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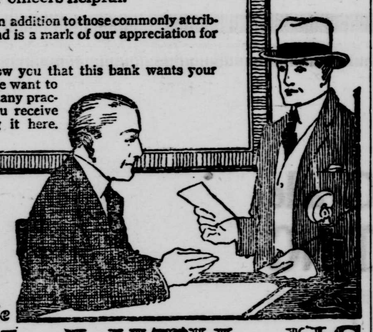
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CHAPTER SIX.

In Which a Very Old Game Takes Place on the Hog's Back.

ONE.

A thick grey mist lay over the Thames. It covered the water and the low fields to the west like a thick white carpet; it drifted sluggishly under the old bridge which spans the river between Goring and Streatley. It was the hour before dawn, and sleepy passengers, rubbing the windows of their carriages as the Plymouth boat express rushed on toward London, shivered and drew their rugs closer around them. It looked cold . . . cold and dead.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the vapor rose, and spread outwards up the wooded hills by Basildon. It drifted through the shrubs and rose-bushes of a little garden, which stretched from a bungalow down to the water's edge, until at length wisps of it brushed gently round the bungalow itself. Suddenly the window of one of the downstair rooms was flung open, and a man with a white haggard face leaned out drawing great gulps of fresh air into his lungs. Three other men lay sprawling uncouthly in chairs, and two dogs lay motionless on the hearthrug.

After a moment or two the man withdrew, only to appear again with one of the others in his arms. And then, having dropped his burden through the window on to the lawn outside, he repeated his performance with the remaining two. Finally he pitched the two dogs after them, and then, with his hand to his forehead, he staggered down to the water's edge.

"Holy smoke!" he muttered to himself, as he plunged his head into the cold water, "talk about the morning after!"

After a while, with the water still dripping down his face, he returned to the bungalow and found the other three in various stages of partial insensibility.

"Wake up, my heroes," he remarked, "and go and put your great fat heads in the river. We were all of us drugged or doped somehow. And now," he added bitterly, "we've all got heads, and we have not got Potts."

"I don't remember anything," said Toby Sinclair, "except falling asleep. Have they taken him?"

"Of course they have," said Hugh. "Just before I went off I saw 'em all in the garden, and that swine Lakington was with them. However, while you go and put your nuts in the river, I'll go up and make certain."

With a grim smile he watched the three men lurch down to the water; then he turned and went upstairs to the room which had been occupied by the American millionaire. It was empty, as he had known it would be, and with a smothered curse he made his way downstairs again.

TWO.

"Has it struck you fellows," remarked Hugh, at the conclusion of lunch, "that seated around this table are four officers who fought with some distinction and much discomfort in the recent historic struggle?"

"How beautifully you put it, old flick!" said Darrell.

"Has it further struck you fellows," continued Hugh, "that last night we were done down, trampled on, had for mugs by a crowd of dirty blackguards composed largely of the dregs of the universe?"

"A veritable Solomon," said Algy, gazing at him admiringly through his eyeglass. "I told you this morning I detested your friends."

"Has it still further struck you," went on Hugh, a trifle grimly, "that we aren't standing for it? I propose that we should tackle the blighters tonight."

"Tonight!" echoed Darrell. "Where?"

"At The Elms, of course. That's where the wretched Potts is for a certainty."

"And how do you propose that we should set about it?" demanded Sinclair.

Drummond drained his port and grinned gently.

"By stealth, dear old beans—by stealth. You—and I thought we might rake in Ted Jerningham, and perhaps Jerry Seymour, to join the happy throng—will make a demonstration in force, with the idea of drawing off the enemy, thereby leaving the coast clear for me to explore the house for the unfortunate Potts. An accident. . . . A car. . . . What is the connecting-link. . . . Why, drink. Write it down, Algy, or we might forget. Now, can you beat that?"

"We might have some chance," said Darrell kindly, "if we had the slightest idea what you were talking about."

"Pay attention, all of you," said Hugh. "Tonight some time about ten of the clock, Algy's motor will proceed along the Godalming-Guildford road. It will contain you three—also Ted and Jerry Seymour, if we can get 'em. On approaching the gate of The Elms, you will render the night hideous with your vocal efforts. Stray passers-by will think that you are all tight. Then will come the dramatic moment, when, with a heavy crash, you ram the gate. Horrified at this wanton damage to property, you will leave the car and proceed in mass formation up the drive."

"Still giving tongue?" queried Darrell.

"Still giving tongue. Either Ted or Jerry or both of 'em will approach the house and inform the owner in heartbroken accents that they have damaged his gate post. You three will remain in the garden—you might be recognized. Then it will be up to you. You'll have several men all round you. Keep 'em occupied—somehow. They won't hurt you; they'll only be concerned with seeing that you don't go where you're not wanted. The last thing they want to do is to draw any suspicion on themselves—and, on the face of it, you are merely five convivial wanderers who have looked on the wine when it was red. I think," he added thoughtfully, "that ten minutes will be enough for me."

"What will you be doing?" said Toby.

"I shall be looking for Potts. Don't worry about me. I'll look after myself. Now, is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Darrell, after a short silence. "But I don't know that I like it, Hugh. It seems to me, old son, that you're running an unnecessary lot of risk."

"Got any alternative?" demanded Drummond.

"If we're all going down," said Darrell, "why not stick together and rush the house in a gang?"

"No go, old bean," said Hugh, decisively. "Too many of 'em to hope to pull it off. No, low cunning is the only thing that's got an earthly of succeeding." With a grin he rose, and then strolled toward the door. "Now go and rope in Ted and Jerry, and for the love of Heaven don't ram the wrong gate."

"What are you going to do yourself?" demanded Peter suspiciously.

"I'm going to look at her from close to. Go away, all of you, and don't listen outside the telephone box."

THREE.

Hugh stopped his car at Guildford station and, lighting a cigarette, strolled restlessly up and down. He looked at his watch a dozen times in two minutes; he threw away his smoke before it was half finished. In short he manifested every symptom usually displayed by the male of the species when awaiting the arrival of the opposite sex. Over the telephone he had arranged that she should come by train from Godalming to confer with him on a matter of great importance; she had said she would, but what was it? He, having no suitable answer ready, had made a loud buzzing noise indicative of a telephone exchange in pain, and then rung off. And now he was waiting in that peculiar condition of mind, which reveals itself outwardly in hands that are rather too warm, and feet that are rather too cold.

"When is this bally train likely to arrive?" He accosted a phlegmatic official, who regarded him coldly, and doubted the likelihood of its being more than a quarter of an hour early.

At length it was signaled, and Hugh got back into his car. Feverishly he scanned the faces of the passengers as they came out into the street, until, with a sudden quick jump of his heart, he saw her, cool and fresh, coming toward him with a faint smile on her lips.

"What is this very important matter you want to talk to me about?" she demanded, as he assisted her into his car.

"I'll tell you when we get out on the Hog's Back," he said slipping in his clutch. "It's absolutely vital."

He stole a glance at her, but she was looking straight in front of her, and her face seemed expressionless.

"You must stand a long way off when you do," she said demurely. "At least if it's the same thing as you told me over the 'phone."

Hugh grinned sheepishly.

"The exchange went wrong," he remarked at length. "Astonishing how rotten the telephones are in town these days."

"Quite remarkable," she returned. "I thought you weren't feeling very well or something. Of course, if it was the exchange . . ."

"They sort of buzz and blow, don't you know," he explained helpfully.

"That must be most fearfully jolly for them," she agreed. And there was silence for the next two miles.

Once or twice he looked at her out of the corner of his eye, taking in every detail of the sweet profile so near to him. Except for their first meeting at the Carlton, it was the only time he had ever had her completely to himself, and Hugh was determined to make the most of it. He felt as if he could go on driving for ever, just he and she alone. It was then that the girl turned and looked at him. The car swerved dangerously. . . .

"Let's stop," she said, with the suspicion of a smile. "Then you can tell me."

Hugh drew into the side of the road, and switched off the engine.

"You're not fair," he remarked, and if the girl saw his hand trembling a little as he opened the door, she gave no sign. He came and stood beside her, and his right arm lay along the seat just behind her shoulders.

"Tell me about this important thing," she said a little nervously.

He smiled, and no woman yet born could see Hugh Drummond smile without smiling too.

"You darling!" he whispered, under his breath—"you adorable darling!" His arm closed around her, and, almost before she realized it, she felt his lips on hers. For a moment she sat motionless, while the wonder of it surged over her, and the sky seemed more gloriously blue, and the woods a richer green. Then, with a little gasp, she pushed him away.

"You mustn't . . . oh! you mustn't, Hugh," she whispered.

"And why not, little girl?" he said exultantly. "Don't you know I love you?" His face was still very close to hers. "Well?"

"Well, what?" she murmured.

"It's your turn," he whispered. "I love you, Phyllis—just love you."

"But it's only two or three days since we met," she said feebly.

"And phwat the divil has that got to do with it, at all?" he demanded. "Would I be waiting longer to decide such an obvious fact? Tell me," he went on, and she felt his arm round her again forcing her to look at him—"tell me, don't you care . . . a little?"

"What's the use?" She still struggled, but, even to her, it wasn't very convincing. "We've got other things to do. . . . We can't think of. . . ."

And then this very determined young man settled matters in his usual straightforward fashion. She felt herself lifted bodily out of the car as if she had been a child: she found herself lying in his arms, with Hugh's eyes looking very tenderly into her own, and a whimsical grin around his mouth.

"Cars pass here," he remarked, "with great regularity. I know you'd hate to be discovered in this position."

"Would I?" she whispered. "I wonder . . ."

(To Be Continued.)



She Found Herself Lying in His Arms, With Hugh's Eyes Looking Very Tenderly Into Her Own and a Whimsical Grin Around His Mouth.

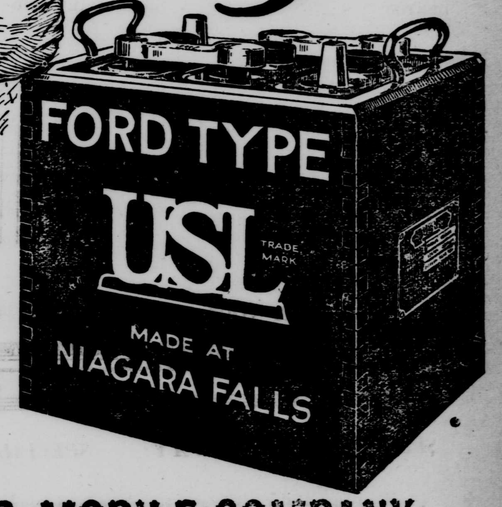
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