, unruly curls of her dark brown hair, and she had clear and very bright brown eyes. The mouth and chin were perhaps a little large to be in absolute harmony with the rest of her features, and she was of a dark complexion, with a soft and delicate bloom that would by itself have given her a right to claim her possession of a full share of good looks. She was dressed quite simply in a white frock with a touch of colour at the waist and she had a very flimsy lace shawl thrown over her shoulders, presumably intended as a protection against the night air.

Her companion was a very tall and big man, well over six feet in height, with handsome, strongly-marked features that often bore an expression a little too haughty, but that showed now a very tender and gentle look, so that it was not difficult to guess the state of his feelings towards the girl at his side. His shoulders were broad, his chest deep, and his whole build powerful in the extreme, and Dunn, looking him up and down with the quick glance of one accustomed to judge men, thought that he had seldom seen one more capable of holding his own.

Answering his companion's remark, he said lightly:—

"Oh, no, I shall cut across the wood, it's ever so much shorter, you know."

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"But it's so dark and lonely," the girl protested. "And then, after last week—"

He interrupted her with a laugh, and he lifted his head with a certain not unpleasing swagger.

"I don't think they'll trouble me for all their threats," he said. "For that matter, I rather hope they will try something of the sort on. They need a lesson."

"Oh, I do hope you'll be careful," the girl exclaimed.

He laughed again and made another lightly-confident, almost-boastful remark, to the effect that he did not think any one was likely to interfere with him.

For a minute or two longer they lingered, chatting together as they stood in the gas-light on the veranda, and from his hiding-place Dunn watched them intently. It seemed that it was the girl in whom he was chiefly interested, for his eyes hardly moved from her and in them there showed a very grim and hard expression.

"Pretty enough," he mused. "More than pretty. No wonder poor Charles raved about her, if it's the same girl—if it is, she ought to know what's become of him. But then, where does this big chap come in?"

The "big chap" seemed really going now, though reluctantly, and it was not difficult to see that he would have been very willing to stay longer had she given him the least encouragement.

But that he did not get, and indeed it seemed as if she were a little bored and a little anxious for him to say good night and go.

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At last he did so, and she retired within the house, while he came swinging down the garden path, passing close to where Dunn lay hidden, but without any suspicion of his presence, and out into the high road.

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CHAPTER II

THE FIGHT IN THE WOOD

From his hiding-place in the bushes Dunn slipped out, as the big man vanished into the darkness down the road, and for the fraction of a second he seemed to hesitate.

The lights in the house were coming and going after a fashion that suggested that the inmates were preparing for bed, and almost at once Dunn turned his back to the building and hurried very quickly and softly down the road in the direction the big man had just taken.

"After all," he thought, "the house can't run away, that will be still there when I come back, and I ought to find out who this big chap is and where he comes from."

In spite of the apparent clumsiness of his build and the ungainliness of his movements it was extraordinary how swiftly and how quietly he moved, a shadow could scarcely have made less sound than this man did as he melted through the darkness and a swift runner would have difficulty in keeping pace with him.

An old labourer going home late bade the big man a friendly good night and passed on without seeing or hearing Dunn following close behind, and a sol-

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itary woman, watching at her cottage door, saw plainly the big man's tall form and heard his firm and heavy steps and would have been ready to swear no other passed that way at that time, though Dunn was not five yards behind, slipping silently and swiftly by in the shelter of the trees lining the road.

A little further beyond this cottage a path, reached by climbing a stile, led from the high road first across an open field and then through the heart of a wood that seemed to be of considerable extent.

The man Dunn was following crossed this stile and when he had gone a yard or two along the path he halted abruptly, as though all at once grown uneasy, and looked behind.

From where he stood any one following him across the stile must have shown plainly visible against the sky line, but though he lingered for a monent or two, and even, when he walked on, still looked back very frequently, he saw nothing.

Yet Dunn, when his quarry paused and looked back like this, was only a little distance behind, and when the other moved on Dunn was still very near.

But he had not crossed the stile, for when he came to it he realized that in climbing it his form would be plainly visible in outline for some distance, and so instead, he had found and crawled through a gap in the hedge not far away.

They came, Dunn so close and so noiseless behind his quarry he might well have seemed the other's shadow, to the outskirts of the wood, and as they entered it Dunn made his first fault, his first failure in an exhibition of woodcraft that a North American

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Indian or an Australian "black-fellow" might have equalled, but could not have surpassed.

For he trod heavily on a dry twig that snapped with a very loud, sharp retort, clearly audible for some distance in the quiet night, and, as dry twigs only snap like that under the pressure of considerable weight, the presence of some living creature in the wood other than the small things that run to and fro beneath the trees, stood revealed to all ears that could hear.

Dunn stood instantly perfectly still, rigid as a statue, listening intently, and he noted with satisfaction and keen relief that the regular heavy tread of the man in front did not alter or change.

"Good," he thought to himself. "What luck, he hasn't heard it."

He moved on again, as silently as before, perhaps a little inclined to be contemptuous of any one who could fail to notice so plain a warning, and he supposed that the man he was following must be some townsman who knew nothing at all of the life of the country and was, like so many of the dwellers in cities, blind and deaf outside the range of the noises of the streets and the clamour of passing traffic.

This thought was still in his mind when all at once the steady sound of footsteps he had been following ceased suddenly and abruptly, cut off on the instant as you turn off water from a tap.

Dunn paused, too, supposing that for some reason the other had stopped for a moment and would soon walk on again.

But a minute passed and then another and there

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