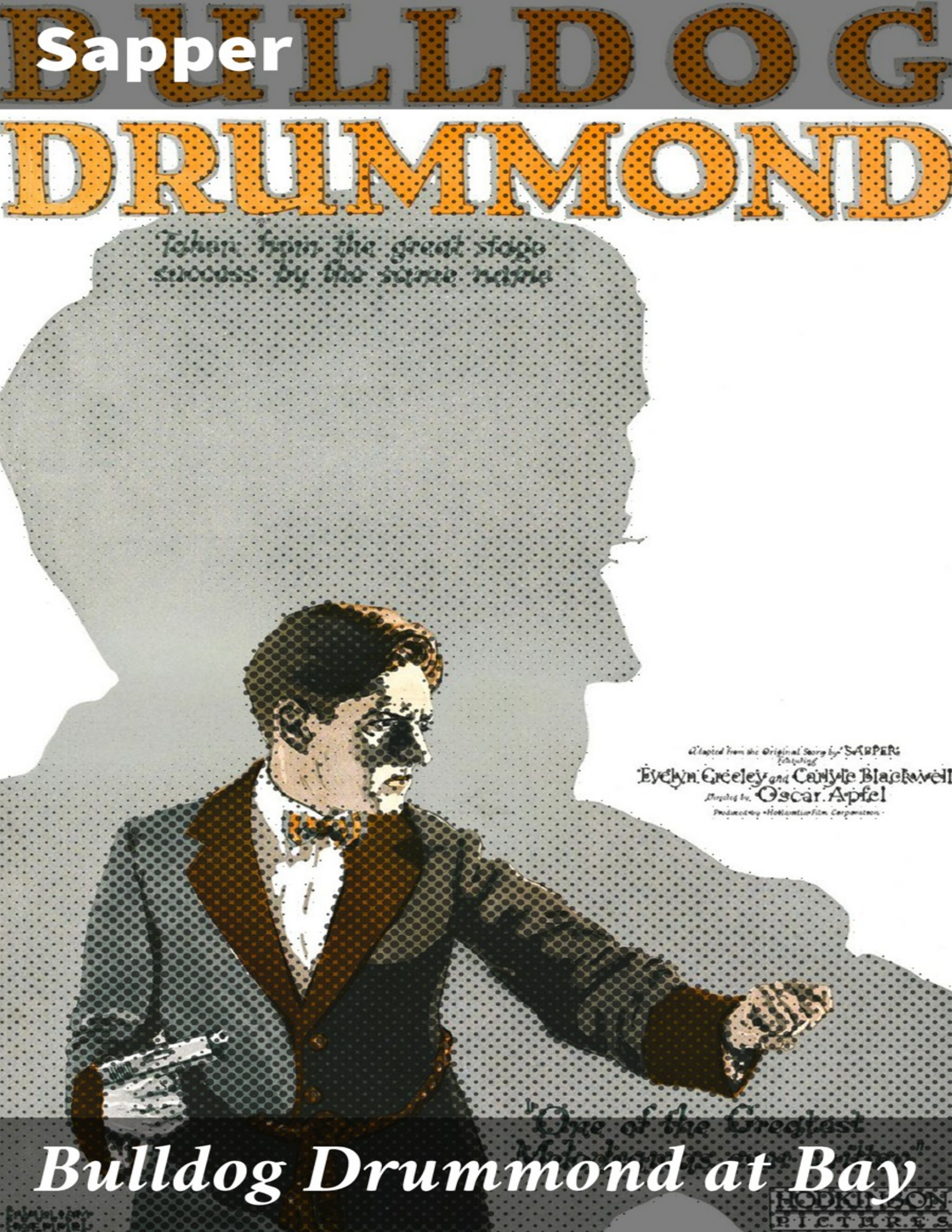
Sapper

BULLDOG DRUMMOND



Bulldog Drummond at Bay

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CHAPTER I

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The mist was low-lying. Above it the tops of the telegraph poles stuck out into the starlit night, marking the line of the road which wound over the desolate fen country. A few isolated houses stood like scattered islands in a sea of white cloud—houses in which the lights had long been extinguished, for it was nearing midnight, and the marsh folk do not sit up late.

One house only proved the exception. In size and shape it was just as the others—a typical fenman's cottage. But from one side of it a diffused white glow shone faintly towards the line of telegraph posts. Above the mist the top room showed black and clear-cut. No light came from that window: the illumination came from the sitting-room below.

In it was seated a very large young man. Between his knees he held a gun, whilst on the table in front of him lay the usual cleaning materials, flanked on the left by a large hunk of bread and cheese, and on the right by a tankard of ale. Behind him, on the hearth-rug, a spaniel lay curled up asleep. In front of him, and close to the door which communicated with the kitchen, a bulldog in a basket snored majestically: also in front of him, and close to the door which led into the diminutive hall, a wire-haired terrier hunted ecstatically in his dreams.

The blind was up: the window, regardless of the mist which drifted sluggishly in, was open top and bottom. On the table a lamp was burning, and by its light the contents of the room stood revealed. And when those contents were

compared with the living occupant the result was somewhat incongruous.

Over the mantelpiece hung several illuminated texts. They were of a depressing character, which a tasteful colour scheme of yellow beads round red letters was powerless to mitigate. Even a wedding group of the early 'sixties, which filled the place of honour in the centre, seemed unable to give that snap to the wall which the proud owner had doubtless intended. And the rest of the room was in keeping. A horsehair sofa covered with a red counterpane in which were sewn large, round pieces of coloured glass, adorned one wall: a table, complete with cloth to match the counterpane, and a stuffed weasel under a glass dome, adorned another. And in the window, on a small three-legged stool, reposed a Bible of colossal dimensions.

To the expert the solution was obvious on the spot. This was the parlour; that mysterious, unused room which is found in every similar house; that room, which, when the door is suddenly opened on the unwary visitor, exudes a strange and musty smell strongly reminiscent of a not too recent death behind the wainscot: that room which is utterly wasted on the altar of lower class respectability.

On the night when the mist was drifting just ceiling high the room was proving false to its traditions. Gone was the stale smell of ancient bones: even "Prepare to meet thy God" hung at a more rakish angle. The first was due to the open window: the second to the fact that a disreputable cap was slung on one end of the text. But the effect was all to the good. And since the large young man who at the moment was engaged in filling his pipe was presumably

responsible for both acts of vandalism, it might be well to turn from the room to its occupant.

His clothes were quite incredibly ancient. Grey flannel trousers: a sweater that had once been white, and an old shooting-coat padded with leather over the shoulders comprised the outer layer. Underneath, grey socks and brown brogues, with a shirt that was open at the neck completed the picture, whilst a collar, made of the same material as the shirt, had been flung carelessly into the coal-scuttle with a tie inside it.

After a while he rose and stretched himself, and it was not until he stood up that it was possible to realise how very large he was. He stood at least six feet in height, and being broad in proportion he seemed almost to fill the room. Only the spaniel noticed his movement and opened one liquid brown eye—an eye which followed him as he sauntered over to the window and peered out. Then he returned to the table and, picking up his empty tankard, he made his way past the snorer to the kitchen. A final pint was indicated before turning in.

It was while he was drawing it that the terrier gave a sudden, sharp, staccato bark, and the large young man returned to the parlour to find that the kennels were awake. The spaniel was sitting up contemplating the window; the bulldog, though still breathing hard, had emerged from his basket, whilst the terrier was following up his one bark with a steady stream of bad language under his breath.

"What is it, fellers?" said the large young man genially. "Does some varlet approach our domain?"

Holding his beer in his hand he again went to the window.

"Shut up, Jock, you ass!" he cried. "How can I hear anything if you're making that damn fool noise?"

The terrier made a valiant effort which was partially successful; and then the strain proved too great. And this time his master heard it too. From somewhere, not very far away, there came a muffled shout, and Jock proclaimed the fact in no uncertain voice—no just reason, he reflected, for being temporarily winded with a shooting-boot.

The large young man stood motionless, listening intently. The sound was not repeated, but it seemed to him that it had not been so much a cry for help as a call from one man to another indicating that he had found something. But who could be looking for anything at midnight in the fens, with a ground mist lying thick?

The shout had come, so far as he could judge, from the road which passed his own front gate ten yards away. And he was on the point of strolling down the little garden path to investigate further, when a development occurred which was so completely unexpected that for a few moments he could only stare foolishly round the room; whilst even Jock, by this time recovered, forgot to bark. There came a crash of breaking glass, followed by a further crash of still more breaking glass, and the stuffed weasel subsided with a thud on to the carpet.

The large young man had been getting his cap when it happened, otherwise the stone which he now perceived was the cause of the outrage would have spared the weasel and taken him in the pit of the stomach. For the first crash of breaking glass had been the window, which, having been open top and bottom, now had both upper and lower panes

smashed. Thence the missile, missing the lamp by a few inches, had smitten the glass dome of the weasel hip and thigh, and ricochetting off the wall had finished up by the bulldog's basket.

"Hi!" shouted the large young man, when he had recovered himself, "what the devil do you think you're doing?"

His momentary amazement had given way to anger: someone had deliberately thrown a stone through the window from the road, and it did not strike him as being in the slightest degree funny. Some tramp presumably, or a belated drunk: in any case, whoever it turned out to be, he was going to be thanked in suitable terms in the near future. Indubitably the large young man was not amused.

"Heel! The lot of you."

He strode down the garden path, and flinging open the little gate stepped into the road.

"Where's the lousy swine who bunged that brick through my window?" he called out.

There was no answer, and for a moment or two he stood undecided, with the dogs at his heels. He could hear no sound save the cry of a distant night bird, and gradually the difficulty of the position came home to him. The mist, if anything, was thicker; he could see the light from the room he had just left like a dull yellow square in the surrounding whiteness. But the trouble was he had no means of telling which way the stone-thrower had gone after he had done the deed. The fog had swallowed him up completely.

Again he listened intently, and, as he stood there motionless, subconsciously he became aware of the strange

silence of the three dogs. He glanced down at them: in the dim light he could see their heads close together over something in the road. He spoke to them and they looked up at him. Between them, in the dust, was a dark patch.

The large young man lit a match and bent down to examine it. And after a while he gave a low whistle. For the patch was still wet, and it was red—that unmistakable red which can only be one thing. It was blood, and why should a tramp or a belated drunk be bleeding?

He straightened up and lit a cigarette: the mystery was becoming stranger and stranger. That the blood was recent was obvious, otherwise it would have dried in the dust. And it therefore seemed fairly conclusive to him that it had come from the man who had thrown the stone. But why should an injured man, who was so badly hurt that he was bleeding, do what he had done? Why hadn't he come up to the cottage and asked for help?

Suddenly Jock began to growl under his breath, though his master could hear nothing suspicious. Until, a few moments later, he heard very faintly in the distance the unmistakable hum of an engine. A motor-car was coming along the road, and the driver had evidently got into a low gear.

The large young man hesitated; then, with a quick order to his dogs, he stepped back on to the garden path, and, closing the gate, he stood leaning over it. He felt instinctively that this car, nosing its way through the fog, was connected in some way with the unknown stone-thrower who had come out of the night and disappeared

into it again, leaving only the ominous red patch to mark his passing.

Gradually the noise of the car grew louder, until with unexpected suddenness two headlights loomed up out of the mist. They came abreast the gate, and then they halted; the driver had stopped the car. Voices sounded over the noise of the engine; then one of the doors opened and shut, and footsteps approached the gate.

The man who had got out had his hand actually on the latch, when the glow of a cigarette within a few inches of his face caused him to start violently.

"Good evening," said the large young man pleasantly. "Can I be of any assistance?"

He drew hard at his cigarette, and in the glow he got a quick glimpse of the new-comer. The man wore no hat, and his hair was cropped short, whilst his features had that square cut, Teutonic look which branded him at once as a German, even without the muttered "*Gott im Himmel*" that he ejaculated under his breath at the shock of finding the gate occupied.

"Have you seen a man?" he began, when once again a door in the car opened and shut, and further footsteps approached the gate. But this time the visitor carried an electric torch which he flashed on to the large young man's face. From there it travelled downwards, pausing for a moment on oil-stained hands, and finishing up with the incredibly dirty trousers.

"Have you been here long, my man?" said the new arrival curtly, and in the darkness the large young man smiled. Evidently by his clothes he had been judged.

"Nigh on thirty year coom next cherry-picking," he answered, hoping fervently that his attempt at dialect would pass muster. What dialect it was supposed to be he had no idea, but to his profound relief it seemed to go down.

"I don't mean that," snapped the other. "Have you been standing by this gate for long?"

He turned and gave a rapid order to the German beside him, who disappeared back into the car, and the engine stopped.

"Maybe five minutes—maybe more," said the large young man. "Why do 'ee ask?"

"Have you seen a man come along the road?"

"Old Gaffer Sheepshank, he coom along round about seven. He wor drunk."

The other swore under his breath.

"Just recently, I mean. Within the last few minutes."

"Noa. I ain't seen no one. What sort of a man do 'ee mean?"

But a sudden exclamation from the road interrupted their conversation.

"Emil," called out a harsh voice, "come here at once! Bring your torch."

The large young man thoughtfully ground out with his heel the cigarette he was smoking, and wondered what was going to happen next. For the gentleman who had called for Emil was now examining with keen interest the patch of blood that had happened to show up clearly in the headlights of the car. And then, after a few moments' earnest conversation, Emil returned to the gate.

"Now, look here, my man," he said quietly, "I take it this is your cottage."

"'Tis my faythers."

"Is your father here?"

"Not to-night. He be in Norwich."

"So you're all alone in the house?"

"That's right, mister."

"Are you quite sure?" A sinister note had crept into the speaker's voice.

"Course I'm sure. Do 'ee think I'm daft?"

The torch flashed on again, and by its light the large young man saw that he was covered by a revolver.

"Get indoors," snapped the other. "And get a move on, I'm in a hurry. Now," he continued, when they were both standing in the parlour, "what have you done with the man who came along this road a few minutes ago?"

"I tell 'ee I ain't seen no man," was the stubborn answer. "And I reckons you'd better put that there toy away or it might go off. A pretty thing this—in a man's own house."

The large young man sat down in an arm-chair by the hearth-rug ostensibly to pat the spaniel, but in reality to smuggle his Free Forester tie from the coal-scuttle into his trousers pocket. This man Emil defeated him. His English was perfect, without the suspicion of an accent: to look at he might have been an Englishman. And yet there was something intangible about him that placed him as a foreigner. His clothes were faultless—perhaps a shade too faultless for the country. And on one finger of his left hand he wore a ring with a peculiar blue stone in it.

The tie smuggled successfully into his pocket the young man rose, the picture of aggrieved, bucolic indignation.

"Look 'ee 'ere, mister," he said angrily, "I'm tired of thy fooling. Search the house if it gives thee any satisfaction, and then get thee gone. I'm fair sick of the sight of thy ugly fiz, and if I knew who it was I'd have the law on 'ee to-morrow."

But the man called Emil took no notice. His revolver had dropped to his side: his gaze was riveted on the broken window.

"When did that happen?" he said slowly.

"What the 'ell's that to do with thee?"

"Silence, you fool!"

His glance wandered to the broken cover of the stuffed weasel, and finally rested on the stone itself, which he bent down and picked up. Then, balancing it in his hand, he fixed the large young man with a pair of dark, penetrating eyes.

"When did this happen?" he repeated softly.

"What's that to do with thee?"

"Who threw this stone through the window?"

"Danged if I knows, mister."

"How long ago did it happen?"

For the fraction of a second the young man hesitated: then he made up his mind he would tell the truth. It seemed to him that by doing so he stood a better chance of getting some light thrown on a mystery that was growing more incomprehensible every minute.

"Nigh about ten minutes," he said. "T'wor that that took me down to gate."

"So." The other's eyes bored into him. "So. And you did not see the man who threw the stone?"

"Noa."

"Did he call out to you? Speak to you?"

"Noa."

"What did you do after it happened?"

"Got cap and went to gate with pups."

"And you saw no sign of him?"

"Noa."

The man called Emil crossed to the window and shouted, and his companion who had discovered the blood in the road joined him at once. They stood conversing in low voices in a tongue which the large young man recognised as German. One or two stray phrases came to his ear: "*dummer Bauer*" (imbecile peasant) ... "*Zeitvergeudung*" (waste of time); remarks which he had no difficulty in interpreting. Up to date, at any rate, it was clear that he had bluffed them into thinking he was a local product. But what infuriated him was that he was still as far off as ever from discovering what all the excitement was about. And then suddenly he caught another sentence: "*sich versichern*" (better make sure).

Better make sure. Sure of what? He was not left long in doubt. The second man vaulted through the open window and vanished upstairs. His steps could be heard going into each room above: then he came down again and went into the kitchen.

"*Nichts*" (nothing), he said, reappearing. "Search him," ordered his leader, and the large young man recoiled a pace.

"'Ere—wot do 'ee think 'ee be a'doing of?" he cried, only to find the revolver pointing unwaveringly at his heart.

"Put your hands above your head!"

The order was curt, and, after a pause, the large young man obeyed. Not that there was anything incriminating in his pockets, except that confounded Free Forester tie, and his pulse beat a trifle faster when he saw it extracted and thrown on the table. Worse still, it fell in such a position that the name of the shop where it had been bought lay uppermost for all to see, and Norfolk yokels rarely buy their neckwear from Mr. Black, of Jermyn Street. But his luck held; neither man paid any attention to it whatever. Evidently they were looking for something else, and the question which began to hammer at his brain, even before he was allowed to put his hands down, was—what? Assuming that he was a labourer, as they undoubtedly did, what under the sun could they expect to find in his pockets which could possibly prove of the slightest interest to them?

At last the searcher was satisfied, and once again the two men held an earnest conversation. But this time their voices were so low that the listener could hear nothing. Evidently the man who had searched him was urging Emil to do something, and Emil was doubtful. At length, however, he seemed convinced, and having nodded his head two or three times, his companion returned to the car and re-started the engine, leaving Emil and the large young man alone.

"Can you keep your mouth shut, my man?"

The rustle of notes came pleasantly to the ear.

"If so be, mister, that folks make it worth my while."

"A lunatic has escaped from a private asylum," said Emil, "and he is the poor fellow who threw the stone through your window. We are trying to find him, but we do not wish it talked about. Here are two pounds which will pay for mending the glass."

He placed the notes on the table, and the large young man eyed them greedily.

"In a day or two," continued the other, "I shall be returning this way, and I shall make a point of calling in at the pub. And if I find that no one knows anything about this there will be three more to mend the cover of the stuffed animal. But if I find that people do know, why then—God help you!"

He said the last three words very softly, and the large young man stared at him thoughtfully. For the moment he had forgotten his role of bucolic yokel; he was only conscious that opposite him was standing a very dangerous customer. And as his eyes fell on that tell-tale tie lying on the table he became conscious also of a profound feeling of relief that his *vis-à-vis'* cricketing education had been neglected.

"You understand what I say?"

"Aye, mister. I'll say nowt."

With a nod the man called Emil left the room and strode down the garden path. And it was not until the sound of the engine was getting faint in the distance that the large young man stretched himself and lit another cigarette.

"What the devil does it all mean, Jerry?" he said, apostrophising the bulldog. "Why does Mr. Emil tell me such a fatuous lie, even if he does think I'm a half-wit? Why do

people throw bricks through the window, and leave pools of blood in the road? Presumably there is some reason, but for the life of me I can't see what it is at the moment."

He glanced at his watch: it was nearly one o'clock, and he gave a prodigious yawn.

"To-morrow we will battle with the enigma," he announced. "To-morrow father will bring the grey matter to bear on what is at present shrouded in impenetrable gloom. To-night—bed."

And even as he spoke, sharp and clear through the stillness there came the sound of one solitary shot.

The dogs stirred; the large young man stiffened abruptly. The noise had come from the direction in which the car had gone, and he waited tensely. Silence: the sound was not repeated. But there had been no mistaking what it was. Someone had fired a revolver.

"Stay where you are, boys!"

The front door banged behind him, and the dogs, after one wistful look, relapsed once more into slumber, as their master, running with the easy stride of a born athlete, followed the car. The mist was still heavy, but as he got farther from the cottage, clear pockets began to appear from time to time. And it was as he was passing through one of these, that he heard in front of him the thrumming of an engine. He had caught up with the car.

He halted abruptly; then, getting on to the grass verge, he crept forward cautiously. The noise of the engine grew louder; he could hear voices ahead. And then suddenly, looming out of the fog which had again closed down on the road, he saw the red tail light of the car.

Inch by inch he moved towards it, fearful that at any moment a sudden eddy of breeze might clear the mist away and show him up. But he need not have worried: he had arrived at the end of the entertainment. He was still two or three yards from the back of the car when the driver let in his gear, the red light disappeared into the fog, and half a minute later all was silent again.

The large young man stepped out into the road and moved a few paces forward. What had they found in that particular spot to fire at? Was it the man they were looking for—the man who had presumably thrown the stone through the window? And even as he asked himself the question there came the ominous answer. No small patch this time, but a great dark pool stained the road at his feet. Blood again, and he grunted savagely.

"The poor devil must have damned near bled to death," he muttered under his breath.

With the help of a box of matches he searched the surrounding ground, but he could find nothing. At one point the grass seemed a little beaten down, but whether that had been done by the man in the car or by somebody else earlier in the day it was impossible to tell. And at last he gave it up and started back to the cottage.

He walked slowly, his hands in his pockets. Try as he would, he could get no possible solution that fitted. There always seemed to be something that refused to come into line. If, as appeared obvious, a wounded man was being pursued by the occupants of the car—a wounded man, moreover, who was capable of throwing a stone with considerable force, and after doing so of walking or crawling

over a quarter of a mile—why had he not come to the cottage? Answer—because he guessed the cottage would be searched. Then why throw the stone? What good could it possibly do?

He opened the gate and turned up the path, vainly racking his brains for a solution. The dogs stirred lazily, and for a while he stood in the door staring round the room. And then his eyes narrowed. The things on the table had been moved. The oil bottle and rag were not in the same position; the gun itself was not where he had left it.

Quietly he walked across, and sitting down in the chair he opened the drawer of the table. And there he found proof positive; some papers which had been in front were now pushed to one side. Someone had been in the room in the last quarter of an hour. The two notes still remained on the cloth: it was clearly not the work of a tramp or a passing thief. So there was no doubt left in his mind as to whom it was the work of. Somebody had been left behind when the car drove away with instructions to watch the cottage, and he had seized the opportunity of the owner's absence to search it. The point was whether he was still there.

The large young man's eyes strayed towards the kitchen door: it was as he had left it. Unlikely, he reflected, that the man would be in the house, but he decided to make sure. He sauntered across and flung the door open; the room beyond was empty. Presumably therefore, if his visitor was there at all he was outside, hiding somewhere in the little garden.

There the dogs would come in. Only too well did their master know the unfailing courtesy with which they all three

welcomed strangers inside the house: in all probability they had sat round the man as he searched hoping for biscuits. Outside it would be a very different matter.

"Jock! Jerry!"

He opened the front door, the terrier and the bulldog beside him.

"See him off! Good dogs! See him off!"

And then things happened quickly. Like a streak of lightning the terrier shot across a flower bed, barking furiously; his grunting companion at his heels. Came a commotion in some shrubs, and a yell of terror followed by ominous tearing sounds. Then footsteps going at speed up the road, urged on evidently by Jock.

Not so Jerry. Not for him such violent exercise at these ungodly hours: besides, his part of the performance was over. Snorting dispassionately, he waddled into sight, and deposited at his master's feet the spoils of war. Then he returned to his basket, whilst the large young man examined the catch.

"First blood to us, Jerry," he remarked approvingly. "The seat of his pants, or I'm a Dutchman. That'll larn the blighter. For all that, I wish to Heaven I could think why we are thus honoured."

He gave another vast yawn, and went over to the window; whatever the solution of the mystery might prove to be, there was nothing more to be done that night. The cottage did not boast of a telephone, and the nearest police station was five miles away. And since his car was being repaired in Sheringham, and would not be back till the following morning, there was no possible method of getting

there except by walking, the mere thought of which caused him to break into a cold sweat.

Jock had returned, and his master pulled down the lower sash of the window. Broken glass fell on the floor, though most of it still remained between the two panes—large, jagged pieces, wickedly dangerous for dog's paws. So he raised the top sash carefully, and even as he put out one hand to catch the rest, he saw it. In between the fragments lay a piece of crumpled paper.

For a moment or two its significance did not strike him, and he carried the handful of glass over to the table. Then he extracted the paper and looked at it. In the centre was a frayed hole, and there were two or three crimson smears near it. But it was the scrawled words that riveted his attention.

Mary Jane. Urgent. G G Pont. A5.

He had the greatest difficulty in making out the words, which had been written with a blunt pencil. And when he had deciphered them, they did not seem to convey much. But, as he began to reason things out, the piece of paper conveyed a great deal. Things, at last, were becoming clearer, and with increased lucidity came increased caution. The mist had lifted; the road was deserted, but the large young man went to the window and pulled down the blind. So this piece of paper was what his visitors had been looking for. The writer must have wrapped it round the stone, and thrown it through the window. And the glass cutting it, had left the stone free to go on, whilst the wrapping had remained between the two panes—the one place where no one had thought of searching.

Thoughtfully he folded the paper up and put it in his pocket. And had the man called Emil seen Hugh Drummond's expression as he blew out the lamp, it might have caused him food for thought.

CHAPTER II

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It has been stated somewhere that men can be divided into two classes—those who can and those who can not stop a dog fight. With equal justification the classification might be, those who look for trouble and those who do not. So that it was a trifle unfortunate for the nocturnal motorists that by no possible stretch of imagination could the recipient of the brick be placed in the second category.

Hugh Drummond had come to his old nurse's cottage, during her temporary absence, for a few days duck-shooting, but with the arrival of that cryptic message out of the fog all ideas of that innocent pastime had at once left his head. And when he awoke the next morning to find the sun pouring through the window of his bedroom he was still of the same way of thinking.

That he ought, as a right-minded citizen, to take the message and story to the police was obvious. The trouble was that he did not feel in the least degree like doing so. A hard-worked body of men: it struck him that it would be a crime to overburden them still more. Besides, he felt that the reception of his story by the local constable would probably leave much to be desired. But for the broken windows of the parlour he himself could almost have believed the whole thing to have been a nightmare. What then was the reaction of the village guardian of the peace going to be?

A cheerful rat-tat on the door announced the arrival of the post and Drummond put his head out of the window.

"Morning, Joe. Anything for me?"

"No, sir," said the postman. "Two for Mrs. Eskdale. Be she coming back this morning?"

"She is, Joe."

The postman's glance strayed to the parlour window.

"Good Lord, sir! what have 'ee been doing here?"

"Got angry with it and bit it, Joe," answered the other with a grin. "Chuck the letters through the bottom hole into the parlour."

The postman did as he was asked, still clearly intrigued beyond measure at the broken glass.

"It was all right yesterday evening, sir," he remarked.

"Indigestion in the middle of the night, Joe: eating glass is the best thing in the world for it."

"Strikes me a motor-car had indigestion up the road there, too: I never did see such a pool of oil. Ten times the size of that there one outside your gate."

"What's that, Joe?"

Hugh Drummond, who had slipped on a shirt and a pair of flannel trousers, appeared at the door.

"Oil outside the gate? Let's go and have a look at it."

The dew was still heavy on the grass as the two men strolled down the path, with the dogs behind them.

"B'ain't nothing to pool up further," repeated the postman. "There it be."

"So I see," said the other thoughtfully. "Yes—that's oil right enough."

"Darned near skidded in other patch, I did." The postman prepared to mount his bicycle. "Dratted stinking machines, I calls 'em. Well, good morning, sir."

"Morning, Joe."

For a moment or two it was on the tip of his tongue to ask this reservoir of local gossip if any strangers had been seen in the neighbourhood, but he refrained. If they had, he reflected, Joe would have passed it on by now; and if they had not it would only whet still more that worthy's insatiable curiosity, already strained to bursting point by the broken window.

He watched the postman cycle away; then he again looked at the pool of oil. Nothing very interesting about it, except one thing. It exactly covered and obliterated the pool of blood which had been there a few hours previously.

"Interesting," he muttered to himself. "Very interesting. One wonders excessively."

He whistled the dogs to follow him and started up the road. He did not wonder at all: he knew what he was going to find, but it was better to make certain. And sure enough he had only gone a bare quarter of a mile when he saw a large dark patch in the dust in front of him. There was no mistake about it: beside it was the beaten-down bit of the verge. This was the place where he had overtaken the car.

For a while he stood there smoking thoughtfully. This oil had not been put down at the time—that he was prepared to swear. Therefore someone had been sent back during the night to do it. A clumsy way of covering their tracks: oil does not generally flow from a motor-car quite so prolifically. Besides, this was new oil, and not old stuff from the sump. At the same time it was difficult to see what better method could have been thought of on the spur of the moment. And

one thing it proved conclusively: Mr. Emil and Co. were desperately anxious to blush unseen.

He strolled back to the cottage, where a loud hissing noise in the kitchen announced that the kettle was boiling, and made himself some tea. As a cook he did not excel, but having raided the local hen he was proceeding to boil the fruit of her labours, when a knock on the front door and a chorus from the dogs proclaimed a visitor.

"Come in," shouted Drummond. "I shan't be long."

"Will the bulldog bite?" asked a very delightful feminine voice.

The chef paused in his work. Who the deuce could this be?

"Jerry—come here, you blighter!" he cried as he went to the front door. "How dare you..."

He paused again. Confronting him was a charming-looking girl of about twenty-five. What she was dressed in his masculine eye somewhat naturally failed to notice, except that it seemed the goods. Also it most certainly was not the raiment one would expect to see at that hour of the morning in the middle of the fen country.

"Forgive me," he murmured, "I was expecting a dear old lady whose dimensions are somewhat similar to those of a steam-roller, and your sudden appearance rather shook me. Won't you come in?"

The girl stared at him in silence for a moment or two, and it seemed to him that a look of surprise flashed across her face.

"My car has broken down," she said at length. "It is just a few yards up the road. I wondered if you had a telephone

here, so that I could ring up a garage."

"I'm afraid that's beyond me," he confessed. "The telephone is a *rara avis* in these parts. But perhaps I might be able to help, and if I can't my own car is being brought here shortly by a bloke from a garage. He'll do the necessary if it defeats me. Let's go and have a look."

"So you have a car, have you?" she said. "I should have thought that was even more of a *rara avis* round here than a telephone."

They were strolling along the road towards a small two-seater, which, with its back towards them, was standing motionless a couple of hundred yards away.

"Amongst the inhabitants, you're right," he agreed. "I am only a visitor."

"Are you in that little cottage all by yourself?"

"Until Nanny comes back," he said with a grin. "She is the steam-roller I told you I was expecting."

She stared at him with a slightly puzzled frown.

"I don't quite understand," she said. "Where do you live usually?"

"In London—where, I trust, I shall have the pleasure of renewing your acquaintance."

"But why on earth do you come to a place like this?"

"For excitement," he told her, "when London gets too dull. One would never find anyone like you on the doorstep along with the morning milk in the old metropolis."

But her frown was still there, though she smiled faintly.

"You're rather an extraordinary individual," she remarked. "Have you been here long?"

"Two days," he answered. "Now let's have a look at the bus."

He opened the bonnet, and even as he did so he heard a little gasp. He glanced up: the girl, with her eyes closed, was holding on to the door.

"What is it?" he cried. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"Would you get me some water?" she muttered. "My head is all swimming."

"Of course I will. I won't be a second. Get into the car and sit down."

He raced back towards the cottage and got a glass of cold water. Pray Allah she was not going to throw a faint, he reflected. Hugh Drummond's ideas of first aid were most sketchy. But when he got back to the car she seemed to have partially recovered, though she sipped the water gratefully.

"Sorry to be so silly," she said apologetically, "but I have not had any breakfast."

"My dear soul," he cried, "that must be remedied at once. If you can bear a boiled egg, or, better still, can do something in the bacon line, we will do the trick at my cottage."

"I ought to be getting on," she answered doubtfully.

"That's out of the question until you've had some food. Breakfast first; then we'll tackle the car."

She allowed herself to be persuaded, and they walked back to the cottage together.

"Where are you off to that makes a start at such an ungodly hour necessary?" he asked.

"To a house not far from Cambridge," she answered. "My uncle's place. And he wanted me there early to get some wretched tennis tournament fixed up for this afternoon. Good heavens! What have you been doing to the windows? I didn't notice them before."

"A merry Norfolk pastime," he said with a smile. "Some blighter wished it on me last night."

"What *do* you mean?" she cried.

"A fact," he assured her. "Someone threw a brick through the window and nearly hit little Willie in the tummy."

"What on earth did he do that for?"

"The ways of drunks are passing strange," he answered. "But I don't know what the proud owner will say when she sees it."

It was the story he had decided to tell Mrs. Eskdale, and since the two women were likely to overlap it saved bother to spin the same yarn to both.

"Are you expecting her back soon?"

"At any moment. And then, providing we've got your car right, I'm off to London."

"Country getting too exciting?"

"That's the idea."

He poured out the tea and went into the kitchen to get the eggs.

"Put some milk in mine, like an angel," he called out. "And two—lumps of sugar."

For the fraction of a second he had paused as he spoke; for the fraction of a second he had stood motionless, his eyes glued to the mirror which hung above the little range. For in it he had seen the reflection of the girl seated at the