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THE HUNT BALL MYSTERY

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THE HUNT BALL MYSTERY

BY

SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY, Bt.

Author of "A Prince of Lovers," "The Mystery of the Unicorn," etc., etc.

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BRENTANO'S
NEW YORK
1918

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CHAPTER I

The Intruder

"I'M afraid it must have gone on in the van, sir."

"Gone on!" Hugh Gifford exclaimed angrily. "But you had no business to send the train on till all the luggage was put out."

"The guard told me that all the luggage for Branchester was out," the porter protested deprecatingly. "You see, sir, the train was nearly twenty minutes late, and in his hurry to get off he must have overlooked your suit-case."

"The very thing I wanted most," the owner returned. "I say, Kelson," he went on, addressing a tall, soldierly man who strolled up, "a nice thing has happened; the train has gone off with my evening clothes."

Kelson whistled. "Are you sure?"

"Quite." Gifford appealed to the porter, who regretfully confirmed the statement.

"That's awkward to-night," Kelson

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commented with a short laugh of annoyance. "Look here, we'd better interview the station-master, and have your case wired for to the next stop. I am sorry, old fellow, I kept you talking instead of letting you look after your rattle-traps, but I was so glad to see you again after all this long time."

"Thanks, my dear Harry, you've nothing to blame yourself about. It was my own fault being so casual. The nuisance is that if I don't get the suit-case back in time I shan't be able to go with you to-night."

"No," his friend responded; "that would be a blow. And it's going to be a ripping dance. Dick Morriston, who hunts the hounds, is doing the thing top-hole. Now let's see what the worthy and obliging Prior can do for us."

The station-master was prepared to do everything in his power, but that did not extend to altering the times of the trains or shortening the mileage they had to travel. He wired for the suit-case to be put out at Medford, the next stop, some forty miles on, and sent back by the next up-train. "But

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that," he explained, "is a slow one and is not due here till 9.47. However, I'll send it on directly it arrives, and you should get it by ten o'clock or a few minutes after. You are staying at the *Lion*?"

"Yes."

"Not more than ten or twelve minutes' drive. I'll do my best and there shall be no delay."

The two men thanked him and walked out to the station yard, where a porter waited with the rest of Gifford's luggage.

"There is a gentleman here going to the *Lion*," he said with a rather embarrassed air; "I told him your fly was engaged, sir; but he said perhaps you would let him share it with you."

Kelson looked black. "I like the way some people have of taking things for granted. Cheek, I call it. He had better wait or walk."

"The gentleman said he was in a hurry, sir," the porter observed apologetically.

"No reason why he should squash us up in the fly," Kelson returned. "I'll have a word with the gentleman. Where is he?"

"I think he is in the fly, sir."

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"The devil he is! We'll have him out, Hugh. Infernally cool." And he strode off towards the waiting fly.

"Better see what sort of chap he is before you go for him, Harry," Gifford said deprecatingly as he followed. He knew his masterful friend's quick temper, and anticipated a row.

"If you don't mind, this is my fly, sir," Kelson was saying as Gifford reached him.

"The porter told me it was the *Golden Lion* conveyance," a strong, deeply modulated voice replied from the fly.

"And I think he told you it was engaged," Kelson rejoined bluffly.

"I did not quite understand that," the voice of the occupant replied in an even tone. "I am sorry if there has been any misunderstanding; but as I am going to the hotel——"

"That is no reason why you should take our fly," Kelson retorted, his temper rising at the other's coolness. "I must ask you to vacate it at once," he added with heat.

"How many of you are there?" The man leaned forward showing in the door-

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way a handsome face, dark almost to swarthiness. "Only two? Surely there is no need to turn me out. You don't want to play the dog in the manger. There is room for all three, and I shall be happy to contribute my share of the fare."

"I don't want anything of the sort——" Kelson was beginning angrily when Gifford intervened pacifically.

"It is all right, Harry. We can squeeze in. The fellow seems more or less a gentleman; don't let's be churlish," he added in an undertone.

"But it is infernal impudence," Kelson protested.

"Yes; but we don't want a row. It is not as though there was another conveyance he could take."

"All right. I suppose we shall have to put up with the brute," Kelson assented grudgingly. "But I hate being bounced like this."

Gifford took a step to the carriage-door. "I think we can all three pack in," he said civilly.

"I'll take the front seat, if you like,"

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the stranger said, without, however, showing much inclination to move.

"Oh, no; stay where you are," Gifford answered. "I fancy I am the smallest of the three; I shall be quite comfortable there. Come along, Harry."

With no very amiable face Kelson got in and took the vacant seat by the stranger. His attitude was not conducive to geniality, and so for a while there was silence. At length as they turned from the station approach on to the main road the stranger spoke. His deep-toned voice had a musical ring in it, yet somehow to Gifford's way of thinking it was detestable. Perhaps it was the speaker's rather aggressive and, to a man, objectionable personality, which made it seem so.

"I am sorry to inconvenience you," he said, more with an air of saying the right thing than from any real touch of regret. "On an occasion like this they ought to provide more conveyances. But country towns are hopeless."

"Oh, it is all right," Gifford responded politely. "The drive is not very long."

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"A mile?" The man's musical inflection jarred on Gifford, who began to wonder whether their companion could be a professional singer. One of their own class he certainly was not.

"I presume you gentlemen are going to the Hunt Ball?" he asked.

"Yes," Gifford answered.

"Rather a new departure having it in a private house," the man said. "Quite a sound idea. I have no doubt Morriston will do us as well—much better than we should fare at the local hotel or Assembly Rooms."

"Are you going?" They were the first words Kelson had uttered since the start, and the slight surprise in their tone was not quite complimentary. It must have so struck the other, seeing that he replied with a touch of resentment:

"Yes. Why not?"

"No reason at all," Kelson answered, "except that I don't remember to have seen you out with the Cumberbatch."

"I dare say not," the other rejoined easily. "It is some years since I hunted with them. I'm living down in the south

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now, and when I'm at home usually turn out with the Bavistock. Quite a decent little pack, *faute de mieux*; and Bobby Amphlett, who hunts them, is a great pal of mine."

"I see," Kelson observed guardedly. "Yes, I believe they are quite good as far as they go."

The stranger gave a short laugh. "They, or rather a topping old dog-fox, took us an eleven mile point the other day, which was good enough in that country. Being in town I thought I would run down to this dance for old acquaintance' sake. Dare say one will meet some old friends."

"No doubt," Kelson responded dryly.

"As you have been good enough to ask me to share your fly," the man observed, with a rather aggressive touch of irony, "I may as well let you know who I am. My name is Henshaw, Clement Henshaw."

"Any relation to Gervase Henshaw?" Gifford asked.

"He is my brother. You know him?"

"Only by reputation at my profession, the Bar. And I came across a book of his the other day."

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"Ah, yes. Gervase scribbles when he has time. He is by way of being an authority on criminology."

"And is, I should say," Gifford added civilly.

"Yes; he is a smart fellow. Has the brains of the family. I'm all for sport and the open-air life."

"And yet," thought Gifford, glancing at the dark, rather intriguing face opposite to him, "you don't look a sportsman. More a *viveur* than a regular open-air man, more at home in London or Paris than in the stubbles or covert." But he merely nodded acceptance of Henshaw's statement.

"My name is Kelson," the soldier said, supplying an omission due to Henshaw's talk of himself. "I have hunted this country pretty regularly since I left the Service. And my friend is Hugh Gifford."

"Gifford? Did not Wynford Place where we are going to-night belong to the Giffords?" Henshaw asked, curiosity overcoming tact.

"Yes," Gifford answered, "to an uncle of mine. He sold it lately to Morriston."

"Ah; a pity. Fine old place," Henshaw

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observed casually. "Naturally you know it well."

"I have had very good times there," Gifford answered, with a certain reserve as though disinclined to discuss the subject with a stranger. "I have come down now also for old acquaintance' sake," he added casually.

"I see," Henshaw responded. "Not altogether pleasant, though, to see an old family place in the hands of strangers. Personally, when a thing is irrevocably gone, as, I take it, Wynford Place is, I believe in letting it slide out of one's mind, and having no sentiment about it."

"No doubt a very convenient plan," Gifford replied dryly. "All the same, if I can retrieve my evening kit, which has gone astray, I hope to enjoy myself at Wynford Place to-night without being troubled with undue sentimentality."

"Good," Henshaw responded with what seemed a half-smothered yawn. "Regret for a thing that is gone past recall does not pay; though as long as there is a chance of getting it I believe in never calling oneself beaten. Here we are at the *Lion*."

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CHAPTER II

The Stained Flowers

"WHAT do you think of our acquaintance?" Gifford said as they settled down in the private room of Kelson, who made the *Golden Lion* his hunting quarters.

"Not much. In fact, I took a particular dislike to the fellow. Wrong type of sportsman, eh?"

"Decidedly. Fine figure of a man and good-looking enough, but spoilt by that objectionable, cock-sure manner."

"And I should say a by no means decent character."

"A swanker to the finger-tips. And that implies a liar."

"Not worth discussing," Kelson said. "He goes to-morrow. I made a point of inquiring how long he had engaged his room for. One night."

"Good. Then we shan't be under the

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ungracious necessity of shaking him off. I can't tell you how sick I am, Harry, at the loss of my things."

"No more than I am, my dear fellow. If only a suit of mine would fit you. But that's hopeless."

They both laughed ruefully at the idea, for Captain Kelson looked nearly twice the size of his friend.

"We'll hope they'll arrive in time for you to see something of the fun at any rate," Kelson said. "I'm in no hurry; I'll wait with you."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Harry," Gifford protested. "Do you think I can't amuse myself for an hour or two alone? You'll go off at the proper time. Absurd to wait till every decent girl's card is full."

"I don't like it, Hugh."

"Nor do I. But it is practically my fault in not looking sharper after my luggage, and better one should suffer than two."

So it was arranged that Captain Kelson should go on alone and his guest should follow as soon as his clothes turned up and he could change into them.

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That settled, they sat down to dinner.

"Tell me about the Morristons, Harry," Gifford said. "He is a very good fellow, isn't he?"

"Dick Morriston? One of the best. Straight goer to hounds and straight in every other capacity, I should say. You know they used to live at Friar's Norton, near here, before they bought your uncle's place."

"Yes, I know. What is the sister like?"

"A fine, handsome girl," Kelson answered, without enthusiasm. "Rather too cold and statuesque for my taste, although I have heard she has a bit of the devil in her. Quite a sportswoman, and as good after hounds as her brother. They say she had a thin time of it with her step-mother, and has come out wonderfully since the old lady died. Lord Painswick, who lives near here, is supposed to be very sweet on her. Perhaps the affair will develop to-night. The ball will be rather a toney affair."

"Morriston has plenty of money?"

"Heaps. And the sister is an heiress too. The old man did not nearly live up to his income and there were big accumulations."

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"Which enabled the son to buy our property," Gifford said with a tinge of bitterness. "Well, it might have been worse. Wynford has not passed into the hands of some Jew millionaire or City speculator, but has gone to a gentleman, a good fellow and a sportsman, eh?"

"Yes; Dick Morriston is all that. As the place had to go, you could not have found a better man to succeed your people."

When the time came to start for the ball Gifford went down to see his friend off and to repeat his orders concerning the immediate delivery of his suit-case when it should arrive. Henshaw was in the hall, bulking big in a fur coat and complaining in a masterful tone of the unpunctuality of his fly. A handsome fellow, Gifford was constrained to acknowledge, and of a strong, positive character; the type of man, he thought, who could be very fascinating to women—and very brutal.

He dropped his rather bullying manner as he caught sight of the two friends; and, noticing Gifford's morning clothes, made a casually sympathetic remark on his bad luck.

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"Oh, I shall come on when my things arrive, which ought to be soon," Gifford responded coldly, disliking the man and his rather obvious insincerity.

"We might have driven over together," Henshaw said, addressing Kelson. "But I hardly cared to propose it after the line you took at the station."

There was an unpleasant curl of the lip as he spoke the words almost vindictively, as though with intent to put Kelson in the wrong.

But his sneer had no effect on the ex-Cavalryman.

"I am driving over in my own trap," he replied coolly, ignoring the other's intent. "You will be a good deal more comfortable in a closed carriage."

"Decidedly," Henshaw returned with a laugh. "I am not so fond of an east wind as to get more of it than can be helped. And, after all, it is best to go independently to an affair of this sort. One may get bored and want to leave early."

Kelson nodded with a grim appreciation of the man's trick of argument, and went

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out to his waiting dog-cart. Henshaw's fly drove up as Gifford turned back from the door.

"I suppose we shall see you towards mid-night," he said lightly as he passed Gifford, his tone clearly suggesting his utter indifference in the matter.

"I dare say," Gifford replied, and as he went upstairs he heard an order given for "Mr. Henshaw's fire in number 9 to be kept up against his return."

Alone in the oak-panelled sitting-room Gifford settled down to wait for his clothes. He skimmed through several picture-papers that were lying about, and then took up a novel. But a restless fit was on him, and he could not settle down to read. He threw aside the book and began thinking of the old property which his uncle had muddled away, and recalling the happy times he had spent there from his schooldays onwards. Memories of the rambling old house and its park crowded upon him. By force of one circumstance or another he had not been there for nearly ten years, and a great impatience to see it again took hold of him. He

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looked at the clock. At the best, supposing there were no hitch, his suit-case could hardly arrive for another hour and a half. Wynford Place was a bare mile away, perhaps twenty minutes' walk; the night was fine and moonlight, he was getting horribly bored in that room; he would stroll out and have a look at the outside of the old place. After all, it was only the exterior that he could expect to find unaltered; doubtless the Morristons with their wealth had transformed the interior almost out of his knowledge. Anyhow he would see that later. Just then he simply longed for a sight of the ancient house with its detached tower and the familiar landmarks.

Accordingly he filled a pipe, put on a thick overcoat and a golf cap and went out, leaving word of his return within the hour.

But it was a good two hours before he reappeared, and the landlord, who met him with the news that the missing suit-case had been awaiting him in his room since twenty minutes past ten, was struck by a certain peculiarity in his manner. It was nothing very much beyond a suggestion

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of suppressed excitement and that rather wild look which lingers in a man's eyes when he is just fresh from a dispute or has experienced a narrow escape from danger. Then Gifford ordered a stiff glass of spirits and soda and drank it off before going up to change.

"Shall you be going to Wynford Place, sir?" the landlord inquired as he glanced at the clock.

Gifford hesitated a moment. "Yes. Let me have a fly in a quarter of an hour," he answered.

But it was more than double that time when he came down dressed for the dance.

The old house looked picturesque enough in the moonlight as he approached it. All the windows in the main building were lighted up, and there was a pleasant suggestion of revelry about the ivy-clad pile. Standing some dozen yards from the house, but connected with it by a covered way, was a three-storied tower, the remains of a much older house, and from the lower windows of this lights also shone.

Gifford entered the well-remembered hall

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and made his way, almost in a dream, to the ball-room, where many hunting men in pink made the scene unusually gay. Unable for the moment to catch sight of Kelson, he had to introduce himself to his host, who had heard of his mishap and gave him a cheerily sympathetic welcome. Richard Morriston was a pleasant-looking man of about five or six-and-thirty, the last man, Gifford thought, he would bear a grudge against for possessing the old home of the Giffords.

"I'm afraid you must look upon me rather in the light of an intruder here," Morriston said pleasantly.

"A very acceptable one so far as I am concerned," Gifford responded with something more than empty civility.

"It is very kind of you to say so," his host rejoined. "Anyhow the least I can do is to ask you with all sincerity to make yourself free of the place while you are in the neighbourhood. Edith," he called to a tall, handsome girl who was just passing on a man's arm, "this is Mr. Gifford, who knows Wynford much better than we do."

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Miss Morriston left her partner and held out her hand. "We were so sorry to hear of your annoying experience," she said. "These railway people are too stupid. I am so glad you retrieved your luggage in time to come on to us."

Gifford was looking at her with some curiosity during her speech, and quickly came to the conclusion that Kelson's description of her had certainly not erred on the side of exaggeration. She looked divinely handsome in her ball-dress of a darkish shade of blue, relieved by a bunch of roses in her corsage and a single diamond brooch. Statuesque, too statuesque, Kelson had called her; certainly her manner and bearing had a certain cold stateliness, but Gifford had penetration enough to see that behind the reserve and the society tone of her welcome there might easily be a depth of feeling which his friend with a lesser knowledge of human nature never suspected. An interesting girl, decidedly, Gifford concluded as he made a suitable acknowledgment of her greeting, and, I fancy, my friend Harry takes a rather too superficial view of her

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character, he thought, as strolling off in search of Kelson, he found himself watching his hostess from across the room with more than ordinary interest.

He soon encountered Kelson coming out of a gaily decorated passage which he knew led to the old tower. He had a pretty girl on his arm, tall and fair, but with none of Miss Morriston's dignified coldness. This girl had a sunny, laughing face, and Gifford thought he understood why his friend had not been enthusiastic over the probable Lady Painswick.

Kelson, receiving him with delight, introduced him, with an air of proprietorship it seemed, to his companion, Miss Tredworth.

"Have you been exploring the old tower?" Gifford asked.

"We've been sitting out there," Kelson answered with a laugh. "They have converted the lower rooms into quite snug retreats."

"In my uncle's day they were anything but snug," Gifford observed. "I remember we used to play hide-and-seek up there."

He spoke with preoccupation, his eyes

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fixed on a bunch of white flowers which the girl wore on her black dress. They were slightly blotched and sprinkled with a dark colour in a way which was certainly not natural, and Gifford, held by the peculiar sight, looked in wonder from the flowers to the girl's face.

"You must give Gifford a dance," Kelson said, breaking up the rather awkward pause.

"I'm afraid my card is full," Miss Tredworth said, holding it up.

Kelson laughed happily. "Then he shall have one of mine."

But Gifford protested. "Indeed I won't rob you, Harry," he declared. "I'm tired, and should be a stupid partner."

"Tired?" Kelson remonstrated. "Why, you have been resting at the *Lion* waiting for your things while we have been dancing our hardest."

"Resting? No; I went out for a walk," Gifford replied.

"The deuce you did! Where did you go to?"

"Oh, nowhere particular," Gifford answered rather evasively. "Just about the town."

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CHAPTER III

The Streak on the Cuff

HUGH GIFFORD did not stay very long at the dance. He took a mouthful of supper, and then told Kelson that he had a headache and was going to walk back to the *Golden Lion*.

Kelson was distressed. "My dear fellow, coming so late and going so early, it's too bad. This is the best time of the night. I hope the old place with its memories hasn't distressed you."

"Oh, no," was the answer. "But something has upset me. I'll get back and turn in. By the way, I don't see that man Henshaw."

"No," Kelson replied casually; "I haven't seen him lately. But then I've had something better to think about than that ineffable bounder. He was here all right

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in the early part of the evening. One couldn't see anything else."

"Dancing?"

"More or less. Well, if you will go, old fellow, do make yourself comfortable at the *Lion* and call for anything you fancy. I'm dancing this waltz."

Gifford left the dance and went back to the hotel. He seemed perplexed and worried, so much so that for some time he paced his room restlessly and then, instead of turning in, he went back to the sitting-room, lighted a pipe, and settled himself there to await his friend's return.

It was nearly three o'clock when Kelson came in.

"Why, Hugh!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Still up?"

"I didn't feel like sleeping," Gifford answered, "and if I'm to keep awake I'd rather stay up."

Kelson looked at him curiously. "I hope the visit to your old home hasn't been too much for you," he remarked with the limited sympathy of a strong man whose nerves are not easily affected.

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"Oh, no," Gifford assured him. "Although somehow I did feel rather out of it. I have had rather a teasing day, but I shall be all right in the morning, and am looking forward to a run round the scenes of my childhood."

"Good," Kelson responded, relieved to think his friend's visit was not after all going to be as dismal as he had begun to fear. "Well, Hugh," he added gaily. "I have a piece of news for you."

"Not that you are engaged?"

Something, an almost apprehensive touch, in Gifford's tone rather took his friend aback.

"Why not?"

"To Miss—the girl you were dancing with?"

Again Gifford's tone gave a check to Kelson's enthusiasm.

It was with a more serious face that he replied, "Muriel Tredworth, the best girl in England. I hope, my dear Hugh, you are not going to say you don't think so."

"Certainly not," Gifford answered promptly. "I never saw or heard of her before to-night."

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Kelson laughed uncomfortably. A man in love and in the flush of acceptance wants something more than a lukewarm reception of the news. "I'm glad to hear it," he responded dryly. "From your tone one might almost imagine that you knew something against Muriel."

"Heaven forbid!" Gifford ejaculated fervently.

"You don't congratulate me," his friend returned with a touch of suspicion.

Gifford forced a laugh. "My dear Harry, you have taken my breath away. You deserve the best wife in the kingdom, and I sincerely hope you have got her," he said, not very convincingly.

His half-heartedness, not too successfully masked, evidently struck Kelson. "One would hardly suppose you thought so," he said in a hurt tone. "I wish," he added warmly, "if there is anything at the back of your words you would speak out. I should hope we are old friends enough for that."

Gifford glanced at the worried face of the big, simple-minded sportsman, more or less

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a child in his knowledge of the subtleties of human nature, and as he did so his heart smote him.

"We are, and I hope we always shall be," he declared, grasping his hand. "You are making too much of my unfortunate manner to-night, and I'm sorry. With all my heart I congratulate you, and wish you every blessing and all happiness."

There was an unmistakable ring of sincerity in his speech now, and, without going aside to question its motive, as a more penetrating mind might have done, Kelson accepted his friend's congratulations without question.

"Thanks, old fellow," he responded, brightening as he returned the grasp of Gifford's hand. "I was sure of your good wishes. You need not fear I have made a mistake. Muriel is a thorough good sort, and we shall suit each other down to the ground. We've every chance of happiness."

Before Gifford could reply there came a knock at the door. The landlord entered.

"Beg your pardon, captain," he said, "I'm sorry to trouble you, but could you tell

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me whether they are keeping up the Hunt Ball very late?"

"No, Mr. Dipper," Kelson answered. "It was all over long ago. I was one of the last to come away. We left to the strains of the National Anthem."

Mr. Dipper's face assumed a perplexed expression.

"Thank you, captain," he said. "My reason for asking the question is that Mr. Henshaw, who has a room here, has not come in."

"Not come in?" Kelson repeated. "Too bad to keep you up, Mr. Dipper."

"Well, captain," said the landlord, "you see it is getting on for four o'clock, and we want to lock up. Of course if the ball was going on we should be prepared to keep open all night if necessary. But my drivers told me an hour ago it was over."

"So it was. I wonder"—Kelson turned to Gifford—"what can have become of the egregious Henshaw. I don't think, as I told you in the ball-room, I have seen him since ten o'clock."

Gifford shrugged. "Unless he has come across friends and gone off with them."

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"He couldn't well do that without calling here for his things," Kelson objected. "I suppose he did not do that, unknown to you?" he asked the landlord.

"No, captain. His things are all laid out in his room, and the fire kept up as he ordered."

"Then I don't know what has become of him," Kelson returned, manifestly not interested in the subject. "I certainly should not keep open any longer. If Mr. Henshaw turns up at an unreasonable hour, let him wait and get in when he can. Don't you think so, Hugh?"

Gifford nodded. "I think, considering the hour, Mr. Dipper will be quite justified in locking up," he answered.

"Thank you, gentlemen; I will. Good-night," and the landlord departed.

Kelson turned to a side table and poured out a drink.

"Decent fellow, Dipper, and uniformly obliging," he said. "I certainly don't see why he should be inconvenienced and kept out of his bed by that swanker, who has probably gone off with some pal and hasn't

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had the decency to leave word to that effect. Bad style of man altogether. Hullo! What's this?"

"What's the matter?"

Gifford crossed to Kelson, who was looking at his shirt-cuff.

"What's this?"

A dark red streak was on the white linen.

"Hanged if it doesn't look like blood," Kelson said, holding it to the light.

Gifford caught his arm and scrutinized the stain.

"It is blood," he said positively.

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CHAPTER IV

The Missing Guest

NEXT morning Captain Kelson took his guest for a long drive round the neighbourhood. Before starting he asked the landlord at what time Henshaw had returned.

"He didn't come in at all, captain," Dipper answered in an aggrieved tone. "His fire was kept up all night for nothing."

"I suppose he has been here this morning," Kelson observed casually.

"No," was the prompt reply. "Nothing has been seen or heard of him here since he left last night for the ball."

Kelson whistled. "That looks rather queer, doesn't it, Hugh?"

Gifford nodded. "Very, I should say. What do you make of it?" he asked the landlord.

That worthy spread out his hands in a

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gesture of helplessness. "It's beyond me, gentlemen. We can none of us make it out. I've never known anything quite like it happen all the years I've been in the business."

"Oh, you'll have an explanation in the course of the morning all right," said Kelson with a smile at the host's worry. "Don't take it too seriously; it isn't worth it. You've got Mr. Henshaw's luggage, which indemnifies you, and he is manifestly a person quite capable of taking care of himself."

Mr. Dipper gave a doubtful jerk of the head. "It is very mysterious all the same."

Kelson laughed as he went off with his friend.

"I'm afraid I can't get up much interest in the doings of the objectionable Henshaw," he remarked lightly as they started off. "Such men as he know what they are about, and are not too punctilious with regard to other people's inconvenience."

"No," Gifford responded quietly. "All the same, his non-appearance is a little mysterious."

Kelson blew away the suggestion of mystery in a short, contemptuous laugh.

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"Oh, he is probably up to some devilry with some fool of a girl," he said in an offhand tone. "I know the type of man. They have a keen scent for impressionable women, of whom a fellow of that sort has always half-a-dozen in tow. No doubt that is what he came down here for—a tender adventure. That's the only kind of hunting he is keen on, take my word for it."

"I quite agree with you there," Gifford answered with conviction, and the subject dropped.

When they returned for luncheon they found that nothing had been heard of the *Golden Lion's* missing guest.

"It is rather an extraordinary move of our friend's," Kelson observed with a laugh. "He surely can't be living all this time in his evening clothes. Not but what a man like that would not let a trifle stand in his way if he had some scampish sport in view. No doubt he is up to a dodge or two by way of obviating these little difficulties."

In the afternoon the two friends went up to Wynford Place to call after the dance. Kelson had naturally been much more in-

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clined to drive over to the Tredworths, about seven miles away, in order to settle his betrothal, but Gifford suggested that the duty call should be paid first, and so it was arranged. To Kelson's delight he heard that Muriel Tredworth and her brother were coming over next day to stay with the Morristons for another dance in the neighbourhood and a near meet of the hounds; so he, warming to the Morristons, chatted away in all a lover's high spirits.

"By the way," he said presently, as they sat over tea, "rather an extraordinary thing has happened at the *Golden Lion*."

"What's that?" asked his host.

"Did you notice a man named Henshaw here last night? A big, dark fellow, probably a stranger to you, but by way of being a former follower of the Cumberbatch."

"An old fellow?" Morriston asked.

"Oh, no. About six-and-thirty, I should say; eh, Hugh?"

"Under forty, certainly," Gifford answered.

"Tall and very dark, almost to swarthiness; of course I remember the man,"

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Morriston exclaimed with sudden recollection. "I introduced him to a partner."

"I noticed the fellow," observed Lord Painswick, who also was calling. "Theatrical sort of chap. What has he done?"

Kelson laughed. "Simply disappeared, that's all."

"Disappeared!" There was a chorus of interest.

"How do you mean?" Morriston asked.

"Left the hotel at nine last night and has never turned up since," Kelson said with an air of telling an amusing story. "Poor Host Dipper is taking it quite tragically, notwithstanding the satisfactory point in the case that the egregious Henshaw's elaborate kit still remains in his unoccupied bedroom."

"Do you mean to say he never came back all night?" Miss Morriston asked.

"Never," Kelson assured her. "Old Dipper came to us, half asleep, at four o'clock to ask whether he was justified in locking up the establishment."

"And nothing has been seen or heard of the man since," Gifford put in.

"That is queer," Morriston said, as though

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scarcely knowing whether to take it seriously or otherwise. "Now I come to think of it I don't recollect seeing anything of the man after quite the first part of the evening. Did you, Painswick?"

"No, can't say I did," Painswick answered.

"And," observed Kelson, "he was not a man to be easily overlooked when he was on show. I missed him, not altogether disagreeably, after the early dances."

"What is the idea?" Edith Morriston inquired. "Is there any theory to account for his disappearance?"

"No," Kelson answered, "unless a discreditable one. Gone off at a tangent."

"And still in his evening things?" Painswick said with a laugh. "Rather uncomfortable this weather."

"That reminds me," Morriston said with sudden animation, "one of the footmen brought me a fur coat and a soft hat this morning and asked me if they were mine. They had been unclaimed after the dance and he had ascertained that they belonged to none of the men who were staying here. Nor were they mine."

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"That is most curious," Kelson said with a mystified air. "Henshaw was wearing a fur coat and soft hat when we saw him in the hall of the *Lion* just before starting. Don't you remember, Hugh?"

"Yes; certainly he was," Gifford answered.

"Then they must be his," Morriston concluded.

"And where is he—without them?" Painswick added with a laugh. "Dead of cold?"

"It is altogether quite mysterious," Morriston observed with a puzzled air. "He can't be here still."

"Hardly," his sister replied. "You know him?" she asked Kelson.

"Quite casually. So far as nearly coming to a rough and tumble with the fellow for his cheek in scoffing our fly at the station constitutes an acquaintance. Gifford acted as peacemaker, and we put up with the fellow's company to the town. But neither of us imbibed a particularly high opinion of the sportsman, did we, Hugh?"

"No," Gifford assented; "his was not a taking character, to men at any rate; and

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we rather wondered how he came to be going to the Cumberbatch Ball."

"No doubt he got his ticket in the ordinary way," Morriston said.

"It only shows, my dear Dick," his sister observed, "you may quite easily run risks in giving a semi-public dance in your own house."

Morriston laughed. "Oh, come, Edith," he protested, "we need not make too much of it. We don't know for certain that the man was a queer character."

"One finds objectionable swaggerers everywhere," Painswick put in.

"Anyhow," said Kelson, "if this Henshaw was a bad lot he had the decency to efface himself promptly enough. The puzzle is, what on earth has become of him?"

"I don't know, Mr. Gifford," Morriston said as the two friends were leaving, "whether you would care for a ramble over the old place. A man named Piercy has written to me for permission to go over the house; he is, it appears, writing a book on the antiquities of the county. I have asked him to luncheon to-morrow, and we shall be delighted

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if you and Kelson will join us as a preliminary to a personally conducted tour of the house. Charlie Tredworth and his sister are coming over for a week's stay, so we shall be quite a respectable party."

Naturally Kelson accepted the invitation with alacrity, and Gifford could do no less than fall in with the arrangement.

"Hope you won't mind going over to Wynford," Kelson said as they drove back. "If it is at all painful to you from old associations, I'll make an excuse for you."

Gifford hesitated a moment. "Oh, no," he answered. "I'll come. There is no use in being sentimental about the place going out of our family, and these Morristons are quite the right sort of people to have it. A splendidly thoroughbred type of girl, Miss Morriston."

Kelson laughed. "Oh, yes; a magnificent creature; cut out for a duchess. Only, you know, my dear Hugh, if I married a woman like that I should always be a little afraid of her. A magnificent chatelaine and all that, but too cold for my taste."

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"You think there is no deep feeling under the ice of her manner?"

"I don't know," Kelson replied, as though the idea was quite novel to him. "Never got so far as to think of that. I like a girl with whom you can get on without going through the process of thawing her first. And with Edith Morriston I should say it would be a slow process. Anyhow, she is just the girl for Painswick, who is evidently after her."

"I should say that with him the ice is a little below the surface," Gifford ventured.

Kelson laughed. "You've hit it, Hugh. He's easy enough, but scratch him and you come upon a very straight-laced aristocrat. He and the statuesque Edith Morriston are made for one another."

As they entered the *Golden Lion* the landlord met them.

"Well, Mr. Dipper, any news of your missing guest?" Kelson inquired with characteristic cheeriness, ignoring the troubled expression on that worthy's face.

"No, captain; and we can't imagine what has happened to Mr. Henshaw. There

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are three telegrams come for him, and I have just got one, reply-paid, to ask whether he is staying here."

"And you replied?"

"Went to Hunt Ball 9 last night. Not been here since," Dipper quoted. "It is rather awkward and unpleasant for me, sir," he added uncomfortably.

"Oh, you've no responsibility in the matter," Kelson assured him. "Don't you worry about it, Mr. Dipper. If the man goes out and does not choose to come back, that, beyond the payment of your charges, can be no affair of yours. Isn't that so, Hugh?"

"Certainly," Gifford assented.

Still their host looked anything but satisfied.

"Yes, sir, that's quite right; all the same, we are beginning not to like the look of it. It is very mysterious."

"It is, Mr. Dipper, to say the least of it," Kelson replied. "Still from such opinion as we were able to form of Mr. Henshaw I don't think it worth while making much fuss about it. He'll turn up all right and probably call you a fool for your pains."

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"I would not worry about it if I were you," Gifford said quietly.

As they turned to go upstairs a telegraph boy came in and handed his message to the landlord, who read it and handed it to Kelson.

"Please wire me without fail directly Mr. Henshaw returns. Gervase Henshaw, 8, Stone Court, Temple, London," Kelson read.

"That's his brother," Gifford observed.

"All right," said Kelson. "Let him worry if he likes. All you have to do, Mr. Dipper, is what he asks you there."

He went upstairs with Gifford, leaving the landlord reperusing the telegram, his plump face dark with misgiving.

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CHAPTER V

The Locked Room

THAT night the missing man did not return, nor was anything heard of him. The morning brought no news, and even Kelson began to think there might be something serious in it.

"If it was anybody but that man," he said casually over a hearty breakfast, "I should say it would be worth while taking steps to find out what had become of him. But that fellow can take care of himself; and when you come to think of it, his coming down here, an outsider, to the ball, was in itself rather fishy."

Gifford agreed, and they fell to discussing the day's plans. Kelson was going to drive over to have the momentous interview with Miss Tredworth's father. He anticipated no difficulty there; still, as he said, "The thing

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has got to be done, and the sooner it is over the better."

"Why not go to-morrow?" Gifford suggested. "There will be rather a rush to-day."

Kelson, a man of action, scoffed at the idea. "Oh, no; Muriel and Charlie are coming over to Wynford to luncheon. I shall simply get the thing settled and drive back with them."

So it was arranged. Gifford spent the morning in a stroll about the familiar neighbourhood, and when luncheon time came they all met at Wynford Place. Miss Morriston was not present. Her brother apologized for her absence, saying she had been obliged to keep an engagement to lunch with a friend, but that she had promised to return quite early in the afternoon. Mr. Piercy, the antiquarian, proved to be by no means as dry as his pursuit suggested. He was a lively little man with a fund of interesting stories furnished by the lighter side of his work, and altogether the luncheon was quite amusing.

When it was over Morriston suggested that, not to waste the daylight, they should

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begin their tour of the house; he called upon Gifford to share the duties of guidance, and the party moved off.

"Hope you haven't been bored all the morning, Hugh," Kelson said to his friend as they found themselves side by side. "Any news at the *Lion*? Has Henshaw turned up yet?"

Gifford shook his head. "No. Host Dipper has had another telegram of inquiry from the brother, but had nothing to tell him in return."

Kelson's face became grave. "It really does begin to look serious," he remarked.

"Yes; Dipper has been interviewing the police on the subject."

"Has he? Well, I only hope Henshaw has not been playing the fool, or worse, and caused all this fuss for nothing."

The party moved on to the great hall where the dancing had taken place, and so to the passage connecting the main building with the ancient tower.

"Now this is the part which will no doubt interest you most, Mr. Piercy," Morriston said; "this fourteenth century tower, which

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is to-day in a really wonderful state of preservation."

"Ah, yes," the archaeologist murmured; "they could build in those days."

They examined the two lower rooms on the ground and first floors, remarked on the thickness of the walls, shown by the depth of the window embrasures, which in older days had been put to sterner purposes; they admired the solid strength of the ties and hammer-beams in the roofs, and scrutinized the few articles of ancient furniture and tapestry the rooms contained, and the massive oaken iron-bound door which admitted to the garden.

"Now we will go up to the top room," Morriston proposed. "It is used only for lumber, but there is quite a good view from it."

He preceded the rest of the party up the winding stairs to the topmost door.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, pushing at it, "the door is locked. And the key appears to have been taken away," he added, bending down and feeling about in the imperfect light.

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The whole party was consequently held up on the narrow stairs. "I'll go and ask what has become of the key," Morriston said, making his way past them.

In a minute he returned, presently followed by the butler.

"How is it that this top door is locked, Stent?" he asked. "And where is the key?"

"I don't know, sir. Alfred mentioned this morning that the door was locked and the key taken away; we thought you must have locked it, sir."

"I? No, I've not been up here since the morning of the ball, when I had those old things brought up from the lower room to be out of the way."

"Did you lock the door then, sir?"

"No. Why should I? I am certain I did not. Perhaps one of the men did. Just go and inquire. And have the key looked for."

"Very good, sir."

"This is rather provoking," Morriston said, as they waited. "I particularly wanted to show you the view, which should be lovely

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on a clear day like this. If we have to wait much longer the light will be going. Besides, it is quite a quaint old room with a curious recess formed by the bartizan you may have noticed from outside."

Presently the butler returned accompanied by a footman with several keys.

"We can't find the right key, sir," he announced. "No one seems to have seen it. Alfred has brought a few like it, thinking one might possibly fit."

None of them, however, would go into the lock, not even the smallest of them.

"I can't make it out, sir," said the man, kneeling to get more effectively to work. But no key would enter. The footman at last took a box of matches from his pocket, struck a light and, holding it to the key-hole, peered in.

"Why, the key is in the lock, on the other side, sir," he said in astonishment.

"Then the door can't be locked," Morriston said, pushing it.

The footman rose and pushed too, but the door showed no sign of yielding; it was fastened sure enough.

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"This is strange," Morriston said. "Hi! Is any one in there?" he shouted; but no response came.

"Are you sure the key is in the door on the inside?" he asked.

"Certain, sir. Will you look for yourself, sir?" the man replied, striking another match and holding it so that his master could convince himself.

"No doubt about that," Morriston declared, as he rose from his scrutiny. "It is the most extraordinary thing I have ever known. Can you account for it, Stent?"

The butler shook his head. "No, sir. Unless someone is in there now."

Morriston again shouted, but no answer came.

"I presume there is no way out of the room but this door," Piercy asked.

"None," Morriston answered; "except the window, and that is, I should say, quite eighty feet from the ground; eh, Mr. Gifford?"

"A sheer drop of quite that distance," he answered.

"A prohibitive mode of exit," Piercy observed with a smile.

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"Yes," Morriston said. "I can't understand it at all. Besides, who would be likely to want to play tricks here? We have had no sign of burglars, and in any case they would hardly have been able to bring a ladder long enough to reach up to that window. Well, we must have the mystery cleared up. I think, Stent, you had better send one of the men on a bicycle into Branchester to fetch a locksmith and have the door opened somehow. Have it explained to him that it may be a tough job. In the meantime we may as well go and view the tower from the outside, as we can't get in."

Accordingly the whole party went down into the hall and so out to the garden, where they strolled round the house, Piercy meanwhile taking notes of its architectural features. As they came to the tower the rays of a late winter sun were striking it almost horizontally, lighting it up in a picturesque glow. Piercy, with his archaeological knowledge, was able to tell the owner and Gifford a good deal about the ancient structure of which they had previously been ignorant.

"The sunset would have been worth seeing

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from that top window," Morriston said, evidently perplexed and annoyed over the mystery of the locked door. "I can't make out what has happened."

"The person who locked the door assuredly did not make his exit by the window," Kelson remarked with a laugh, as he looked up at the sheer surface of the upper wall; "unless he was bent on suicide, in which case we should have found what was left of him at the foot of the tower."

As they went on round the house, Miss Morriston was seen coming up the drive. Her brother hurried forward to meet her.

"I say, Edith," he exclaimed, "we are in a great fix. Can you explain how the door of the top room in the tower comes to be locked with the key inside?"

Miss Morriston looked surprised. "What, Dick?"

"We can't get in," Morriston explained. "We found the door locked and the key missing, and then when Alfred tried another key, he found the right one was in the lock but inside the room."

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