THE LION'S SHARE

BY OCTAVE THANET

CHAPTER VI.—The Voice in the Telephone
CHAPTER VII.—The Haunted House.

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CHAPTER VI.

The Voice in the Telephone.

Well, Bertie?" Mrs. Winter had e back to her parlor in the most le manner in the world. Her sub- ion struck Rupert on the heart; was as if she were stunned, he felt. e was sitting opposite her, his der, rather short figure looking nken in the huge, ugly, upholstered chair; he kept an almost con- ined attitude of military erectness, which he was conscious, himself; at which he smiled forlornly, re- ing the same pose in Haley when- the sergeant was disconcerted.

"But first," pursued his aunt, "who that red-headed bell boy with m you exchanged signals in the ?"

e colonel suppressed a whistle. unt Becky, you're a wonder! Did notice? And he simply shut the n of his hand! Why, it's this way: as convinced that Archie must be on premises; he couldn't get off. So elephoned a detective that I know e, a private agency, not the police, send me a sure man to watch. He made up as a bell-boy (with the el manager's consent, of course); ier I, or Millicent, or that boy has t an eye on the Keatcham doors and next room ever since I found Archie gone. No one has gone out with- our seeing him. If any suspicious son goes out, we have it arranged to ain him long enough for me to get ood look. I can tell you exactly left the room."

"It is you who are the wonder, Ber- " said Aunt Rebecca, a little wear- but smiling. "Who has gone ?"

"At seven Mr. Keatcham's secre- y went down to the office and or- ed dinner, very carefully. I didn't him, but my sleuth did. He had secretary and the valet of the atcham party pointed out to him; saw them. They had one visitor, ng Arnold, the Arnold's son—"

"The one who has all the orange ves and railways? Yes, I knew his her."

"That one; he only came a few mo- nts since. Mr. Keatcham and his retary dined together, and Keatch- 's own man waited on them; but waiter for this floor brought up the hes. At nine the dishes were brought and my man helped Keatcham's et to pile them a little farther down corridor in the hall."

"These items the colonel was reading of his little red book.

"You have put all that down. Do think it means anything?"

"I have put everything down. One t weed until there is a crop of ormation, you know."

"True," murmured Aunt Rebecca, ding her head thoughtfully. "Well, anything else happen?"

"The secretary posted a lot of let- s in the shute. They are all smok- now. Yes—" he was on his feet at the door in almost a single tion. There had been just the htest tattoo on the panel. When door was opened the colonel could r the rattle of the elevator. He was late to catch it, but he could see inmates. Three gentlemen stood the car. One was Keatcham, the er two had their backs to Winter. e seemed to be supporting Keatcham, o looked pale. He saw the colonel darted at him a single glance in ich was something like a poignant eal; what, it was too brief for the iver to decide, for in the space of eye-blink a shoulder of the other n intervened, and simultaneously the ator car began to sink.

"There was need to decide instantly should follow, who stay on guard. ert bade the boy go down by the irs, while, with a kind of bulldog tinct, he clung to the rooms. The was to fetch the manager and the s of the Keatcham suite.

"Meanwhile Rupert paced back and th before the closed doors, whence re penetrated the rustle of packing a murmur of voices. Presently atcham's valet opened the farther r. He spoke to some one inside. es, sir," he said, "the porter ght to be 'ere now."

"The porter was there; at least he s coming down the corridor which to the elevator, trundling his truck ore him. He entered the rooms and ied himself about the luggage.

"Doggedly the colonel stuck to his rd until the valet and another man, lean-shaven, fresh-faced young man om the watcher had never seen be- , came out of the room. The valet erintended the taking of two trunks, epting tickets and checks from the ter with a thoroughly Anglican sus- ion and thoroughness of inspection, le the young man stood tapping his naculate trousers-leg with the stick his admirably slender umbrella.

"It's all right, Colvin," he broke impatiently: "three tickets to Los geles, drawing room, one lower th, one section, checks for two aks; come on!"

"Very methodically the man called vin stowed away his green and red s, first in an envelope, then in his ketbook, finally buttoning an in- pocket over all. He was the image a rather stupid, conscientious Eng- serving creature. Carefully he nted out a liberal but not lavish for the porter, and watched that ctionary depart. Last of all, he ted the door.

"With extreme courtesy of manner, ater approached the young man.

"Pardon me," said he. "I am Colo- Winter; my aunt, Mrs. Winter, has rooms near yours, and she finds t she needs another room or two. you leaving yours?"

"These are Mr. Keatcham's rooms, mine," the young man responded tely. "He is leaving them."

"When you give up your keys, would mind asking the clerk to send them to me?" pursued the colonel. oom three twenty-seven."

"Certainly," replied the young , "or would you like to look at n a moment now?"

"Why—if it wouldn't detain you," tated Winter; he was hardly pre- d for the offer of admittance.

"Get the elevator and hold it a ute, Colvin," said the young man, he instantly fitted the key to the , which he flung open.

"Excuse me," said he, as they stood he room, "but aren't you the Colo- Winter who held that mountain to let the other fellows get off, r your ammunition was exhaust- ?"

"I seem to recall some such episode, it sounds rather gaudy the way put it."

"I read about you in the papers; swam a river with Funston; did all s of stunts—"

"Or the newspaper reporter did. don't happen to know anything t the price of these rooms, I sup- ?"

The young man did not know, but he showed the colonel through all the rooms with vast civility. He seemed quite indifferent to the colonel's interest in closets, baths and wardrobes; he only wanted to talk about the Philippines.

The colonel, who always shied like a mettled horse from the flutter of his own laurels, grew red with discomfort and rattled the doorknobs.

"There the suite ends," said the young man.

"Oh, we don't want it all, only a room or two," Colonel Winter demurred. "Any one of these rooms would do. Well, I will not detain you. The elevator boy will be tired, and Mr. Keatcham will grow impatient."

"Not at all; he will have gone. I—I'm so very glad to have met you, Colonel—"

In this manner, with mutual civilities, they parted, the young man escorting the colonel to his own door, which the latter was forced to enter by the sheer demands of the situation.

But hardly had the door closed than he popped out again. The young man was swinging round the corner next the elevator.

"Is he an innocent bystander or what?" puzzled the soldier. He resumed his march up and down the corridor. The next room to the Keatcham suite was evidently held by an agent of the Fireless Cooking Stove, since one of his samples had strayed into the hall and was mutely proclaiming its own exceeding worth in very black letters on a very white placard.

"If the young man and the valet are straight goods, the key will come up reasonably soon from the office," thought the watcher.

Sure enough, the keys, in the hands of Winter's own spy, appeared before he had waited three minutes. He reported that the old gentleman got into a cab with his secretary and the valet, and the other gentlemen took another cab. The secretary paid the bill. Had he gone sooner than expected? No; he had engaged the rooms until Thursday night; this was Thursday night.

The colonel asked about the next room, which was directly on the cross corridor leading to the elevator. The detective had been instructed to watch it. How long had the Fireless Cooking Stove man had it? There was no meat for suspicion in the answer. The stove man had come the day before the Keatcham party. He was a perfectly commonplace, good-looking young man, representing the Peerless Fireless Cooking Stove with much picturesque eloquence; he had sold a lot of stoves to people in the hotel, and he tried without much success to tackle "old Keatcham"; he had attacked even the sleuth himself. "He gave me a mighty good cigar, too," chuckled the red-headed one.

"Hmn' you got it now?"

"Only the memory," the boy grinned.

"You ought to have kept it, Birdsall would tell you; you are watching every one in these rooms. Did it have a necktie? And did you throw that away?"

"No, sir, I kept that; after I got to smoking, I just thought I'd keep it."

When he took the tiny scrap of paper from his pocketbook the colonel eyed it grimly. "A de Villar y Villar," he read, with a slight ironic inflection. "Decidedly our young Fireless Stove promoter smokes good cigars!"

"Maybe Mr. Keatcham gave it to him. He was in there."

"Was he? Oh, yes, trying to sell his stove—but not succeeding?"

"He said he was trying to get past the valet and the secretary; he thought if he could only get at the old man and demonstrate his stove he could make the sale. He could cook all right, that feller."

The colonel made no comment, and presently betook himself to his aunt. She was waiting for him in the parlor, playing solitaire. Through the open door the white bed that ought to have been Archie's was gleaming faintly. The colonel's brows met.

"Well, Bertie? Did you find anything?" Mrs. Winter inquired smoothly.

"I'm afraid not; but here is the report." He gave it to her, even down to the cigar wrapper.

"It doesn't seem likely that Mr. Keatcham has anything to do with it," said she. "He, no doubt, has stolen many a little railway, but a little boy is too small game."

"Oh, I don't suspect Keatcham; but I wish I had caught the elevator tonight. He looked at me in a mighty queer way."

"Did you recognize his secretary as any one whom you ever saw before?" asked Mrs. Winter.

"I can't say," was the answer, given with a little hesitation. "I'm not sure."

"I don't think I quite understand you, Bertie; better make a clean breast of all you know. I'm getting a little worried myself."

The colonel reached across the cards and tapped his aunt's arm affectionately. He felt the warmest impulse toward sympathy for her that he had ever known; it glistened in his eyes. Mrs. Winter's cheeks slowly crimsoned; she turned her head, exclaiming, did she hear a noise; but the colonel's keen ears had not been warned. "Poor woman," he thought, "she is worried to death, but she will not admit it."

"Now, Bertie," said Mrs. Winter calmly, but her elbow fell on her cards and spoiled a very promising game of Penelope's Web, "now, Bertie, what are you keeping back?"

Then, at last, the colonel told her of his experience in Chicago. She heard him quite through without comment, and he could detect no shift of emotion in her demeanor of absorbed but perfectly calm attention, unless a certain tension of attitude and feature (as if, he phrased it, she were "holding herself in") might be so considered. And he was not sure of this. When he came to the words which stuck in his throat, the sentence about Miss Smith, she smiled frankly, almost laughed.

At the end of the recital—and the colonel had not omitted a word or a look in his memory—she merely said: "Then you think Cary Mercer has kidnaped Archie, and the nice-looking Harvard boy is helping him?"

"Don't you think it looks that way, yourself?"

She answered that question with another one; "But you don't think, do you, that Janet is the Miss Smith mentioned?"

His reply came after an almost imperceptible hesitation: "No!"

Again she smiled. "That is because you know Janet; if you didn't know her you would think the chances were in favor of their meaning her? Naturally! Well, I know Cary a little. I knew his father well. I don't believe he would harm a hair of Archie's head. He isn't a cruel fellow—at least not toward women and children. I've a notion that what he calls his wrongs have upset his wits a bit, and he might turn the screws on the Wall Street crowd that ruined him. That is, if he had a chance; but he is poor; he would need millions to get even a chance for a blow at them. But a child, a lad who looks like his brother—no, you may be sure he wouldn't hurt Archie! He couldn't."

"But—the name, Winter; it is not such a common name; and the words about a lady of—of—"

"An old woman, do you mean?" said Aunt Rebecca, with a little curving of her still unwrinkled upper lip.

"It counds so complete," submitted her nephew.

"Therefore distrust it," she argued dryly. "Gaboriau's great detective and Conan Doyle's both have that same maxim—not to pick out easy answers."

Winter smiled in his own turn. "Still, sometimes the easy answers are right. Now here is the situation: I hear this conversation at the depot. I find one of the men on the same train with me. He, presumably, if he is Cary Mercer, and I don't think I can be mistaken in his identity—"

"Unless another man is making up as Cary!"

"It may seem conceited, but I don't think I could be fooled. This man had every expression of the other's, and I was too struck by the—I may almost call it malignant—look he had, not to recognize him. No, it was Mercer; he would certainly recognize you, and he would know who I am; he would not be called upon to snub me as a possible confidence man."

"That rankles yet, Bertie?"

He made a grimace and nodded.

"But," he insisted, "isn't it so? If he is up to some mischief, any mischief—doesn't care to have his kin meet him—that is the way he would act, don't you think?"

"He might be up to mischief, yet have no designs on his kin."

"He might," said the colonel musingly. A thought which he did not confide to the shrewd old woman had just flipped his mind. But he went on with his plea.

"He avoids you; he avoids me. He is seen going into Keatcham's drawing room; that means some sort of an acquaintance with Keatcham, enough to talk to him, anyway. How much, I can't say. Then comes the attack by the robbers; he is in another car, so there is no call for him to do anything; there is no light whatever on whether he had anything to do with the robbery.

"Then we come here. Keatcham has the room next but one. Archie goes into his own room; we see him go; I am outside, directly outside; it is simply impossible for him to go out into the hall without my seeing him; besides, I found the doors outside all locked except the one to the right where we entered your suite; then we may assume that he could not go out. He could not climb out of locked windows on the third floor down a sheer descent of some forty or fifty feet. Your last room to the right, Miss Smith's bedroom, is a corner room; besides, she was in it; that excludes every exit except that to the left. We find Mrs. Wigglesworth was absent, and there were evidences of—an—attack of some kind carefully hidden, afterward. But there is no sign of the boy. I watch the rooms. If he is hidden somewhere in Keatcham's rooms, the chances are, after Keatcham goes, they will try to take him off. I don't think it probable that Keatcham knows anything about the kidnaping; in fact, it is wildly improbable. Well, Keatcham goes; immediately I get into the room. The valet and the young man visiting Keatcham, young Arnold, let me in without the slightest demur. Either they know nothing of the boy or somehow they have got him away, else they would not let me in so easily. Maybe they are ignorant and the boy is gone, both. We go to the rooms very soon after; there is not the smallest trace of Archie."

"How did he get out?"

"They must have outwitted me, somehow," the colonel sighed, "and it looks as if he went voluntarily; there was no possible carrying away by force. And there was no odor of chloroform about; that is very penetrating; it would get into the halls. They must have persuaded him to go—but how?"

"If they have kidnaped him," said Mrs. Winter, "they will send me some word, and if they have persuaded him to run away, plainly he must be able to walk, and that—mess in Mrs. Wigglesworth's room doesn't mean anything bad."

"Of course not," said the colonel firmly.

Then, in as casual a tone as he could command: "By the way, where is Miss Smith? She is back, isn't she?"

"Oh, a long time ago," said Mrs. Winter. "I sent her to bed."

"I've been frank with you. You will reciprocate and tell me why, for what, you sent her out?"

Mrs. Winter made not the least evasion. She answered frankly: "I sent her with a carefully worded advertisement—but you needn't tell Millicent, who has also gone to bed, thank heaven—I sent her with a carefully worded advertisement to all the papers. It will reach the kidnapers, and it will not reach any one else. See." She handed him a slip of paper from her card case. He read:

"To the holders of Archie W: Communicate with R. S. W., same address as before, and you will hear of something to your advantage. Perfectly safe."

The colonel read it thoughtfully, a little puzzled. Before he had time to speak, his quick ears caught the sharp ring of his room telephone bell. He excused himself to answer it. His room was the last of the suite, but he shut the door on his way to the telephone.

He expected Haley; nor was he disappointed. Haley reported—in Spanish—that he had traced the automobile; it was the property of young Mr. Arnold, son of the rich Mr. Arnold. Young Arnold had been at Harvard last year, and he took out a Massachusetts license; he had a California one, too. Should he (Haley) look up young Arnold? And should he come to report that night?

The colonel thought he could wait till morning, and, a little comforted, hung up the receiver. Barely was it out of his hand when the bell shrilled again, sharply, vehemently. Winter put the tube to his ear.

"Does any one want Colonel Winter, Palace Hotel?" he asked.

A sweet, eager, boyish voice called back: "Uncle Bertie! Uncle Bertie, don't you worry, I'm all right!"

"Archie!" cried the colonel. "Where are you?"

But there was no answer. He called again, and a second time; he told the lad that they were dreadfully anxious about him. He got no response from the boy; but another voice, a woman's voice, said, with cold distinctness, as if to some one in the room: "No, don't let him; it is impossible!" Then a dead wall of silence and Central's impassive ignorance. He could get nothing.

Rupert Winter stood a moment, frowning and thinking deeply. Directly, with a shrug of the shoulders, he walked out of his own outside door, locking it, and went straight to Miss Smith's.

He knocked, at first very gently, then more vigorously. But there was no answer. He went away from the door, but did not re-enter his room. He did not bear to his aunt the news which, with all its meagerness and irritating incompleteness, had been an enormous relief to him. He simply waited in the corridor. Five minutes, ten minutes passed; then he heard the elevator whir, and standing with his hand on the knob of his open door, he saw his aunt's companion, dressed for the street, step out and speed down the corridor to her own door.

The other voice—the woman's voice—had been Janet Smith's.

CHAPTER VII.

The Haunted House.

A mud-splashed automobile runabout containing two men was turning off Van Ness Avenue down a narrower and shadier side street in the afternoon of the Sunday following the disappearance of Archie Winter. One of the occupants seemed to be an invalid whom the brilliant March sunshine had not tempted out of his heavy wrappings and cap; the other was a short, thick-set, corduroy-jacketed chauffeur. One marked the runabout at a glance as a hardly used livery motor car; but a moment's inspection might have shown that it was running with admirable smoothness and quiet. The chauffeur wore goggles, hence his eyes were shielded, but he turned a broad smile upon the pallid cheeks and sharpened profile beside him.

"Colonel, as a health-seeker who can't keep warm enough, you're great!" he cried. "Lord, but you look the part!"

"If I can't shed some of these confounded mufflers soon," growled the pale sufferer addressed, "I'll get so red with heat it will come through my beautiful powder. I hope those fellows won't see us, for they will be on to us, all right."

"Our own mothers wouldn't be on to us in these rigs," the chauffeur replied cheerily; he seemed to be in a hopeful mood; "and let us once get into the house, and surprise em, and there'll be something drop. But I haven't really had a chance to tell you the latest—having to pick you up at a drug store this way. Now, let's sum things up! You think the boy got out through Keatcham's apartment? Or Mrs. Wigglesworth's?"

"How else?" said the colonel, "he can't fly, and if he could, he couldn't fly out and then lock the windows from the inside."

"I see"—the chauffeur appeared thoughtful—"and the Wigglesworth door was locked. You think that Keatcham is in it, someway?"

"Not Keatcham," said the colonel. "There was another man in the car—Atkins they called him, though he has disappeared. But Mercer remains. His secretary and that valet of his; I think the secretary is Cary Mercer. The boy might have slipped out in those few moments we were hunting for him inside. Afterward, either Mrs. Melville Winter or I was on guard until your man came. He might go to the Fireless Stove man, slip out of his rooms, and round the corner to the elevator in a couple of seconds. Then, of course, I might see their rooms—"

"Provided, that is, the Fireless Stove drummer is in the plot, too."

"The Fireless Stove drummer who smokes Villar y Villar cigars? He is in it, I think, Birdsall."

"Well, I'll assume that. Next thing: you get the telephone call. And you say the voice sounded chipper; didn't look like he was being hurt or bothered in any way, did it?"

"Not at all. Besides, you know the letter Miss Smith got this morning?"

"I think I'd like another peek at that; will you drive her a minute, while I look at the letter again?" The instant his hands were free, Birdsall pulled out the envelope from his leather-rimmed pocket.

It was rectangular in shape and smaller than the ordinary business envelope. The paper was linen of a common diamond pattern, having no engraved heading. The detective ran his eyes down the few lines written in an unformed boyish hand. There was neither date nor place; only these words:

Dear Miss Janet—Don't you or auntie be woried about me because I am well and safe and having a good time. I had the nose bleed that is why I spotted the carpet. Tell auntie to please pay for it out of my next week's allowance. Be sure and don't worry. Your aff. friend,

ARCHIBALD PAGE WINTER.

"You're sure this is the boy's writing?" was the detective's comment.

"Sure. And his spelling, too."

"Now," said Birdsall, watching the colonel's keen, aquiline profile as he spoke, "now you notice there's no heading or mark on the paper; and the watermark is only O. K. E., Mass., 1904. And that amounts to nothing; those folks sell all over the country. But you notice that it is not the ordinary business paper; it looks rather ladylike than commercial, doesn't it?"

The colonel admitted that it did look so.

"Now, assuming that this letter was sent with the connivance of the kidnapers, it looks as if our young gentleman wasn't in any particular danger of having a hard time. To me, it looks pretty certain he must have skipped himself; tolled along someway, maybe, but not making any resistance. Now, is there anybody that you know has enough influence over him for that? How about the lady's maid?"

"Randall has been a faithful servant for twenty years, middleaged, serious-minded, decent woman. Out of the question."

"This Miss Smith, your aunt's companion, who is she? Do you know?"

"A South Carolinian; good family; she has lived with my aunt as secretary and companion for a year; my aunt is very fond of her."

"That all you know? Well, I have found out a litle more; she used to live with a Mrs. James S. Hastings, a rich Washington woman. The lady's only son fell in love with her; somehow the marriage was broken off."

"What was his name?"

"Lawrence. They call him Larry. He went to Manila. Maybe you've met him there."

"Yes, I knew him; I don't believe he ever was accepted by her."

"I don't know. I have only had two days on her biography. Later, she went to Johns Hopkins hospital. One of the doctors was very attentive to her—but it did not come to anything. She didn't graduate. Don't know why. Then she went to live with Miss Angela Nelson, who died and left her money away from her own family. There was talk of breaking the will; but it wasn't done. Then she came to Mrs. Winter."

The colonel was silent; there was nothing discreditable in these details. He had known before that Janet Smith was poor; that she had been thrown on the world early; that she must earn her own livelihood; yet, somehow, as Birdsall marshaled the facts, there was an insidious, malarious hint of the adventuress, bandied from place to place, hawking her attractions about, wheedling, charming for hire, entrapping imbecile young cubs—Larry Hastings wasn't more than twenty-two—somehow he felt a revolt against the picture and against the man submitting it—and, confound Millicent!

The detective changed the manner of his questions a little. "I suppose your aunt is pretty advanced in years, though she is as well preserved an old lady as I have ever met, and as shrewd. Say, wouldn't she be likely to leave the boy a lot of money?"

"I dare say." The colonel was conscious of an intemperate impulse to kick Birdsall, who had been such a useful fellow in the Philippines.

"If anything was to happen to him, who would get the money?"

"Well, Mrs. Melville and I are next of kin," returned the colonel dryly. "Do you suspect us?"

"I did look up Mrs. Melville," answered the unabashed detective, "but I guess she's straight goods all right. But say, how about Miss Smith?"

The colonel stared, then he laughed. "Birdsall," said he, "there's somewhat too much mention of ladies' names to suit my Virginian taste. But if you mean to imply that Miss Smith is going to kill Archie to get my aunt's money, I can tell you you are 'way off! Your imagination is too active for your profession. You ought to hire out to the yellow journals."

His employer's satire did not even flick the dust off Birdsall's complacency; he grinned cheerfully. "Oh, I'm not so bad as that; I don't suppose she did kill the boy; I think he's alive, all right. But say, Colonel, I'll give it to you straight; I do think the senora coaxed the boy off. You admit, don't you, he went off. Well, then, he was coaxed, somehow. Now, who's got influence enough to coax him? You cross out the maid; so do I. You cross out Mrs. Melville Winter; so do I. I guess we both cross out the old lady. Well, there's you and the senora left. I don't suspect you, General."

"Really? I don't see why. I stand to make more than anybody else, if you are digging up motives. And how about the chambermaid?"

Birdsall flashed a glance of reproach on his companion. "Now, Colonel, do you think I ain't looked her up? First thing. Nothing in it. Decent Vermont girl, three years in the hotel. Came for her lungs. She ain't in it. But let's get back to Miss Smith. Did you know she is Cary Mercer's sister-in-law?"

He delivered his shot in a casual way, and the colonel took it stonily; nevertheless, it went to the mark. Birdsall continued. "Now, question is, was Mercer the secretary? You didn't see the man in the elevator, except his back. Had he two moles?"

"I couldn't see. He had different clothes; but still there was something like Mercer about the shoulders."

"Burney didn't get a chance to take a snapshot, but he did snap the stove man. Here it is. Pull that book out of my bocket."

Obeying, the colonel lifted a couple of small prints which he scrutinized intently, at the end, admitting, "Yes, it is he all right. Now do you know what I think?"

Birdsall couldn't form an idea.

"I think the Keatcham party is in it; and I think they are after bigger game than Archie. Maybe the train-robbers were a part of the scheme—although I'm not so sure of that."

"Oh, the robbers were in it all right. But now come to Miss Smith; where does she come in? Or are you as sure of her as Mercer was in Chicago?"

If he had expected to get a spark out of the Winter tinder by this scraping stroke, he was mistaken; the soldier did not even move his brooding gaze fixed on the hills beyond the house roofs; and he answered in a level tone: "Did you get that story from my aunt, or was it Mrs. Melville? I'm pretty certain you got your biography from that quarter. My aunt might have told her."

"That would be betraying a lady's confidence. I'm only a detective, whose business is to pry, but I never go back on the ladies. And I think, same's you, that the lady in question is a real nice, high-toned lady; but I can't disregard the evidence. I never give out my system, but I've got one, all the same. Look here, see this paper?"—he had replaced the envelope in his pocket; he pulled it out again; or rather, so the colonel fancied, until Birdsall turned the envelope over, revealing it to be blank. "There's a sheet of paper inside; take it out. Look at the watermark, look at the pattern; then compare it with this letter"—handing the colonel the original envelope. "Same exactly, ain't they?"

The colonel, who had studied the two sheets of paper silently, nodded as silently; and he had a premonition of Birdsall's next sentence before it came. "Well, Mrs. Melville Winter, this morning, took me to Miss Smith's desk, where we found this and a lot more like it."

"You seem to be right in thinking the paper widely distributed," observed the colonel.

"And you don't think that suspicious?"

"I should think it more suspicious if the paper were not out on her desk. If she is such a deep one as you seem to think, she would hide such an incriminating bit of evidence."

"She didn't know we suspected her. Of course, you haven't shadowed her a little bit?"

"There is a limit to detective duty in the case of a gentleman," returned the colonel haughtily. "I have not."

Little Birdsall sighed; then in a propitiatory tone: "Well, of course, we both think there are other people in the job; I don't know exactly what you mean by bigger game, but I can make a stagger at it. Now, say, did you get any answer when you wrote to Keatcham himself?"

"Yes," said the colonel grimly. "I heard. You know the sort of letter I wrote; telling him of our dreadful anxiety and about the lad's being an orphan; don't you think it was the sort of letter a decent man would answer, no matter how busy he might be?"

"Sure. Didn't you get an answer?"

"I did." The colonel extricated himself from his wrappings enough to find a pale blue envelope, which he handed to Birdsall, at the same time taking the motor handle. "You see; typewritten, very polite, chilly sort of letter, kind to make a man hot under the collar and swear at Keatcham's heartlessness. Mr. Keatcham unable to answer, having been ill since he left San Francisco. Did not see anything of any boy. Probably boy ran away. Has no information of any kind to afford. And the writer is very sincerely mine. The minute I read it I was sure Mercer wrote it; and he wrote it to make me so disgusted with Keatcham I wouldn't pursue the subject with him. Just the same way he snubbed my aunt; and, for that matter, just the way he tried to snub me on the train. But he missed his mark; I wired every hotel in Santa Barbara and every one in Los Angeles; and Keatcham isn't there and hasn't been there. He has a big bunch of mail at Santa Barbara waiting for him, forwarded from Los Angeles, but he hasn't shown himself."

Birdsall shot a glance of cordial admiration at the colonel. "You're all there, General," he cried with unquenchable familiarity. "I've been trying to call up the Keatcham outfit, and I couldn't get a line, either. They haven't used the tickets they bought—their reservations went empty to Los Angeles. Now, what do you make of that?"

"I make out that Archie is only part of their game," replied the soldier. "Now see, Birdsall, you are not going to get a couple of rich young college fellows to do just plain kidnaping and scaring women out of their money—"

"Lord, General," interrupted Birdsall, "those college guys don't turn a hair at kidnaping; they regularly steal the president of the freshman class, and the things they do at their hazing bees and initiations would make an Apache Indian sit up and take notice. I tell you, General, they're the limit for deviltry."

"Some kinds. Note that kind; it's too dirty. Arnold was one of the cleanest football players at Harvard. And I don't know anything about human nature if that other youngster isn't decent. But Mercer—es un loco; you can look out for anything from him. Now, see the combination. Arnold was at Harvard! I have traced the motor car they used to him; and then, if you add that his father is away safe in Europe and he has an empty house, off to one side, with a quantity of space around it and the reputation of being haunted, why—"

"It looks good to me. And I understand my men have got around it on the quiet all right. How's your man Haley got on, hiring out to the Jap in charge?"

"Well enough; the Jap took him on to mow, but either Mr. Caretaker doesn't know anything or he won't tell. He's bubbling over with conversation about the flowers and the country and the Philippines, where he used to be; but he only knows that the honorable family are all away and he is to shun the house. Aren't we almost there?"

"Just around the corner. I guess when you see it you'll think it's just the patio a spook of taste would freeze to."

"Why is it haunted?"

"Now you have me. I ain't on to such dream stuff. Gimme five cards. Mrs. Arnold died off in Europe, so 'tain't her; and the house has only been built two years; but the neighbors have seen lights and heard groans and a pick chopping at the stones. Some folks say the land belonged to an old miner and he died before he could tell where he'd buried his mazuma; so he is taking a little buscar after it. There's the house, General."

The street climbed a gentle hill, and on its crest a large house, in mission style, looked over a pleasant land. Its position on a corner and the unusual size of the grounds about it gave the mansion an effect of space. Of almost rawly recent erection though it was, the kindly climate had so fostered the growth of the pines, acacias and live oaks, the eucalypti and the orange trees, which made a rich blur of color on the hillside, had so lavishly tended the creeping ivies and Bougainvilleas which masked the rounded lantern arches of the stern gray facade, and so sumptuously blazoned the flower-beds in the garden on the one hand, yet, on the other, had so cunningly dulled the greenish-gray of the cobblestones from California arroyos in chimney and foundation, and had so softly streaked the marble of the garden statues and the plaster of walls and mansion with tiny filaments of lichens or faint green moss, that the beholder might fancy the house to be the ancient home of some Spanish hidalgo, handed down with an hereditary curse, through generations, to the last of his race. One was tempted to such a flutter of fancy because of the impression given by the mansion. A sullen reticence hung about the place. The windows, for the most part, were heavily shuttered. Not a pane of glass flashed back in the sunlight; even those casements not shuttered turned blank dark green shades, like bandaged eyes, on the court and the beautiful terraces and the lovely sweep of hillsides where the wonderful shadows swayed and melted.

The best figure of a man raking, distorted by the perspective, was visible just beyond the high pillars of the gateway. He paid no attention to the motions of the motor car, nor did he answer a hail until it was repeated. Then he approached the car. Birdsall was in the roadway trying to unlock the gate. The man, whose Japanese features were quite distinguishable, bowed; he explained that the honorable owners were not at home; his insignificant self was the only keeper of the grounds. He spoke sufficiently good English with the accompaniment of a deprecatory, amiable smile. Birdsall, in turn, told him that his own companion was a very great gentleman from the east who belonged to a society of vast power which was investigating spectral appearances, and that he had come thousands of miles to see the ghost.

The Japanese extended both hands, while the appeal of his smile deepened. "Too bad, velly," he murmured, "but got leally any g'lost, no, nev'."

"Don't you believe in the ghost?" asked Colonel Winter.

"No, me Clistian boy, no believe not'ing."

"All the samee," said the colonel, laboriously swinging himself from his vantage ground of the motor seat to the flat top of the wall, thence dropping to the greensward below, "allee samee, like go in house hunt ghost." He crackled a banknote in the palm of the slim brown hand, smiling and nodding as if to break the force of his brusque action. Meanwhile, Birdsall had safely shut off his engine before he placed himself beside the others with an agility hardly to be expected of his rotund build.

As for the caretaker, whether because he perceived himself outnumbered, or because he was really void of suspicion, he accepted the money with outward gratitude and proffered his guidance through the garden and the orchards. He slipped into the role of cicerone with no atom of resistance; he was voluble; he was gracious; he was artlessly delighted with his senors. In spite of this flood of suavity, however, there seemed to be no possibility of persuading him to admit them to the house.

Assured of this, the two fell back for a second, time for the merest eye-flash from the detective to the soldier, who at once limped briskly up to the Jap, saying: "We are very much obliged to you; this is a beautiful house, beautiful gardens; but we want to see the ghost; and if you can give me young Mr. Arnold's address I will see him—or write, and we can come back."

The gardener, with many apologies and smiles, did not know Mr. Arnold's honorable address, but he drew out a soiled card, explaining that it bore the name of the gentleman in charge of the property. Birdsall, peering over the Jap's shoulders, added that it was the card of a well known legal firm.

"Then," said the colonel with deliberation, "we will thank you again for your courtesy, and—what's that?"

The Jap turned; they all started at the barking detonation of some explosion; while they gazed about them there came another booming sound, and they could see smoke pouring from the chimney and leaking through the window joints of a room in the rear of the house. Like a hare, not breaking his wind by a single cry, the Jap sped toward the court. The others were hard on his heels, though the colonel limped and showed signs of distress by the time they reached the great iron door.

The Jap pulled out a key; he turned it and swung the door barely enough to enter, calling on them to stay out; he would tell them if he needed them.

"Augustly stay; maybe honolable t'ieves!" he cried.

But the detective had interposed a stalwart leg and shoulder. Instantly the door swung open; he acted as if he had lost his wits with excitement. "You're burning up! Lord! You're burning. Fire! Fire!" he bawled, rushing boldly into the room.

Winter followed him, also calling aloud in a strident voice. And it was to be observed, being such an unusual preparation for a conflagration, that he had drawn a heavy revolver and ran with it in his hand. Before he jumped out of the car he had discarded his thick topcoat and all his wrappings.

An observer, also (had there been one near), would have taken note of a robust Irishman, who had been weeding the flower-beds, and would have seen him straighten at the first peal of the explosion, stare wildly at the chimneys before any distinct smoke was to be seen, then run swiftly and climb up to a low chimney on a wing of the house, watering-pot in hand. He would have seen him empty his inadequate fire extinguisher and rapidly descend the ladder, while the smoke volleyed forth, as if defying his puny efforts; later, he would have seen the watering-pot bearer pursue the others into the house, emitting noble yells of "Fire!" and "Help!"

Further, this same observer, had he been an intimate friend of Sergeant Dennis Haley, certainly would have recognized that resourceful man of war in the amateur fireman.

(To be Continued)

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