

KARL GRIER THE STRANGE STORY OF A MAN WITH A SIXTH SENSE

XII. The Scene in the Garden Court

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"The Great Mogul," Etc.

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Of course, it was not to be expected that these morning hours of sunshine (London having embarked, as it turned out, on a giddy whirl of a fortnight's fine weather) would find us in the tension to which we were strung overnight. Such a thing would be unreasonable, almost inhuman. The merry jingle of the hansoms coming through the open windows, the glimpse of omnibus tops freighted with wearers of flower hats and frivolous muslins, the gay horn-blown tarantara of the coaches crossing Trafalgar Square or climbing the Haymarket—this glad-some medley must banish all problems which appealed to either science or credulity. London was astir and enjoying itself, and who were we that we should resist its decorous gaiety?

At that period motor-cars were still sufficiently uncommon in England to lend a piquant novelty to my suggestion that we should avail ourselves of a friend's offer to me and borrow his car for the day. That was soon arranged. I sat with the chauffeur in the front seat, Karl and the ladies occupied the tonneau, and when Mrs. Hutchinson and her daughter had recovered from the silent dread of whirring past all other traffic and utilizing apparently impossible openings between heavy vehicles, they began to enjoy the ride immensely.

We ran through Surbiton, Esher and Guildford, over the Hog's Back to Farnham, where we ate with the normal appetites of four healthy Britons. We came home by way of Aldershot, Virginia Water, Windsor Great Park and Staines, driving gloriously not only through the royal domain but through several Acts of Parliament as well.

Karl, by reason of the nearing end of the midsummer term, must return to Oxford that night, so it was interesting to note how much he made of those flying hours of freedom. At least a year a minute fell away from the conventional coating of the decade which had sped since he and the girl were children together. "Mr. Grier" and "Miss Hutchinson" quickly gave place to "Karl" and "Maggie." We were not at Barnes Bridge on the outward journey before Karl had declared his fixed resolution to wheedle a motor car out of his father the day he left the university, and the pair of them were planning where "we" should drive this chariot of delight during the wonderful summer of next year.

Maggie, it appeared, was much enamoured of cathedrals. Here was a fine inspiration to provide excursions for the long summer days. Bless you! they had seen Canterbury, Salisbury and Ely in a sentence, and were doing sums in the following breath to find out if far-away York was achievable. Ah, how potent the engineer who constructs that magic machine which carries the day-dreams of the young! What feats it accomplishes, how smoothly do its noiseless wheels glide over the most perfect of roads! Yet we all possess the treasure, and happy the man or woman who has not lost the joy of living, losing with it the willing slave which carries them whither they list. This wonder-coach is capable of astounding performances. It

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She Sat There Unseeing and Unhearing

shall whisk you through many cities and strange lands. What does it matter if the scene be new to your eyes, when you are brought to it by the sober stuffiness of a railway plus a return ticket? You have been there twice, that is all, and surely the first visit, in imagination, far surpassed the second, in reality.

Indeed, we enjoyed ourselves so greatly that the crassness of things in general was sure to bring about some unpleasantness. There is a substratum of truth in the old Scotch idea of certain people being fay before death. None of us died, I am glad to say; but we should have been wise had we outrageously made off with that motor car, scurrying far from London ere nightfall, and leaving it to my ingenuity to explain matters to my lending friend.

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We reached the hotel at six o'clock, and there was Signor Bocci impatiently awaiting the return of Mrs. Hutchinson and her violin-playing daughter. "Business is business," you know, and really I could see no reason why the girl should not accept the splendid offer made by Steindal's agent. He showed no disinclination to discuss it before Karl and myself. Nay, more, the little man said he was glad of our presence.

"You are—a man of affairs, yes," he said volubly, "and in—a dis oafar I haf—a displayed to de signorina de career mos' magnificent, is it—a not?"

Certainly his words were justified to outward seeming, though the very hyalence of Steindal's undertaking should have warned us that things were not so clear as they seemed. Here was a girl of little more than eighteen, yet the agent, one of the few men in the world of music who could make or break an artiste, was binding himself to give her two star performances in London, with full orchestra and distinguished vocal soloists, guaranteeing an expenditure of two hundred pounds on each concert, one in the autumn and another in the spring of the following year, agreeing to hand her three-fourths of the proceeds after (and if) they exceeded the sum named, and finally pledging at least thirty public appearances at a fee of twenty guineas each within the ensuing twelve months. Think of it, ye budding geniuses! How the strings would twank

or the pen splutter if some moon-frenzy seized impresario or publisher to give you a start like that!

Karl, like Mrs. Hutchinson and myself, advised acceptance, though I discovered afterward that he had a great repugnance to the notion of Maggie's appearing on a public platform. That was natural enough, poor fellow! He didn't want to have all the young sparks about town telling each other, and, what was even less endurable, telling Maggie, that she was the most beautiful creature under the sun. No man, short of an actor, can pretend that he likes his inamorata to face the foot-lights. Stage-land has its own domestic idyls, to be sure—and sweet and wholesome they oft may be—but they are of a different blend to those which find general acceptance.

Yet Maggie, who listened seriously to us all, urged with gentle insistence that no harm would be done if we gave Steindal's magnanimity one day's thought,

and when I saw that her mother was willing to accede to this request, I backed it up, with the result that Signor Bocci's eyebrows became fierce, and he murmured something about the impossibility of his principal keeping the offer open indefinitely.

"I do not think my daughter is asking for any unreasonable delay," replied Mrs. Hutchinson with some spirit. "This is practically our first business interview. Your meeting with us on the landing-stage, though exceedingly kind on your part, can hardly be regarded as giving us an opportunity for full discussion. Therefore, to promise a decision to-morrow is speedy enough in all conscience, seeing that when I wrote to Mr. Steindal eight months ago he never even replied to my letter."

This was a facer for Bocci. Nevertheless, he struggled gamely. "Herr Steindal has a great—a many letters from—a de amateur," he said. "He hear in New—a York 'ow Mees Ootchinson blay—"

"He did nothing of the kind!" cried the elder woman. "That is the extraordinary part of it. He met her, it is true, but he admitted he had not been to any of her concerts. I am beginning to think, signor, that my daughter is right and we others are wrong. Will you leave a copy of the contract for our consideration?"

"Oh—ah, yes," said he instantly, and being a man of rapid perception, he did not press any more for completion that day.

Certainly I was puzzled by Steindal's tactics. Allowing that he was actuated by the basest motives, that Constantine was paying the bill, and that their precious compact would reveal its intent before many weeks had passed, it was nevertheless a singular course they had chosen. What possible harm could result to Maggie Hutchinson if she seized the splendid opening dangled before her eyes by the Jew? All he asked in return was a reasonable monopoly, voidable by his failure to carry out his undertakings in their entirety. From her point of view, it was the most convincing case of "Heads I win, tails you lose" I ever heard of in connection with a professional where contracts are likely to be one-sided.

And the haze did not lessen when Maggie became confidential that evening after dinner. Karl had

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