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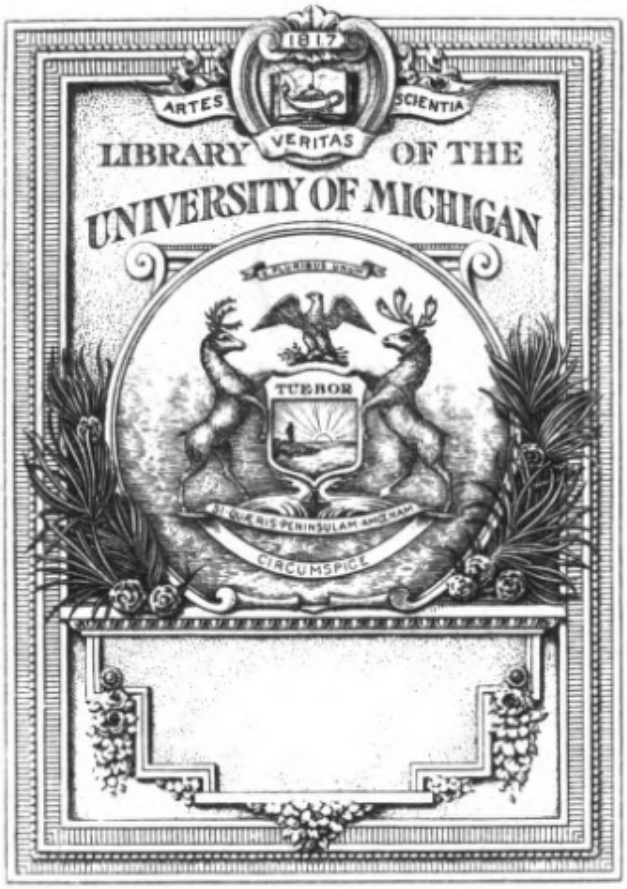

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THE GREAT HOLD-UP MYSTERY

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First published in 1928

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The Great Hold-Up Mystery

by

WILFRID USHER

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In addition to giving the customary assurance that the characters in the yarn which follows are imaginary, the author wishes to make it clear that the liberties taken with certain megalithic remains are intentional, and that the house on the island, together with its various approaches, has no existence whatever outside his own fancy.

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THE GREAT HOLD-UP MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE MAN WITH HAY-FEVER

(1)

At the moment when the three shots rang out, Peter Brown was sitting alone on the stone wall that runs by the quay at Tregenneth, the little Cornish fishing-village, smoking a final pipe before turning in as he watched the play of moonlight on the river. The sound at such an hour—for it was after eleven—was so unexpected that for a few moments he continued to sit in a kind of dazed astonishment. Then the patter of running feet made him turn his head sharply, and he beheld a man a hundred yards away, racing towards the quay as if for his life. And a little distance behind him ran several others.

He was a fat man, the foremost runner, with a bare bald head that gleamed white under the moon, but despite his bulk he covered the ground well, and by the time he reached that part of the quay near where Peter was sitting he was fully fifteen yards ahead, apparently making for some steps which led down to the water. Before he could reach them, however,

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disaster overtook him in a singular fashion; for suddenly, as he ran, he gave a tremendous sneeze. Whether this circumstance was in itself responsible, or whether his foot caught in something on the surface of the quay, it is impossible to say; at any rate he tripped and fell; and before he could recover, his pursuers—Peter counted four of them—were upon him.

It was at this juncture that Peter decided to take a hand in the game. Normally an amiable individual who disliked rows, he disliked still more the spectacle of a middle-aged man of stout aspect being set upon by four others. He hesitated only long enough to take off his spectacles and slip them in his pocket; then he darted forward with that agility which had once made him one of the most famous rugby three-quarters in England. And since he was wearing rubbers on his feet, his approach possessed in large measure that element of surprise which constitutes in all warfare the surest prelude to success.

There was no doubt about the surprise. Indeed, if a tornado had burst above the heads of those four men they could hardly have been more astonished. One of the ruffians was kneeling on the prostrate man's chest, apparently trying to tear open his waistcoat, when an iron hand seized him by the neck from behind, another grip fastened on the seat of his trousers, and he was flung full into the bosom of one of his friends who unwisely chose that instant to slink up; with the result that he, in his turn, cannoned into yet a third. All fell in a mix-up on the ground; while Peter, turning, was in time to meet the rush of the fourth man, a huge mulatto. One rapid glance was

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sufficient to convince Peter that he was no match for the coloured man at close quarters, so he dived like lightning for his legs. The mulatto's head met the ground with a crack, and for a time, at least, his interest in the proceedings was negligible, while Peter had a moment's leisure to see how the situation was developing elsewhere.

The fat man, profiting by the respite, had regained his feet. Peter had a glimpse of him in the act of charging his assailants like an enraged bull, but it was no more than a glimpse, for he suddenly became aware of a new peril. Creeping towards him with a peculiar sinuous movement was a slight man, some kind of foreigner, who held in his hand a weapon that looked like a razor without the handle. His lips rolled back in a malevolent grin as he saw his approach was discovered, but he did not cease his stealthy advance, planting one foot in front of another with the soft tread of a marauding cat.

With a queer constricted feeling in the region of the breast-bone Peter waited for him, leaning a little forward on the balls of his feet, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. Of the methods of attack practised by razor-slashers he was in entire ignorance, but he remembered how years ago, during the War, a Canadian gunner, by way of passing the time in a convalescent home, had taught him the trick of defeating an aggressor armed with a knife. The ruse depended largely for its success upon watching one's adversary's eyes, and he breathed a little prayer of thankfulness that he had the moon behind him.

To this fact he undoubtedly owed his safety, for,

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just before his assailant sprang, there leapt into his eyes an unmistakable warning of his intention. And in that instant, with a frantic movement, Peter hurled himself to the right. The razor swept harmlessly, and then, before the man could recover himself, Peter's hands were upon him. There was a quick twist—no violent effort—followed by a yelp of pain and a sound like a stick being broken under water. The weapon fell to the ground, and Peter, stepping back a pace, let the other have his left on the point of the chin. And number two of the attacking party flopped over like a dead thing.

So far as Peter was concerned, that ended the fight. The remaining two ruffians, who had been having an uncomfortable time at the formidable hands of the fat man, now, on Peter's approach, immediately took to their heels; and hardly had they disappeared, when the big mulatto, recovering consciousness, staggered to his feet. He gave one wild look round, and finding himself deserted, promptly followed the example of his companions and bolted.

"Cleared out, by George, the whole bunch!" declared the fat man breathlessly. "Laddie, I don't know who you are, but—"

He broke off, staring over Peter's shoulders, and turning, Peter saw why. Crawling along the ground in the evident hope of escaping observation, was the man whom he had hit on the jaw.

Suddenly Peter perceived his objective—the razor which lay near the edge of the quay, where he had carelessly kicked it after knocking out his man. He sprang forward, and immediately the man, abandoning

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all efforts at concealment, leapt to his feet. It was Peter who reached the weapon first, however, and he covered it with one foot.

"I think not," he said quietly.

The next moment the fat man, coming up behind, had seized the enemy by the coat collar.

"Now, you scum!" he cried. "Try to murder me, would you! Why, you damned little squirt, for two pins I'd tear you in half. Did he hurt you just now?" he demanded of Peter.

"He had a jolly good try to. I rather think I broke his arm, though."

"Broke his arm?—pity it wasn't his head!" growled the fat man. "Got anything to say, you?"—this to his prisoner, whose sullen eyes were fixed on Peter.

The man slowly felt his dangling arm, and Peter noticed that his face was disfigured by a huge scar that ran across cheek and nose.

"I not forget you," he said deliberately. "One dese days—I kill you!"

The fat man laughed in a soft and particularly unpleasant fashion.

"Indeed," he said, in a silky voice, "and pray what makes you think you're going to live so long? Kill, by George!"—and here his voice began to gain in volume. "I reckon the boot's on the other leg! Listen here, little man. I'm not going to kill you here and now, because you'd be a nuisance, and I've no time to waste on coroner's courts and things. But by the living God, if ever I lay hands on you again after this I'll break every bone in your body and dance on the remains

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afterwards. D'ye hear? Now go before I change my mind, and thank your lucky stars I'm a humane, kind man. Understand? And if I catch you monkeying round here again to-night, sure as my name's Jim Bridgewater I'll smash your ugly face in, broken arm or no broken arm! Now run away back to Horst-man. *Impshi! Futsack!* Or by the Lord, I'll——"

Here he suddenly gave his prisoner a mighty shove that sent him ten paces, and then, taking a run, launched a tremendous kick at the flying man which, had it taken full effect, would assuredly have given him cause to remember the moment for long afterwards. Mr. Bridgewater returned, wheezing audibly, but with his face agleam with laughter.

"Filthy little swine, ain't they!" he said cheerfully. "I must apologize for my language, but it's the only kind that sort of blackguard understands." He sneezed twice, then added: "We'll collect the spoils of war."

Picking up the razor, he glanced at it and pitched it into the river. "Hurt?" he inquired.

"Not at all, thanks. How about you?" said Peter. "That was a nasty purler you went just now."

Mr. Bridgewater gave a contemptuous snort. "Pooh, that was nothing. My dear fellow, it takes more than that to hurt me. What I'm sorry about is having to let 'em get away so easy, but there's no alternative, unfortunately. I don't suppose this place has a policeman, let alone a lock-up. The dirty cowards—they came on me suddenly, five of them—and one started getting busy with a gun, damn him."

"I heard him," said Peter.

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"That was Horstman—you didn't see him," went on Mr. Bridgewater, who seemed to find relief in talking. "He's too lame to go running races in the dark. Well, I'm not a tenderfoot cowboy that I should go about with a six-shooter in my hip, so not carrying a gun I ran for it, remembering a wise tag about a lame dog. I'd have got clean away, too, if my cursed hay-fever hadn't come along and made me trip and embrace Mother Earth with rather more affection than I usually bestow on that hard-bosomed lady. But it was worth my trouble to see the way you set about them—upon my soul, I couldn't have done it better myself. Quite sure you're not hurt?" he insisted, casting an anxious eye over his rescuer.

Peter laughed. He rather liked this large garrulous man who could show such solicitude for another when he had only just escaped what had every appearance of being a violent attempt on his life.

"Not a scratch," he assured him. "I suppose, by the way, your friends are not indulging in what the newspapers used to call a strategic retirement, and intend coming back with reinforcements? Because——"

"Come back? Not they!" cried Mr. Bridgewater with a confident laugh. "They won't trouble us again if I know anything of the breed. They've had their bellyful for one night, I fancy. But look here, laddie, I haven't properly thanked you——"

"Please don't," said Peter hastily. "In any case I suggest we move away from here, in case your friend with the pistol decides on a forlorn hope. I don't

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know whether you live here or not, but I'm staying at a cottage about half a mile away, if you'd care to come and have a clean up."

Mr. Bridgewater consulted his watch. "Thanks, I will. It's too late now to find the man I'm looking for. Excuse me one moment."

Whereupon this strange man produced a small glass instrument with a bulb attachment like a scent-spray, and proceeded to apply it to his nostrils. The treatment was evidently effectual, for he drew several deep breaths with every appearance of satisfaction.

Peter began to put on his spectacles, when he noticed that his new acquaintance had paused, and was regarding him with an amused smile.

"Do you usually have time to take your glasses off when you come to the rescue of middle-aged men in distress?" he inquired with a chuckle.

Peter smiled. "Well, as a matter of fact, I see much better without them," he confessed. "They aren't really necessary, but I happened to have a slight accident to one eye during the War—" he broke off, for Mr. Bridgewater's large face had changed like a conjuring trick, and he was staring open-mouthed.

"Well, if this ain't providence I don't know what is," he said in a new voice. "Are you by any blessed chance P. J. Brown, the rugger-man?"

"Yes. Why?" asked Peter mildly.

"It's a sign from Heaven," Mr. Bridgewater declared solemnly. "You're the very man I've come to these parts to see."

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Half an hour later, scraped and cleaned into some semblance of respectability, and with several strips of sticking-plaster across his forehead, Mr. Bridgewater sat in the solitary arm-chair that Peter's sitting-room boasted, smoking a vile-smelling cigarette which, he explained, alleviated his hay-fever.

Seen in the light he proved to be a much more powerfully-built man than Peter had supposed. There was latent strength in the broad shoulders and deep chest. He had a massive face, sallow and heavily lined, with a wide tolerant mouth, and a dominant nose like Mr. Punch. His eyes were at present suffused with his distressing malady, but they were kindly, and for all his air of complacency, there was that about the shape of his jaw that hinted at his being an unhealthily efficient person to play monkey-tricks with; and Peter had evidence that in his case excess of flesh did not necessarily mean lack of agility. His years looked to be about forty-five.

"Well, Mr. Brown, I expect you're thinking it's time I gave an account of myself," he said, stretching his legs in front of him. "You probably wonder what in the name of sanity and common sense a fellow of my age and spread is doing scrapping with a lot of dock-sweepings at this time of night."

Peter nodded. On the way up from the quay Mr. Bridgewater had given no hint as to the motives of the gang in attacking him. Realizing that his companion was a man who would tell his story in his own way,

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Peter had forborne to ask questions, but he certainly felt intensely curious.

"I'll enlighten you," Mr. Bridgewater proceeded. "I came down here by car, which I left in a field some way out of the village, and I was going to sleep there if I couldn't find anywhere else. I should have been here earlier if I hadn't been delayed by two punctures, one of which I had to mend myself. I came into the village on foot; and, as I told you, when Horstman and his merry men appeared from nowhere and started mistaking me for a moving target, I didn't linger, and a lucky thing it was for me he was the only one with a gun. As it was I half-expected a knife in my back any moment. They're pretty handy with their knives, some of those boys. I've seen one split an apple at thirty paces before now. What beats me is how Horstman knew I was coming here; I only landed at Croydon early this morning. Tell me, now, I believe you know a man named Cartwright—Colonel Richard Cartwright?"

"Old Dick? I used to know him very well indeed at one time."

"So I am given to understand; he happens to be a friend of mine also. He told me quite a lot about some of your exploits in the War."

"Dick is a silly ass," said Peter laughing. "What is he doing now, by the way? The last I heard of him he was on some kind of secret police work in Egypt."

"Dick is at the present moment—or he was two days ago—lying ill with pneumonia in a place called Bratislava in Czecho-Slovakia. I've come straight from him."

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"Is he seriously ill?"

"He was, but he's pulling round. Naturally he won't move about for a bit. I was to show you this by way of credentials."

Mr. Bridgewater took from his pocket a bunch of keys, one of which he held out for the inspection of Peter, who, noticing what was scratched on the wards, experienced a sudden feeling of annoyance. Once during the War, in a certain Italian town, he had secretly met by appointment an agent, a harmless-looking civilian in a bowler hat, who, he had been informed, was one of the cleverest spies in the service of the allies. It had been arranged that this man, whom Peter, then a pilot in the R.A.F., was going to attempt to drop in Austrian territory from a parachute, should reveal his identity by means of a sign. The key which Mr. Bridgewater had handed to him bore a precisely similar marking, and it brought back the memory of certain things which he thought he had finished with for ever.

"Go on," said Peter quietly, as he gave back the keys. "Let's hear the worst. Dick always was a bird of ill-omen."

Mr. Bridgewater heaved his heavy body forward in his chair and began to speak with the grave deliberation of a man who weighs the value of each word before uttering it.

"I'm going to tell you a little story. You must know that some time ago our people became interested in a certain man who had made a reputation, to say nothing of a small fortune, out of the War. You have heard of the Drude Submarine Detector and the Drude

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Mortar—well, Sir Mortimer Drude is our man. If you will look him up in 'Who's Who' you will learn among other things that he is a distinguished physicist, the author of several notable works on scientific subjects—I am told his monograph on the Brownian movement is already a classic—and that he lives in Okewood Hall in Devonshire. I can supplement that record a little. Before the War he was an amiable and popular professor at one of the minor universities, loved by his friends and respected wherever he went. He resigned his position early in the War to devote his energies to the perfecting of those inventions which made him famous, and, incidentally, transformed him from a comparatively poor man into a fairly rich one. After the War he went away for a six months' holiday abroad. Where he went to no one but himself knows, but he came back a changed man. His entire nature had altered. From being one of the most open-hearted and charitable men in the world, he became secretive and suspicious. He shut himself up in his house and would see no one: became a misanthropist, detested by his neighbours, to most of whom he was unbearably rude, and the despair of his former friends. So he has been ever since. Twice every year he goes abroad, no one knows where. For the rest he spends most of his time in his laboratory, locked up with his assistants. Only for one person he seems to have any kind of toleration, and that is his niece, an orphan who has lived with him for some years. The two, it appears, are devoted to each other, which is the more remarkable as she is a girl of some personal attraction, who you would think would be happier in

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an environment more suited to her youth and position. I should perhaps mention that Sir Mortimer is over sixty, a widower, and has no children of his own.

"Now you must also know that our people sometimes pick up very odd bits of information from all sorts of queer places. It so happened that we heard rumours of an unusual piece of business going on on the Continent. We got a line on it through a Polish Jew, a gentleman who had once belonged to a certain secret service that had since gone out of business in that line on account of the poor state of trade. He kept a coffee-house in the Ringstrasse in Vienna, very respectable and proper, but as his name wasn't the one he was known by in Berlin we kept an avuncular eye on him for old acquaintance' sake. One of our men happened to be in this place one evening when some Americans belonging to the A.R.A. came in. They had with them a compatriot whom our man thought he had seen before; he couldn't at first recollect where, until some little mannerism or movement helped his memory, and then he knew. He was one of the biggest men in one of the old underworlds of Berlin. He was now talking like an American of good breeding, and was apparently engaged in showing the A.R.A. men round Vienna, but our man had had dealings with him before and made no mistake. That chance meeting resulted in our learning quite a lot of things. One was that the Polish Jew-boy was acting in connection with some mysterious syndicate that was out to obtain the sole rights for some secret discovery at present in the possession of Monsieur X; moreover this syndicate had already offered an enormous sum

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of money which had not yet been accepted, and negotiations were still in progress. The sum mentioned was one million pounds. Another thing we learnt was the names of some of the syndicate, and a nice lot they were.

"One passed as a Lithuanian diamond merchant who owed his wealth to having been an international receiver at the time the homes of the Russian aristocracy were being broken up. A second was Kreller, the renegade Englishman who enjoyed the peculiar distinction of having fought on both sides in the War, first in the French Foreign Legion and then in an Austrian Infantry regiment. Another was the notorious Pagleiro or Straussmann, who seems to have been everything from an Albanian brigand to a secret-film proprietor. I could name a dozen, but though they came from nearly every country in Europe, they were all alike in one particular respect: they reeked with rottenness and degeneration. There was not a man among them who wasn't an outcast and enemy of organized society. But that didn't mean there was any lack of funds. We had ample evidence of the extent of the financial backing.

"Well, these people being what they were, we were at some pains to discover the identity of the mysterious Monsieur X. There was no Monsieur about him: he was an Englishman and his name was Sir Mortimer Drude.

"You may say it was no business of ours. There was an eminent scientist with a fine record of service to his name and a K.C.B. into the bargain. If he chose to be so unwise as to sell an invention or discovery or

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process, whatever it was, to a syndicate composed of some of the biggest rogues in international crookdom, what had it do with us? There was no question of the law being broken. To go to Sir Mortimer and warn him of the kind of people he was dealing with was simply showing what cards we held if he was playing a crooked game. We decided to do a little more private inquiry work, and put a good man on. It was so contrived that he became a servant in Sir Mortimer's household. He was a clever man and at the end of four months he brought us something that might be a clue to the secret and might not. I have it in my possession now and I want you to see it."

Peter looked curiously at the three creased sheets of foolscap which the other took from a hidden pocket in the lining of his waistcoat. Each sheet was covered with rows of figures, written very small and neat, except one on which they stopped short half-way down the page.

"Cipher?" he inquired. Mr. Bridgewater shook his head.

"Now you've asked me. Two of the biggest cipher experts in the country have been working at it without any result. That doesn't mean, of course, that it can't be deciphered. It's quite possible to make a cipher by means of stencils and key-words that no man in the world can read. But this may be some secret kind of shorthand—we have no means of telling! It may even be an elaborate formula. What we do know is, firstly, that the writing is Sir Mortimer's, and the circumstances under which he wrote it; secondly, that Sir Mortimer is moving Heaven and earth to

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recover it. You saw yourself to-night to what lengths he was prepared to go."

"D'you mean—those fellows on the quay?" said Peter in astonishment.

"I don't mean that Sir Mortimer himself was there, of course; but the sole object of that attack was to get this paper from me. Thanks to you, it failed, and friend Horstman, the man in charge of to-night's attempt, won't love you for it. How he got word of the fact that I was coming down here I can't explain, but there it is."

Peter handed back the papers with a thoughtful expression.

"What's their history?" he asked.

"Our man found that Sir Mortimer was spending night after night alone, locked in his laboratory. He was working at something—something he wanted to keep so secret that even his two laboratory assistants were excluded. Then one night he was interrupted—two foreigners arrived in the small hours demanding to see him—and on leaving he left the door open. It was the opportunity which our man had been waiting for. He had been in the laboratory before and had already examined much of the apparatus that is always lying about a big laboratory, without having found any clue to the nature of Sir Mortimer's nocturnal experiments, however. But this time he was luckier. On the previous occasion he had noticed a large cupboard, about the size of a bathing-machine, and stoutly built of wood, with a Yale lock: this cupboard was now open, revealing what at first sight looked like a magnificent radio-receiving set. But a

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second glance convinced him it was no ordinary set. It was totally unlike one he had ever seen before. In front was a small table on which lay a pile of manuscript and a pair of headphones. Clapping the latter on his head he heard a loud ticking noise going on—not Morse, but presumably some other code, for it was intermittent. As he listened his eyes ran over the bewildering array of instruments and valves on the board in front of him and they rested on a curious thing. In one corner was a square of ground-glass, about the size of the one on a reflex camera, and shadows were moving across it. He was going to examine it more closely when he heard footsteps approaching, and had to hide behind a bench. It was Sir Mortimer come back to shut up shop. He came in, noticed nothing out of the ordinary, switched off the valves, hung up the phones, and locked the cupboard; then he turned off the light at the door and went out, locking the door behind him.

"Waiting a little in case he returned unexpectedly our man presently switched on his torch and tried to open the cupboard. Short of bursting the lock it was impossible—you can't pick a Yale with a bit of iron. While he was considering his next move he noticed that Sir Mortimer had left his manuscripts behind, and he picked up some of the sheets. They were covered with little rows of figures, as you've seen. Suddenly to his annoyance he heard footsteps again, and he had barely time to hide behind the bench before the door opened once more, the light was switched on, and Sir Mortimer came in with the two foreigners.

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"He was speaking as he entered, and the words he used were interesting.

"'You shall see for yourselves, gentlemen,' he said, 'that I do not exaggerate when I say that the man with this knowledge in his possession would be among the most powerful men in the world.'

"That was something of a startler for our man, but it was nothing to Sir Mortimer's next words, for he suddenly cried out: 'There's been someone at my papers: the top sheet was only half-covered.'

"Then our man realized the game was up. He was a fellow of considerable resource, and before one of the men could so much as raise a hand to stop him he had smashed a window and climbed through. It was lucky Sir Mortimer hadn't a pistol handy. After that it was easy enough to get away through the grounds, and next day our man reported at headquarters, bringing these papers with him. But you would have had some difficulty in recognizing in the elegant young man with the Free Forester tie the escaping footman of the night before. Only his bandaged hands, where he had cut himself getting through the window, remained to testify to the hurry of his exit.

"A fortnight later, Brown, he was abominably murdered. Oh, they were clever rogues, I give them credit for that; there was never a hint of foul play. He was found in his own motor-house lying dead with the engine running and the doors closed, asphyxiated by the fumes from the exhaust. Accidental death! —and the usual remarks by the coroner about the folly of running an idle engine in an insufficiently-ventilated motor-house. I tell you I know, Brown—

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I know it as well as I know my own name, there was no more an accident than if I had been killed myself to-night. I've no proof—of course I've no proof—but it isn't very difficult to imagine a possible sequence of events: the sudden attack, the victim bound and gagged and left on the motor-house floor, the engine started and the doors shut; and then later the removing of the bonds and leaving the body in a natural position, as if he'd been overcome while doing some odd job about the car. You probably read the case in the papers. Does anything strike you?"

A look of interest came into Peter's face.

"Yes—wait a minute—wasn't it Hangerson, that chap who played for the Gentlemen last year at Lords? Good Heavens! And you mean to say he was the man who—" he stopped abruptly, awed into silence.

Mr. Bridgewater rose heavily and stood with his back to the fireplace.

"I understand from Dick that you are at present in the motor-trade, Mr. Brown?" he said.

Peter nodded. "I am. I own a garage on the Brighton road."

"Think you could drive and look after an Isotta Fraschini?"

"Oh yes—why? Who's got one?"

"Sir Mortimer Drude."

"Sounds thrilling—what do you want me to do—go as his chauffeur?" asked Peter lightly.

"As a matter of fact that is the exact thing we do want you to do," returned the other with a serious face.

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Peter gave an incredulous laugh. "You're joking, man?" he declared.

"I'm not joking; I'm making a dead serious proposition. We want a man with certain qualifications to do this job, and Dick Cartwright assures us that you have them. You are a practical air-pilot, and I understand you have had experience with seaplanes——"

"Seaplanes? Good Heavens, what on earth are you talking about?" cried Peter. "Is there a submarine in the show as well?"

"Hardly," returned Mr. Bridgewater with a grin. "Then Dick tells me you were on the stage for a short time."

"I was; but if you and Dick think I'm going to dress up as a motor-driver or an air-pilot or any such tomfoolery, just because a mad scientist has invented television or whatever it is, then you may consider the deal off. I'm a motor-engineer, not a policeman."

He spoke with decision, and Mr. Bridgewater considered him with an indulgent smile. "My dear fellow, if it were only a matter for the police, do you think for a moment we should ask for your help?" He shook his head. "It goes rather deeper than that. Consider what would happen once this secret got into the hands of these people—the cleverest gang of crooks in Europe. Do you suppose for a moment they are offering a round million for a deadly thing like this appears to be, without intending to make some vile use of it, or sell it to someone else who will make some vile use of it? I know the cunning of the breed. Their immediate aim is the lining of their own fat pockets; but it's precious little it'll worry them if Europe gets set by

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the ears in the process. And what then? Is the League yet so strong that we can sweep aside the prospect of another war as being outside the range of possibilities?"

Peter leaned forward, and all trace of levity had gone from his voice.

"Another war!" he said with some bitterness. "I wish to heaven the words could be banished from the language. I'm not a pacifist by a long chalk, but if I had my way I'd heavily fine anyone not in the services who so much as mentioned the prospect of another war. Honestly, it makes me tired. There was a man in the club-house at the Polhaven golf-club the other day who assured me in all seriousness that because man was a fighting animal wars would never cease; and he brought out a lot of statistics about the world's birth-rate to prove what would happen in three hundred years' time. Talked about war being the great purifier and ennobler, and said it was Nature's way of readjusting the balance of the population. I don't for a moment go so far as to say there will be no more war; but I do say it will not be for many a long year yet. Civilization hasn't yet forgotten lessons of the last. If the late War proved anything, it proved that all the nations are so economically dependent on one another, that so far as material gain is concerned there's precious little difference between the fruits of victory and the ashes of defeat."

"That's only partly true," Mr. Bridgewater admitted. "In the abstract every nation has for a long time recognized war only as a disagreeable necessity. We all pay lip-service to the ideal of world-peace. But

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you've got to remember the curious psychology of a nation: you can't deal with it as if you were dealing with a single intelligent mind. Nations are like crowds; when the passion's in the sense it's out; one whiff of national temper will blow the work of years of calm reflection skyhigh. A little bit of flag-wagging and peace-time arguments go by the board. And look how many more nations there are in Europe to-day than there were ten years ago—each a potential war-maker. I ask you, Brown, are there more than half a dozen nations on the Continent of Europe to-day who would have the moral strength to resist using a weapon that assured world supremacy, were such a one placed within reach? Mind you, a supremacy gained by such means would not last. No nation has ever yet attained to world-power except through the collective will of its people. The advantage gained by such things as death-rays, gas, or freak flying-machines are soon neutralized. Defence, as you know, keeps only a little behind defiance; once the results of the initial surprise have worn off, things have a wonderful way of levelling up. But consider the consequences. Modern civilization is a precariously-balanced affair. It went near to toppling in 1918—we're still wobbling from the shock to-day. Inflict on it such another shock in its present unstable condition, and what would happen? Utter collapse, probably—at any rate, in Europe. The dark ages over again. A desolation and famine too horrible to contemplate, but which we must contemplate if we are going to prevent it. Well, we ask you to help us and try and get to the bottom of the mystery."

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"And if I fail?" Peter asked quietly.

Mr. Bridgewater shrugged his shoulders. "Don't let us imagine unlikely and unpleasant contingencies. If you succeed—well, we won't talk reward, but you would be able to ask for practically anything you liked."

Peter shook his head and smiled. "You don't convince me, Mr. Bridgewater. If I thought there was a real possibility of some dreadful secret being launched on Europe, as you suggest, I shouldn't hesitate for a moment, believe me. But what proof have you? You've only got Sir Mortimer Drude's word, and you say he's mad. Suppose he isn't mad, but is carrying out some kind of gigantic bluff on the people he's trying to sell the secret to?"

"In that case Sir Mortimer's remaining tenure of life will probably be short and extremely unpleasant," returned Mr. Bridgewater with a grim chuckle. "But he's not bluffing. He wouldn't be at such pains to get these back if he was," and he tapped his belt.

"He may be mistaken, though. His secret may be quite harmless after all."

"Ah! It may be; but it may not. Are we justified in taking the chance?"

Peter laughed outright. "It's no good, Mr. Bridgewater; I'm sorry, but I'm not convinced. Suppose we adjourn the meeting till morning, shall we? I've got to get up early, remember, I've a long journey to go, and I want to start before seven."

But Mr. Bridgewater only smiled with quiet confidence.

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CHAPTER II

DOINGS IN THE SMALL HOURS

(1)

It was ten minutes past two when Peter, having seen his visitor comfortably accommodated on the parlour sofa, at length retired to his room. Slipping off his clothes and donning pyjamas, he did not get into bed, but sat on the edge of it with an unlighted cigarette in his mouth, gazing thoughtfully at the candle. His mind was troubled and confused, and he wanted to sort it into some condition of order before he went to bed.

His refusal to accept Bridgewater's proposal had been bluff, pure and simple. Partly from a certain obstinate disinclination to be forced along a course he disliked, and partly in order to see to what length the other would go in efforts to cajole him, he had affected complete disbelief in the urgency of the suggested expedient. But in his heart of hearts he knew he stood committed. Fantastic and unusual as the story was, it had the ring of truth. Dick Cartwright was not the kind of man to appeal to him for help without just cause. Yet Peter could not help a slight feeling of resentment against him for dropping the bombshell into his tiny garden of contentment. He had been so happy in his work, and his friends, and his games. Looking at it in retrospection he realized what it meant to him. And now he must give all these things

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up to embark on an adventure which he knew he would loathe.

He turned the question over in his mind: was he in duty bound to accept? Many men, he knew, would jump at the chance for the sake of the adventure itself. That reason held little appeal for him, but he certainly thought there must be men, trained in the ferreting out of secrets, more competent to undertake the job than himself The mechanical part of the rôle—the driving and looking after the car and so forth—presented no difficulties; but what about the other and more important part? Hangerson, a professional, had failed in this; What were the chances of a mere amateur? Yet Dick Cartwright, no mean judge of men and their capabilities, had thought him not unworthy. It was all very puzzling.

He rose from the bed, and lighting the cigarette, moved to the open window, where he stood with his arms on the sill, looking out over the moonlit landscape. The sight of the river below him brought to his mind the violent attack made on Mr. Bridgewater earlier in the evening, and he wondered what had become of the gang. Probably they were miles away by now. Having failed so completely in their purpose with all the advantages of surprise, it was hardly likely they would linger on in the hope of achieving it now that their intended victim knew of their presence in Tregenneth, and was sure to be on his guard.

The window at which he stood overlooked the road, a thoroughfare bounded on the far side by a low stone wall, beyond which the ground fell steeply to the river. Peter had finished his cigarette and was still ruminating

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on the strangeness of his proposed mission when his eye chanced to fall on a green light moving slowly up-stream. As it drew nearer he could see the dark outline of a small boat and hear the faint throb of its engine. Idly wondering who it could be at such an hour, he was watching it when suddenly the light went out, reappeared for a space, and vanished again, only to appear once more for a similar period before it again ceased. Almost immediately it was there again, a mere flicker this time, and Peter suddenly realized it had spelt the letter "G" in the Morse code. As the light continued to wink away he read the message mechanically. It said: *"Going to Creek."*

Peter's heart was beating a shade faster as the green light, shining steadily now, continued up the river. The flashing of a message implied the presence of a recipient—and who, other than himself, was there awake and alert in Tregenneth at that time? Peter had little doubt as to the right answer. And even as the light, having passed the village, began to draw in to the Tregenneth side of the river, he made up his mind as to his course of action. Half a mile above the village was a small inlet, called Benton's Creek, for which the motor-boat was obviously making. Here was an opportunity not to be missed. Since there was no way of avoiding the part Dick Cartwright had cast for him, he might as well start at once—and what better beginning could be imagined than scrutinizing at close quarters the members of the gang with whom he had to deal, while remaining invisible himself? During the fight on the quay he had been unable to gather more than an impression of their appearance,

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and he had not even caught a glimpse of Horstman—"the lame one" of Mr. Bridgewater's narrative. Benton's Creek, surrounded as it was by trees, was an ideal spot for such an espionage.

There was no need to rouse Mr. Bridgewater. Hurriedly slipping on some clothes he stole downstairs, and cautiously opened and closed the front door; then he ran swiftly and silently in the direction of the village.

Two minutes after he had gone, a man emerged from the shelter of the wall opposite the cottage, and putting his hands to his mouth, uttered a strange cry, which floated down through the quiet night like the plaintive call of a night-bird. Peter, hurrying through the silent village on noiseless rubbered feet, heard the cry, but being occupied with keeping a wary look-out for lurking members of the gang, he gave no heed to it. He had no reason to suppose that they were familiar with his personal appearance, but he was taking no chances.

Once clear of the village he felt more at ease, for he took a short cut of which he knew his enemies would be ignorant. It led along a deep-rutted lane between high banks which presently became a path that crossed a field to the foot of a little hill with a ruined stone tower on top, like the spike on a policeman's helmet. He reached the top of this hill a little breathless, for he had made good time, and he eagerly scanned the several miles of river up-stream which its height commanded. But there was no sign of any boat. Below him, its shores thickly fringed with trees, lay Benton's Creek. Here, he decided, the motor-boat must be hidden.

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He had some anxious moments descending the hill. It was as bare as a new railway embankment, and he was afraid of being seen. Half-way down, as luck would have it, he put his foot in a hole, and ended the descent at a run that nearly brought disaster, his impetus sending him into a tree-trunk with a painful force. In an agony of apprehension he listened, holding his breath. If there was anyone in the creek they certainly heard him.

Came a man's startled voice, low and sibilant. "What's that, Dan?" it demanded.

A peevish voice replied:

"Oh, for cry-sake shut it, can't yer! You give me the ruddy jumps, you do. Scared of a blinkin' 'orse movin' now!"

"That weren't no horse, I know," returned the first. "Shove 'er in a bit, Dan. I'll just 'ave a look——"

"Not in this boat, you won't!" interrupted the other with sudden heat. "I don't shove no boat up to the stage till 'Orstman comes, not for you nor no one. I've 'ad enough trouble with this ruddy engine this trip without startin' 'er up every time you 'ear a ghost. 'Sides, the tide ain't up yet. Chuck them fags over and siddown."

"Horstman said—" began the first speaker.

"I don't care wot 'Orstman said," snapped the irritable one. "I'm in charge o' this boat, not you. Chuck them fags over!"

The other subsided, muttering, and silence descended on the creek. Peter began to pick his way carefully through the trees. Presently he perceived the sheen of water, and a few more stealthy strides brought him

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in sight of the small landing-stage. Twenty yards from the shore lay a motor-boat containing two men. One, little more than a lad, sat forward in an alert attitude; the other, presumably the surly Dan, lolled in the stern, cigarette in mouth, and Peter saw a villainous face with a shield over one eye. There was a stretch of mud between the boat and the stage; it would be the best part of an hour, he decided, before there was sufficient depth of water to float the boat alongside. Peter settled himself to wait.

Slowly the night wore on. The men in the boat hardly stirred. Once the younger of the two essayed conversation, only to be immediately snubbed by his morose companion. The moon sank perceptibly lower in the heavens. Silently the tide crept up to the landing-stage, but still the men made no move. At length, when his vigil seemed to have lasted for hours, Peter heard the melancholy call of a night-bird in the distance. The occupants of the boat at once bestirred themselves, the younger busying himself with the anchor-rope, while the peevish Dan, to the accompaniment of much profanity, bent over the engine.

"About time, too," he grumbled, as the engine started with a splutter. "We'll be lucky if we get out o' this before daylight, I tell you. 'Orstman can say what he likes—'ullo," he broke off, staring up the creek. "Wot's all this?"

At the far end of the creek, where the road came down to the shore, a party of men came into sight, and commenced to advance along the path to the stage. Among them strode a huge man with a conspicuous limp, a monstrous bulk of a man who towered above

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the others like a damaged battleship amidst a swarm of destroyers. Fascinated by the spectacle Peter did not at once observe the rest; but when at length he took his gaze away from the giant his heart missed a beat with sudden horror, for the others were carrying the limp body of a large man.

"It's Josey!" declared the young man in the boat excitedly.

"Josey be blowed," rejoined Dan, standing up as the boat glided to the stage, "it's Big Pedro. Say, boys, wot's happened?" he called out. "Is he dead?"

"Dead?" answered one of the bearers as they laid down their burden. "Ah, I should think 'e was dead. As mutton."

Stray beams of moonlight filtered through the trees, weirdly freckling the face of the dead man; and Peter saw with inexpressible relief that it was the giant mulatto with whom he had tried conclusions earlier in the evening. For several ghastly moments he had thought it was Mr. Bridgewater.

"Aye, but he gave as good as he got," piped the huge man in a shrill voice that contrasted unpleasantly with his enormous size; "trust Pedro for that. Pity he didn't get the other swine as well, blast his bones. Get him in, boys; we don't want to stop here no longer'n we can help. I suppose you ain't seen no man round 'ere, Dan?" he asked.

"There!" cried the young man in the boat.

"You 'old yer ruddy tongue—'e didn't ask you, did 'e?" answered Dan angrily.

"I only said—" commenced the other.

"Stow it!—who wants to 'ear your opinion,"

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retorted Dan. "There wasn't nothing, Mr. 'Orstman. There's been no man 'ere, I'll take my oath."

"Dan couldn't 'ear—'e was half-asleep," said the lad with spirit. "About a hower ago, it was, Mr. 'Orstman . . . . "

"Look 'ere—" began Dan in menacing tones, but the big man interrupted him.

"Well, it don't signify if he ain't here now," he squeaked. "If I got my hands on him I'd tear his eyes out, curse him. Josey here 'ud like to have a word with the swine, too—broke his arm, he did—eh, Josey?"

The miscreant addressed—it was the dago who had tried to slash Peter with a razor—replied with a threat so dreadful that all except the angry Dan laughed loudly.

"Any'ow, we got no time to waste on him now," said Horstman with finality. "We done enough for one night I reckon—leastways, Pedro has. Got those stones, George? Well, chuck 'em in—we'll tie 'em on outside. Get a hustle on, boys."

With a strange sinking of the heart Peter watched them haul the dead body of their fellow-conspirator on board. What was the meaning of these sinister allusions to the dead Pedro?—to whom had he given "as good as he got"? If anything had happened to Mr. Bridgewater while he was away—he clenched his fists at the thought. By Heaven! if there had they should pay for it. If he had to spend a year searching for every member of the gang they should pay.

A wave of anger swept over Peter. He wanted to hurt these men physically, make them suffer, shake them out of their vile complacency. And he was

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helpless—absolutely impotent. He had no more chance of injuring those six desperadoes, unarmed as he was, than a fox had of killing a pack of hounds.

And then suddenly Peter grinned faintly as an idea came to him. The men were all aboard now; all except the monstrous Horstman, who had stopped to light a cigar. Peter considered the relative sizes of the boat and its last passenger—and his grin grew wider. It was madness, of course—but how inexpressibly gorgeous if it came off. And assuredly there was no reason why it should not. After all, it was dark under the trees; the boat was a small one for so many passengers; and he was wearing rubbers. And it was only a matter of a thirty-foot sprint to the boat.

The man Horstman probably never knew quite how it happened. He stood on the edge of the wooden stage, tentatively feeling with one foot for the gunwale of the boat. A hand was stretched forth to help him, and he took it. All at once he heard a sound behind him, while simultaneously a hoarse cry of warning came from the boat. Caught in two minds he hesitated, and then tried to step back, tugging furiously at his hip-pocket. But he never had time to draw. Peter's outstretched hands caught him full in the back. There was a crash as twenty stone odd of human flesh fell sprawling athwart the gunwale; and then a mighty splash as the over-loaded boat, tilting up suddenly to an acute angle, flung the whole of its human freight overboard.

. . . . .

Dawn was beginning to lighten the eastern sky as Peter, reaching the village on his return journey,

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dropped into a walk. He had run from Benton's Creek, not for fear of pursuit from the dripping gang, but urged on by the dread in his heart. The elation of the glorious moment when he had seen his victims struggling in the shallow water had gone, leaving the fear of what he would find at the cottage.

When he came in sight of it he was partly reassured by a light in the sitting-room window, which was wide open. Now, to reach the front door he had to pass this window, and he naturally looked in. What he saw struck him stiff with horror.

In the room stood three people. One was his landlady, her head and shoulders enveloped in a shawl; she had evidently been weeping, and she was looking pathetically at a short man whom Peter recognized as the local doctor, who lived near by. By the couch, in helmet and unfastened tunic, stood the familiar figure of Police-Constable Trethewy, examining some object like a walking-stick in his hand. A figure lay stretched at his feet—a bulky motionless figure with its boots towards the window. Peter gave it one long fearful look; then he again fixed his gaze on the object held by the constable. This time he recognized it. It was a heavy niblick which usually reposed in his golf-bag in the corner; and on the head and part of the shaft was a dark stain.

(11)

Even in the frightful moment of his discovery Peter realized that he must not enter that room. The consequences of such a step were only too apparent. In

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the first place he could do nothing to help: Bridgewater was obviously dead and the vital documents stolen; in the second he clearly foresaw the equivocal nature of his position. What kind of story had he to tell? The truth, to the stolid village constable and the hard-headed country practitioner, would sound like the ravings of a lunatic; the deduction they would draw, with the damning evidence of that golf-stick in front of them, obvious. Nor would they hesitate to act on their conclusions. He was practically a stranger in Tregenneth. Apart from a few fishermen, his landlady, and some members of the golf-club at Polhaven, ten miles away, he knew not a soul in Cornwall. It would be nothing less than the duty of the constable to detain him, if only upon suspicion.

That his detention would only be of short duration he knew; he had not the slightest fear of being unable to prove his innocence, given time. But until his innocence was established in the eyes of the law, even if he were not put to the ignominy of arrest, a watchful eye would indubitably be kept upon his movements, and his liberty of action be curtailed. And at all costs he must keep his freedom if he were to get into touch with Dick Cartwright. He realized that must be his first aim.

While these thoughts flashed through his mind the doctor had been bending over the prostrate figure on the floor; and now he straightened his back and said something in an undertone that resulted in the constable turning to the window. Peter drew away just in time. The voice of Constable Trethewy came from the window:

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