# Hagar of the Pawnshop

BY FERGUS HUME

## THE NINTH CUSTOMER AND THE CASKET.

"To extort money also, I suppose?"

Hagar had almost a genius for reading people's characters in their faces. The curve of the mouth, the glance of the eyes—she could interpret these truly; for to her feminine instinct she added a logical judgment masculine in its discretion. She was rarely wrong when she exercised this faculty; and in the many customers who entered the Lambeth pawnshop she had ample opportunities to use her talent. To the sleek, white faced creature who brought for pawning the renaissance casket of silver she took an instant and violent dislike. Subsequent events proved that she was right in doing so. The ninth customer—as she called him—was an oily scoundrel. In appearance he was a respectable servant—a valet or a butler—and wore an immaculate suit of black broadcloth. His face was as white as that of a corpse, and almost as expressionless. Two tufts of whiskers adorned his lean cheeks, but his thin mouth and receding chin were uncovered with hair. On his badly shaped head and off his low, narrow forehead the scanty hair of iron gray was brushed smoothly. He rdopped his shifty gray eyes when he addressed Hagar, and talked softly in a most deferential manner. Hagar guessed him to be a West End servant, and by his physiognomy she knew him to be a scoundrel.

This "gentleman's gentleman"—as Hagar guessed him rightly to be—gave the name of Julian Peters, and the address of 42 Mount street, Mayfair. As certainly as though she had been in the creature's confidence, Hagar knew the name and address were false. Also, she was not quite sure whether he had come honestly by the casket which he wished to pawn, although the story he told was a very fair and apparently candid one.

"My late master, miss, left me this box as a legacy," he said deferentially, "and I have kept it by me for some time. Unfortunately I am now out of a situation and to keep myself going until I obtain a new one I need money. You will understand miss, that it is only necessity which compels me to pawn this box. I want 15 pounds on it."

"You can have 13 pounds," said Hagar, pricing the box at a glance.

"Oh, indeed, miss, I am sure it is worth 15," said Mr. Peters (so called). "If you look at the workmanship—"

"I have looked at everything," replied Hagar, promptly, "at the silver, the workmanship, the date, and all the rest of it."

"The date, miss?" asked the man, in a puzzled tone.

"Yes; the casket is Cinque Cento, Florentine work. I dare say if you took it to a West End jeweler you could get more on it than I am prepared to lend. Thirteen pounds is my limit."

"I'll take it," said Peters, promptly. "I don't care about pawning it in the West End, where I am known."

"As a scoundrel, no doubt," thought Hagar, cynically. However, it was not her place to spoil a good bargain and getting the renaissance casket for 13 pounds was a very good one—so she made out the ticket in the false name of Julian Peters, and handed it to him, together with a 10 pound note and 3 sovereigns. The man counted the money, with a greedy look in his eyes, and turned to depart with a cringing bow. At the door of the shop he paused, however, to address a last word to Hagar.

"I can redeem the casket whenever I like, miss?" he asked anxiously.

"Tomorrow, if it pleases you," replied Hagar, coldly, "so long as you pay me a month's interest for the loan of the money."

"Thank you, miss; I shall take back the box in a month's time. In the meantime, I leave it in your charge, miss, and wish you a very good day."

Hagar gave a shudder of disgust as he left the shop, for the man to her was a noxious thing, like a snake or a toad. If instinct were worth anything, she felt that this valet was a thief and a scoundrel, who was abusing the trust his employer placed in him. The casket was far more likely to have been thieved than to have come to Mr. Peters by will. It is not usual for gentlemen to leave their servants legacies of Cinque Cento caskets.

The box, as Peters called it, was very beautiful; an exquisite example of goldsmith's art, worthy of Benvenuto Cellini himself. Probably it was by one of his pupils. Renaissance work certainly, for in its ornamentation there was visible that mingling of Christianity and paganism which is so striking a characteristic of the rebirth of the arts in the Italy of Dante and the Medici. On the sides of the casket in relief there were figures of dancing nymph and piping satyr; flower-weathed altar and vine-crowned priest. On the lid a full length figure of the Virgin with upraised hands; below clouds and the turrets of a castle; overhead the glory of the Holy Ghost in the form of a wide winged dove, and fluttering cherubs and grave saints. Within the casket was lined with dead gold, smooth and lusterless; butt his receptacle contained nothing.

Without doubt this tiny gem of goldsmith's art had been the jewel case of some Florentine lady in that dead and gone century. Perhaps for her some lover had ordered it to be made, with its odd mingling of cross and thyrsus; its hints of asceticism and joyous life. But the Florentine beauty was now dust; all her days of love and vanity and sin were over; and the casket in which she had stored her jewels lay in a dingy London pawnshop. There was something ironic in the fate meted out by time and chance to this dainty trifle of luxury.

While examining the box Hagar noticed that the gold plate of the case within was raised some little distance above the outside portion. There appeared to her shrewd eyes to be a space between the base of the casket and the inner box of gold. Ever on the alert to discover mysteries, Hagar believed that in this toy there was a secret drawer, which no doubt opened by a concealed spring. At once she set to work searching for this spring.

"It is very cleverly hidden," she murmured, having been baffled for a long time, "but a secret recess there is, and I intend to find it. Who knows but what I may stumble on the evidence of some old Florentine tragedy like that of the Crucifix of Fiesole?"

Her fingers were slender and nimble, and had a wonderfully delicate sense of feeling in their narrow tips. She ran them lightly over the raised work of beaten silver, pressing the laughing heads of the fauns and nymphs. For some time she was unsuccessful, until by chance she touched a delicately modeled rose, which was carved on the central altar of one side. At once there was a slight click, and the silver slab with its sculptured figures fell downward on a hinge. As she had surmised, the box was divided within into two unequal portions; the upper one, visible when the ordinary lid was lifted, was empty, as has been said; but in the narrowness of the lower receptacle between the false and the real bottom of the box, there was a slim packet. Pleased with her discovery, which certainly did credit to her acute intelligence—Hagar drew out the papers. "Here is my Fronetine tragedy," said she, with glee, and proceeded to examine her treasure trove.

It did not take her long to discover that the letters—for they were letters—five or six, tied up with rose hued ribbon—were not fifteenth century, but very late nineteenth; that they were not written in Italian, but in English. Penned in graceful female handwriting upon scented paper—a perfume of violets clung to them still—these letters were full of passionate and undisciplined love. Hagar only read one, but it was sufficient to see that she had stumbled on an intrigue between a married woman and a man. No address was given, as each letter began unexpectedly with words of fire and adoration, continuing in such style from beginning to end where the signature appended was "Beatrice." In the first one which Hagar read—and which was a sample of the rest—the writer lamented her marriage, raged that she was bound to a dull husband, and called upon her dearest Paul—evidently the inamorato's name—to deliver her. The passion, the fierce sensual love which burned in every line of this married woman's epistles, disgusted Hagar not a little. Her pure and virginal soul shrank back from the abyss revealed by this lustful adoration; trembled at the glimpse of a hidden life. There was, indeed, no tragedy on these letters as yet, but it might be—with such a woman as she who penned them—that they would become the prelude to one. In every line there was divorce.

"What a liar that valet is!" thought Hagar, as she tied the letters up again. "This casket was left to him as a legacy, was it? As if a man would intrust such compromising letters to the discretion of a scoundrel like Peters. No, no; I am sure he doesn't know of this secret place, or of the existence of these letters. He stole this casket from his master, and did not know that it was used to hide these epistles from a married woman. I'll keep the casket safely, and see what comes of it when Mr. Peters returns."

But she did not put the letters back in their secret recess. It might be that the valet would return before the conclusion of the month; and if she were out of the shop at the time her assistant would give back the casket. Hagar felt that it would be wrong to let the letters get into the hands of so unscrupulous a scoundrel as she believed Peters to be. Did he find out the secret of the hiding place, and the letters were within, he was quite capable of making capital out of them at the expense of the unhappy woman or his own master. He had the face of a blackmailer; so Hagar reclosed the casket and put away the letters in the big safe in the parlor.

"She is a light woman—a bad woman," she thought, thinking of that Beatrice who had written those glowing letters—"and deserves punishment for having deceived her husband. But I won't give her into the power of that reptile; he would only fatten on her agony. If he comes back for the casket, he shall have it, but without those letters."

Hagar did not think for a moment that Peters knew of the existence of these epistles, else in place of pawning the box he would have levied blackmail on the wretched Beatrice or her lover. But when in two weeks—long before the conclusion of the month—the valet again appeared, he showed Hagar very plainly that he had learned the secret in the meantime. How and from whom he had learnt it Hagar forced him to explain. She was able to do this, as he wanted back the casket, yet had not the money to redeem it. This circumstance gave her power over the man which she exercised mercilessly; and for some time—playing with him in cat and mouse fashion—she pretended to misunderstand his errand. But at first sight she saw from his greedy eyes and the triumphant look on his face that he was bent on some knavery.

"I wish to look at my box, miss," said he, on first entering the shop. "I cannot redeem it as yet, but if you would permit me to examine it I—"

"Certainly," said Hagar, cutting him short; she had no patience with his flowery periods. "Here is the box. Look at it as long as you please."

Peters seized the casket eagerly, opened it and looked into the empty space within; then he shook it, and turned it upside down, as though he expected the inner box to fall out. In a moment Hagar guessed that he had become aware, since pawning the casket, that it contained a secret receptacle, and was looking for the same. With an ironic smile she watched him fingering the delicate carvings with his clumsy hands, and saw that with such coarse handling the casket would never yield up its secret. She therefore revealed it to him, not for his satisfaction, but because she wanted to know the history of the love letters. For these, without doubt the creature was looking, and Hagar congratulated herself that she had obeyed her instinct and had placed the letters beyond his reach.

"You can't find it, I see," she observed, as Peters put down the casket in disgust.

"Find what?" he asked, wtih a certain challenge in his regard.

"The secret drawer for which you are looking."

"How do you know that I look for a secret drawer, miss?"

"I can guess as much from the persistent way in which you press the sides of that box. Your late master, who left the casket as a legacy, evidently did not explain its secret. But if you wish to know, look here." Hagar picked up the box deftly, touched the altar rose with a light finger, and revealed to Mr. Peters the secret recess. His face fell, as she knew it would, at the sight of the vacant space.

"Why, it's empty," he said aloud in a chagrined tone. "I thought—I thought—"

"That you would find some letters within," interrupted Hagar, smarting. "No doubt; but you see, Mr. Peters—if that is your name—I happen to have anticipated you."

"What? You have found the letters?"

"Yes; a neat little bundle of them, which lies in my safe."

"Please give them to me," said the man, with tremulous eagerness.

"Give them to you!" repeated Hagar, contemptuously. "Not I; it is not my business to encourage blackmailing."

"But they are my letters," cried Peters, getting red, but not denying the imputation of blackmailing. "You cannot keep my letters."

"Yes, I can," retorted Hagar, putting the box on the shelf behind her; "in the same way that I can keep the casket if I so choose."

"How dare you!" said the man, losing all his suavity. "The box is mine"

"It is your master's, you mean; and the letters also. You stole the casket to get money, and now you would steal the letters, if you could, to extort money from a woman. Do you know what you are, Mr. Peters? You are a scoundrel."

Peters could hardly speak for rage; but when he did find his voice it was to threaten Hagar with the police. At this she laughed contemptuously.

"The police," she echoed. "Are you out of your mind? Call a policeman, if you dare, and I give you in charge for thieving that box."

"You cannot; you do not know my master's name."

"Do I not?" retorted Hagar, playing a game of bluff. "You forget that the name and address of your master are in those letters."

Seeing that he was baffled in this direction, the man changed his tone for one of diplomacy. He became cringing and wheedling, and infinitely more obnoxious than before. Hagar could hardly listen to his vile propositions with calmness; but she did so advisedly, as she wished to know the story of the letters, the name of the woman who had written them, and that of the man—Peters' master—to whom they had been sent. But the task was disagreeable, and required a great deal of self-restraint.

"Why not share the money with me?" said Peters, in silky tones, "those letters are worth a great deal. If you let me have them I can sell them at a high price either to my master or to the lady who wrote them."

"No doubt," replied Hagar, with apparent acquiescence; "but before I agree to your proposal I must know the story."

"Certainly, miss. I shall tell it to you. I—"

"One moment," interrupted Hagar. "Is Peters your real name?"

"Yes, miss; but the address I gave was false; also the Christian name I gave you. I am John Peters of Duke street, St. James,' in the employment of Lord Averley."

"You are his valet?"

"Yes, I have been with him for a long time, but I lost some money at cards a week or two ago, so I—I"

"So you stole this casket," finished Hagar, sharply.

"No, miss. I didn't," replied Peters, with great dignity. "I borrowed it from my lord's room for a few weeks to get money on it. I intended to redeem and replace it within the month. I shall certainly do so, if our scheme with these letters turns out successful."

Hagar could scarcely restrain herself from an outbreak when she heard this wretch so coolly discuss the use he intended to make of the profits to be derived from his villainy. However, she kept herself calm, and proceeded to ask further questions with a view to gaining his entire confidence.

"Well, Mr. Peters, we will say you borrowed it," she remarked, ironically; "but don't you think that was rather a dangerous proceeding?"

"I didn't at the time," said Peters, ruefully, "as I didn't know my lord kept letters in it. I did not fancy he would ask after it. However, he did ask two days ago, and found that it was lost."

"Did he think you had taken it?"

"Lor' bless you, no," grinned the valet. "I ain't quite such a fool as to be caught like that. My lord's rooms have been done up lately, so he thought as perhaps the paper-hangers or some of that low lot stole the box."

"In that case you are safe enough," said Hagar, enraged at the ingenious villiany of the creature. "But how did you come to learn that there were letters hidden in this box? You didn't know of them when you pawned it."

"No, miss, I didn't," confessed Peters, regretfully; "but yesterday I heard my lord say to a friend of his that there were letters to him from a married lady in the secret place of the box, so I thought—"

"That you would find the secret place and use the letters to get money out of the married lady."

"Yes'm. I did. That's what we are going to do, ain't it?"

"Is the married lady rich?" asked Hagar, answering the question by asking another.

"Lor', miss, her husband, Mr. Delamere, has no end of money. She'd give anything to get those letters back. Why, if her husband saw them he would divorce her for sure! He's a proud man, is Delamere."

"Has he any suspicion of an intrigue between his wife and Lord Averley?"

"Not he, miss, he'd stop it if he had. Oh, you may be sure she'll give a long price for those letters."

"No doubt," assented Hagar. "Well, Mr. Peters, as I am your partner in this very admirable scheme, you had better let me see Mrs. Delamere. I'll get more out of her than you would."

"I dare say, miss. You're a smart one, you are. But you'll go shares fair?"

"Oh, yes; if I get a good sum, you shall have half," replied Hagar, ambiguously. "But where does Mrs. Delamere live?"

"In Curzon street, miss; the house painted a light red. You'll always find her in now about 7. Squeeze her for all she is worth, miss. We've got a thing on in this business."

"It would seem so," replied Hagar, coolly. "But if I were you, Mr. Peters, I would redeem this casket as soon as I could. You may get into trouble else."

"I'll take the money out of my share of the cash," said the scoundrel. "Don't you take less than five hundred, miss; those letters are worth it."

"Be content. I'll see to all that; tomorrow I shall interview Mrs. Delamere; so if you come and see me the day after, I will tell you the result of my visit."

"Oh, there can only be one result with a sharp one like you," grinned Peters. "You squeeze Mrs. Delamere like an orange, miss. Say you'll tell her husband, and she'll pay anything. Good day, miss. My stars, you're a sharp girl. Good day."

Mr. Peters departed with this compliment just in time to stop Hagar from an unholy desire to throw the casket at his head. The man was a greater scoundrel even than she had thought, and she trembled to think of how he would have extorted money from Mrs. Delamere had he obtained the letters. Luckily for that lady, her foolish epistles were in the hands of a woman far more honorable than herself.

Although untitled, Mrs. Delamere was a very great lady. Certainly she was a beautiful one, and many years younger than her lord and master. Mr. Delamere was a wealthy commoner, with a long pedigree and an overweening pride. Immersed in politics and blue books, he permitted his frivolous and youthful wife to do as she pleased, provided she did not drag his name in the mud. He would have forgiven her anything but that. She could be as extravagant as she pleased, gratify all her costly whims, and flirt—if she so choose—with fifty men, but if once the name of Delamere was whispered about in connection with a scandal, she knew well that her husband would seek either a separation or a divorce. Yet, with all this knowledge, pretty, silly Mrs. Delamere was foolish enough to intrigue with Lord Averley, and to write him compromising letters. She never thought of danger. Averley was a gentleman, a man of honor and he had told her a dozen times that he had always burnt the letters she wrote him. It was therefore a matter of amazement to Mrs. Delamere when a gypsy-like girl called to see her with a sealed envelope and mentioned that such envelope contained her letters to Averley.

"Letters, letters," said Mrs. Delamere, brushing her fluffy yellow curls off her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that your letters to Lord Averley are in this envelope,' replied Hagar, looking coldly at the dainty doll before her. "I mean also that did your husband see them he would divorce you."

Mrs. Delamere turned pale under her rouge. "Who are you," she gasped, her blue eyes dilating with terror.

"My name is Hagar Stanley. I am a gypsy girl, and I keep a pawnshop in Lambeth."

"A pawnshop? How did you get my—my letters?"

"The valet of Lord Averley pawned a silver box in which they were concealed," explained Hagar. "He intended to use them as a means to extort money from you. However, I obtained the letters before he did, and I came instead of him."

"To extort money also, I suppose?"

For the life of her, Mrs. Delamere could not help making the remark. She knew that she was speaking false; that this girl with the grave, dark poetic face was not the kind of woman to blackmail an erring sister. Still, the guilty little creature saw that Hagar—the girl from a pawnshop of the slums—was sitting in judgment upon her, and already, in her own mind, condemned her frivolous conduct. Proud and haughty Mrs. Delamere writhed at the look on the face of her visitor, and terrified as she was at the abyss which she saw opening at her feet, she could not help making a slighting remark to gall the woman who came to save her. She said it on the impulse of the moment, and impulse had cost her dearly many a time. But for the fact that Hagar was a noble woman it would have cost the frivolous beauty dearly now.

"No, Mrs. Delamere," replied Hagar, keeping her temper, for really this weak little creature was not worth anger. "I do not wish for money. I came to return you these letters, and I should advise you to destroy them."

"I shall certainly do that," said the fashionable lady, seizing the envelope held out to her; "but you must let me reward you."

"As you would rewaard anyone who returned you a lost jewel," retorted the gypsy, with curling lip. "No, thank you; what I have done for you, Mrs. Delamere, is above any reward."

"Above any reward," stammered the other, wondering if she heard aright.

"I think so," responded Hagar, gravely. "I have saved your honor."

"Saved my honor," cried Mrs. Delamere, furiously. "How dare you? How dare you?"

"I dare, because I happen to have read one of those letters; I read only one, but I have no doubt that it is a sample of the others. If Mr. Delamere read what I did I am afraid you would have to go through the divorce court with Lord Averley as co-respondent."

"You—you are mistaken," stammered Mrs. Delamere, driven into defending herself. "There is nothing wrong between us. I—I swear."

"It is no use to lie to me," said Hagar, curtly. "I have seen what you said to the man; that is enough. However, I have no call to judge you. I came to give you the lettters; you hold them in your hand; so I go."

"Wait! Wait! You have been very good. Surely a little money—"

"I am no blackmailer," cried Hagar, wrathfully; "but I have saved you from one. Had Lord Averley's valet become possessed of those letters, you would have had to pay thousands for them."

"I know, I know," whimpered the foolish little woman. "You have been good and kind; you have saved me. Take this ring as—"

"No, I want no gifts from you," said Hagar, going to the door.

"Why not—why not?"

Hagar looked back with a glance of immeasurable contempt. "I take nothing from a woman who betrays her husband," she said, tranquilly. "Good night, Mrs. Delamere, and be careful how you write letters to your next lover. He may have a valet also," and Hagar left the magnificent room, with Mrs. Delamere standing in it, white with rage and terror and humiliation. In those few contemptuous words of the poor gypsy girl her sin had come home to her.

Hagar had come to the West End to see the woman who had written the letters; now she walked back to her Lambeth pawnshop to interview the man to whom they had been sent.

She was not a girl who did things by halves, and, bent upon thwarting in every way the scoundrelism of John Peters, she had sent a message to his master. In reply Lord Averley had informed her that he would call on her at that time and place mentioned in her letter. The time was 9 o'clock, the place the dingy parlor of the pawnshop, and here Hagar intended to inform Lord Averley of the way in which she had saved Mrs. Delamere from the greed of the valet. Also, she intended to make him take back the casket and repay the money lent on it. In all her dabblings in romance Hagar never forgot that she was a woman of business, and was bound to get as much money as possible for her heir of the old miser who had fed and sheltered her when she had come a fugitive to London. Hagar's ethics would have been quite incomprehensible to the majority of mankind. True to the hour, Lord Averley made his appearance in Carby's Crescent and was admitted by Hagar to the back parlor.

"I have no doubt you wondered at receiving a letter from a pawnshop," she said abruptly.

"I confess I did," he replied,. quietly; "but because you mentioned that you had my casket I came. It is here, you say?"

Hagar took the silver box off a near shelf and placed it on the table before him. "It was pawned here two weeks ago," she said, quietly. "I lent 13 pounds so if you give me thaat sum and the month's interest you can have it."

Without a word Lord Averley counted out the 13 pounds, but he had to ask her what the interest was. Hagar told him, and in a few moments the transaction was concluded.

Then Averley spoke.

"How did you know it was my casket?"

"The man who pawned it told me so."

"That was strange."

"Not at all, my lord. I made him tell me."

"H'm, you look clever," said Averley, looking at her with interest. "May I ask the name of the man who pawned this?"

"Certainly. He was your valet, John Peters."

"Peters," echoed her visitor. "Oh, you must be mistaken. Peters is an honest man."

"He is a scoundrel and a thief, Lord Averley; and but for me he would have been a blackmailer."

"A blackmailer?"

"Yes. There were letters in that casket."

"Were letters?" said Averley, hurriedly, and drew the box toward him. "Do you know the secret?"

"Yes; I found the secret recess and the letters. It was lucky for you that I did so. Your indiscreet speech to a friend informed Peters that compromising letters were hidden in the casket. He came here to find them; but I had already removed them."

"And where are they now?"

"I gave them back to the married woman who wrote them."

"How did you know who wrote them?" asked Lord Averley, raising his eyebrows.

"I read one of the letters, and then Peters told me the name of the lady. He proposed to me to blackmail her. I ostensibly agreed, and went to see the lady to whom I gave back the letters. I asked you here tonight to return the casket; also to put you on your guard against John Peters. He is coming to see me tomorrow, to get—as he thinks—the money obtained by means of the letters. That is the whole story."

"It's a queer one," replied Averley, smiling. "I shall certainly discharge Peters, but I won't prosecute him for thieving."

"He knows about the letters, and they are dangerous now, my lord. I have given them back to the woman who wrote them."

"That was very good of you," said Averley satirically. "May I ask the name of the lady?"

"Surely you know Mrs. Delamere."

Averley looked aghast for a moment, and then began to laugh quietly. "My dear young lady," he said, as soon as he could bring his mirth within bounds, "would it not have been better to have consulted me before giving back those letters?"

"No," said Hagar, boldly, "for you might not have handed them over."

"Certainly I should not have handed them to Mrs. Delamere," said Averley with a fresh burst of laughter.

"Why not?"

"Because she never wrote them. My dear lady, I burnt all of the letters I got from Mrs. Delamere, and I told her I had done so. The letters in this casket signed 'Beatrice' were from a different lady altogether. I shall have to serve Mrs. Delamere. She'll never forgive me. Oh, what a comedy," and he began laughing again.

Hagar was annoyed. She had acted for the best, no doubt; but she had given the letters to the wrong woman. Shortly the humor of the mistake struck her also, and she laughed in concert with Lord Averley.

"I'm sorry I made a mistake," she said at length.

"You couldn't help it," replied Averley rising. "It was that scoundrel Peters who put you wrong. But I'll discharge him tomorrow and get those letters of Beatrice back from Mrs. Delamere."

"And you'll leave that poor little woman alone," said Hagar, as she escorted him to the door.

"My dear lady, now that Mrs. Delamere has read those letetrs she'll leave me alone—severely. She'll never forgive me. Good night. Oh, me, what a comedy."

Lord Averley went off, casket and all. Peters never came back to get his share of the blackmail, so Hagar supposed he had learned from his master what she had done. As to Mrs. Delamere, Hagar often wondered what she said when she read those letters signed "Beatrice." But only Lord Averley could have told her that; and Hagar never saw him again; nor did she ever see Peters the blackmailer. Finally, she never set eyes again on the Cinque Cento Florentine casket which had contained the love letters of the wrong woman.