The Avenger

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CHAPTER I

THE HEAD-HUNTER

Captain Mike Brixan had certain mild and innocent superstitions. He believed, for example, that if he saw a green crow in a field he would certainly see another green crow before the day was out. And when, at the bookstand on Aix la Chapelle station, he saw and purchased a dime novel that was comprehensively intituled "Only an Extra, or the Pride of Hollywood," he was less concerned as to how this thrilling and dog-eared romance came to be on offer at half a million marks (this was in the days when marks were worth money) than as to the circumstances in which he would again hear or read the word "extras" in the sense of a supernumerary and unimportant screen actress.

The novel did not interest him at all. He read one page of superlatives and turned for relief to the study of a Belgian time-table. He was bored, but not so bored that he could interest himself in the sensational rise of the fictitious Rosa Love from modest obscurity to a press agent and wealth.

But "extra" was a new one on Michael, and he waited for the day to bring its inevitable companion.

To say that he was uninterested in crime, that burglars were less thrilling than golf scores, and the record of murders hardly worth the reading, might convey a wrong impression to those who knew him as the cleverest agent in the Foreign Office Intelligence Department.

His official life was spent in meeting queer continentals in obscure restaurants and, in divers rôles, to learn of the undercurrents that were drifting the barques of diplomacy to unsuspected ports. He had twice roamed through Europe in the guise of an open-mouthed tourist; had canoed many hundred miles through the gorges of the Danube to discover, in little riverside beer-houses, the inward meanings of secret mobilizations. These were tasks wholly to his liking.

Therefore he was not unnaturally annoyed when he was withdrawn from Berlin at a moment when, as it seemed, the mystery of the Slovak Treaty was in a way to being solved, for he had secured, at a cost, a rough but accurate draft.

"I should have had a photograph of the actual document if you had left me another twenty-four hours," he reproached his chief, Major George Staines, when he reported himself at Whitehall next morning.

"Sorry," replied that unrepentant man, "but the truth is, we've had a heart to heart talk with the Slovakian Prime Minister, and he has

promised to behave and practically given us the text of the treaty—it was only a commercial affair. Mike, did you know Elmer?"

The Foreign Office detective sat down on the edge of the table.

"Have you brought me from Berlin to ask me that?" he demanded bitterly. "Have you taken me from my favourite café on Unter den Linden—by the way, the Germans are making small arm ammunition by the million at a converted pencil factory in Bavaria—to discuss Elmer? He's a clerk, isn't he?"

Major Staines nodded.

"He *was*," he said, "in the Accountancy Department. He disappeared from view three weeks ago, and an examination of his books showed that he had been systematically stealing funds which were under his control."

Mike Brixan made a little face.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "He seemed to be a fairly quiet and inoffensive man. But surely you don't want me to go after him? That is a job for Scotland Yard."

"I don't want you to go after him," said Staines slowly, "because—well, he has been found."

There was something very significant and sinister in his tone, and before he could take the little slip of paper from the portfolio on the desk, Michael Brixan knew what was coming.

"Not the Head-Hunter?" he gasped. Even Michael knew about the Head-Hunter.

Staines nodded.

"Here's the note."

He handed the typewritten slip across to his subordinate, and Michael read:

"You will find a box in the hedge by the railway arch at Esher.

"The Head-Hunter."

"The Head-Hunter!" repeated Michael mechanically, and whistled.

"We found the box, and of course we found the unfortunate Elmer's head, sliced neatly from his body," said Staines. "This is the twelfth head in seven years," Staines went on, "and in almost every case—in fact, in every case except two—the victim has been a fugitive from justice. Even if the treaty question had not been settled, Mike, I should have brought you back."

"But this is a police job," said the young man, troubled.

"Technically you're a policeman," interrupted his chief, "and the Foreign Secretary wishes you to take this case in hand, and he does this with the full approval of the Secretary of State, who of course controls Scotland Yard. So far, the death of Francis Elmer and the discovery of his gruesome remains have not been given out to the press. There was such a fuss last time that the police want to keep this quiet. They have

had an inquest—I guess the jury was picked, but it would be high treason to say so—and the usual verdict has been returned. The only information I can give you is that Elmer was seen by his niece a week ago in Chichester. We discovered this before the man's fate was known. The girl, Adele Leamington, is working for the Knebworth Film Corporation, which has its studio in Chichester. Old Knebworth is an American and a very good sort. The girl is a sort of super-chorus-extra, that's the word——"

Michael gasped.

"Extra! I knew that infernal word would turn up again. Go on, sir—what do you wish me to do?"

"Go along and see her," said the chief. "Here is the address."

"Is there a Mrs. Elmer?" asked Michael as he put the slip into his pocket.

The other nodded.

"Yes, but she can throw no light upon the murder. She, by the way, is the only person who knows he is dead. She had not seen her husband for a month, and apparently they had been more or less separated for years. She benefits considerably by his death, for he was well insured in her favour."

Michael read again the gruesome note from the Head-Hunter.

"What is your theory about this?" he asked curiously.

"The general idea is that he is a lunatic who feels called upon to mete out punishment to defaulters. But the two exceptions disturb that theory pretty considerably."

Staines lay back in his chair, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Take the case of Willitt. His head was found on Clapham Common two years ago. Willitt was a well-off man, the soul of honesty, well liked, and he had a very big balance at his bank. Crewling, the second exception, who was one of the first of the Hunter's victims, was also above suspicion, though in his case there is no doubt he was mentally unbalanced a few weeks before his death.

"The typewritten notification has invariably been typed out on the same machine. In every case you have the half-obliterated 'u,' the faint 'g,' and the extraordinary alignment which the experts are unanimous in ascribing to a very old and out-of-date Kost machine. Find the man who uses that typewriter and you have probably found the murderer. But it is very unlikely that he will ever be found that way, for the police have published photographs pointing out the peculiarities of type, and I should imagine that Mr. Hunter does not use this machine except to announce the demise of his victims."

Michael Brixan went back to his flat, a little more puzzled and a little more worried by his unusual commission. He moved and had his being in the world of high politics. The finesses of diplomacy were his peculiar study, and the normal abnormalities of humanity, the thefts and

murders and larcenies which occupied the attention of the constabulary, did not come into his purview.

"Bill," said he, addressing the small terrier that lay on the hearth-rug before the fireless grate of his sitting-room, "this is where I fall down. But whether I do or not, I'm going to meet an extra—ain't that grand?"

Bill wagged his tail agreeably.

CHAPTER II

MR. SAMPSON LONGVALE CALLS

Adele Leamington waited till the studio was almost empty before she came to where the white-haired man sat crouched in his canvas chair, his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, a malignant scowl on his forehead.

It was not a propitious moment to approach him: nobody knew that better than she.

"Mr. Knebworth, may I speak to you?"

He looked up slowly. Ordinarily he would have risen, for this middle-aged American in normal moments was the soul of courtesy. But just at that moment, his respect for womanhood was something below zero. His look was blank, though the director in him instinctively approved her values. She was pretty, with regular features, a mop of brown hair in which the sunshine of childhood still lingered. Her mouth firm, delicately shaped, her figure slim—perfect in many ways.

Jack had seen many beautiful extras in his career, and had passed through stages of enthusiasm and despair as he had seen them translated to the screen—pretty wooden figures without soul or expression, gauche of movement, hopeless. Too pretty to be clever, too conscious of their beauty to be natural. Dolls without intelligence or initiative—just "extras" who could wear clothes in a crowd, who could smile and dance mechanically, fit for extras and nothing else all the days of their lives.

"Well?" he asked brusquely.

"Is there a part I could play in this production, Mr. Knebworth?" she asked.

His shaven lips curled.

"Aren't you playing a part, Miss—can't remember your name—Leamington, is it?"

"I'm certainly playing—I'm one of the figures in the background," she smiled. "I don't want a big part, but I'm sure I could do better than I have done."

"I'm mighty sure you couldn't do worse than some people," he growled. "No, there's no part for you, friend. There'll be no story to shoot unless things alter. That's what!"

She was going away when he recalled her.

"Left a good home, I guess?" he said. "Thought picture-making meant a million dollars a year an' a new automobile every Thursday? Or maybe

you were holding down a good job as a stenographer and got it under your toque that you'd make Hollywood feel small if you got your chance? Go back home, kid, and tell the old man that a typewriter's got a sunlight arc beaten to death as an instrument of commerce."

The girl smiled faintly.

"I didn't come into pictures because I was stage-struck, if that is what you mean, Mr. Knebworth. I came in knowing just how hard a life it might be. I have no parents."

He looked up at her curiously.

"How do you live?" he asked. "There's no money in 'extra' work—not on this lot, anyway. Might be if I was one of those billion dollar directors who did pictures with chariot races. But I don't. My ideal picture has got five characters."

"I have a little income from my mother, and I write," said the girl.

She stopped as she saw him looking past her to the studio entrance, and, turning her head, saw a remarkable figure standing in the doorway. At first she thought it was an actor who had made up for a film test.

The newcomer was an old man, but his great height and erect carriage would not have conveyed that impression at a distance. The tight-fitting tail-coat, the trousers strapped to his boots, the high collar and black satin stock belonged to a past age, though they were newly made. The white linen bands that showed at his wrists were goffered, his double-breasted waistcoat of grey velvet was fastened by golden buttons. He might have stepped from a family portrait of one of those dandies of the 'fifties. He held a tall hat in one gloved hand, a hat with a curly brim, and in the other a gold-topped walking-stick. The face, deeply lined, was benevolent and kind, and he seemed unconscious of his complete baldness.

Jack Knebworth was out of his chair in a second and walked toward the stranger.

"Why, Mr. Longvale, I am glad to see you—did you get my letter? I can't tell you how much obliged I am to you for the loan of your house."

Sampson Longvale, of the Dower House! She remembered now. He was known in Chichester as "the old-fashioned gentleman," and once, when she was out on location, somebody had pointed out the big, rambling house, with its weed-grown garden and crumbling walls, where he lived.

"I thought I would come over and see you," said the big man.

His voice was rich and beautifully modulated. She did not remember having heard a voice quite as sweet, and she looked at the eccentric figure with a new interest.

"I can only hope that the house and grounds are suitable to your requirements. I am afraid they are in sad disorder, but I cannot afford to keep the estate in the same condition as my grandfather did."

“Just what I want, Mr. Longvale. I was afraid you might be offended when I told you——”

The old gentleman interrupted him with a soft laugh.

“No, no, I wasn’t offended, I was amused. You needed a haunted house: I could even supply that quality, though I will not promise you that my family ghost will walk. The Dower House has been haunted for hundreds of years. A former occupant in a fit of frenzy murdered his daughter there, and the unhappy lady is supposed to walk. I have never seen her, though many years ago one of my servants did. Fortunately, I am relieved of that form of annoyance: I no longer keep servants in the house,” he smiled, “though, if you care to stay the night, I shall be honoured to entertain five or six of your company.”

Knebworth heaved a sigh of relief. He had made diligent inquiries and found that it was almost impossible to secure lodgings in the neighbourhood, and he was most anxious to take night pictures, and for one scene he particularly desired the peculiar light value which he could only obtain in the early hours of the morning.

“I’m afraid that would give you a lot of trouble, Mr. Longvale,” he said. “And here and now I think we might discuss that delicate subject of ——”

The old man stopped him with a gesture.

“If you are going to speak of money, please don’t,” he said firmly. “I am interested in cinematography; in fact, I am interested in most modern things. We old men are usually prone to decry modernity, but I find my chiefest pleasure in the study of those scientific wonders which this new age has revealed to us.”

He looked at the director quizzically.

“Some day you shall take a picture of me in the one rôle in which I think I should have no peer—a picture of me in the rôle of my illustrious ancestor.”

Jack Knebworth stared, half amused, half startled. It was no unusual experience to find people who wished to see themselves on the screen, but he never expected that little piece of vanity from Mr. Sampson Longvale.

“I should be glad,” he said formally. “Your people were pretty well known, I guess?”

Mr. Longvale sighed.

“It is my regret that I do not come from the direct line that included Charles Henry, the most historic member of my family. He was my great-uncle. I come from the Bordeaux branch of Longvales, which has made history, sir.” He shook his head regretfully.

“Are you French, Mr. Longvale?” asked Jack.

Apparently the old man did not hear him. He was staring into space. Then, with a start:

“Yes, yes, we were French. My great-grandfather married an English lady whom he met in peculiar circumstances. We came to England in the days of the directorate.”

Then, for the first time, he seemed aware of Adele’s presence, and bowed toward her.

“I think I must go,” he said, taking a huge gold watch from his fob pocket.

The girl watched them as they passed out of the hall, and presently she saw the “old-fashioned gentleman” pass the window, driving the oldest-fashioned car she had ever seen. It must have been one of the first motor-cars ever introduced into the country, a great, upstanding, cumbersome machine, that passed with a thunderous sound and at no great speed down the gravel drive out of sight.

Presently Jack Knebworth came slowly back.

“This craze for being screened certainly gets ’em—old or young,” he said. “Good night, Miss—forget your name—Leamington, ain’t it? Good night.”

She was half-way home before she realized that the conversation that she had plucked up such courage to initiate had ended unsatisfactorily for her, and she was as far away from her small part as ever.

CHAPTER III

THE NIECE

ADELE LEAMINGTON occupied a small room in a small house, and there were moments when she wished it were smaller, that she might be justified in plucking up her courage to ask from the stout and unbending Mrs. Watson, her landlady, a reduction of rent. The extras on Jack Knebworth's lot were well paid but infrequently employed; for Jack was one of those clever directors who specialized in domestic stories.

She was dressing when Mrs. Watson brought in her morning cup of tea.

"There's a young fellow been hanging round outside since I got up," said Mrs. Watson. "I saw him when I took in the milk. Very polite he was, but I told him you weren't awake."

"Did he want to see me?" asked the astonished girl.

"That's what he said," said Mrs. Watson grimly. "I asked him if he came from Knebworth, and he said no. If you want to see him, you can have the use of the parlour, though I don't like young men calling on young girls. I've never let theatrical lodgings before, and you can't be too careful. I've always had a name for respectability and I want to keep it."

Adele smiled.

"I cannot imagine anything more respectable than an early morning caller, Mrs. Watson," she said.

She went downstairs and opened the door. The young man was standing on the side-walk with his back to her, but at the sound of the door opening he turned. He was good-looking and well-dressed, and his smile was quick and appealing.

"I hope your landlady did not bother to wake you up? I could have waited. You are Miss Adele Leamington, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"Will you come in, please?" she asked, and took him into the stuffy little front parlour, and, closing the door behind her, waited.

"I am a reporter," he said untruthfully, and her face fell.

"You've come about Uncle Francis? Is anything really wrong? They sent a detective to see me a week ago. Have they found him?"

"No, they haven't found him," he said carefully. "You knew him very well, of course, Miss Leamington?"

She shook her head.

"No, I have only seen him twice in my life. My dear father and he quarrelled before I was born, and I only saw him once after daddy died, and once before mother was taken with her fatal illness."

She heard him sigh, and sensed his relief, though why he should be relieved that her uncle was almost a stranger to her, she could not

fathom.

"You saw him at Chichester, though?" he said.

She nodded.

"Yes, I saw him. I was on my way to Goodwood Park—a whole party of us in a char-à-banc—and I saw him for a moment walking along the sidewalk. He looked desperately ill and worried. He was just coming out of a stationer's shop when I saw him; he had a newspaper under his arm and a letter in his hand."

"Where was the store?" he asked quickly.

She gave him the address, and he jotted it down.

"You didn't see him again?"

She shook her head.

"Is anything really very badly wrong?" she asked anxiously. "I've often heard mother say that Uncle Francis was very extravagant, and a little unscrupulous. Has he been in trouble?"

"Yes," admitted Michael, "he has been in trouble, but nothing that you need worry about. You're a great film actress, aren't you?"

In spite of her anxiety she laughed.

"The only chance I have of being a great film actress is for you to say so in your paper."

"My what?" he asked, momentarily puzzled. "Oh yes, my newspaper, of course!"

"I don't believe you're a reporter at all," she said with sudden suspicion.

"Indeed I am," he said glibly, and dared to pronounce the name of that widely-circulated sheet upon which the sun seldom sets.

"Though I'm not a great actress, and fear I never shall be, I like to believe it is because I've never had a chance—I've a horrible suspicion that Mr. Knebworth knows instinctively that I am no good."

Mike Brixan had found a new interest in the case, an interest which, he was honest enough to confess to himself, was not dissociated from the niece of Francis Elmer. He had never met anybody quite so pretty and quite so unsophisticated and natural.

"You're going to the studio, I suppose?"

She nodded.

"I wonder if Mr. Knebworth would mind my calling to see you?"

She hesitated.

"Mr. Knebworth doesn't like callers."

"Then maybe I'll call on him," said Michael, nodding. "It doesn't matter whom I call on, does it?"

"It certainly doesn't matter to me," said the girl coldly.

"In the vulgar language of the masses," thought Mike as he strode down the street, "I have had the bird!"

His inquiries did not occupy very much of his time. He found the little news shop, and the proprietor, by good fortune, remembered the

coming of Mr. Francis Elmer.

"He came for a letter, though it wasn't addressed to Elmer," said the shopkeeper. "A lot of people have their letters addressed here. I make a little extra money that way."

"Did he buy a newspaper?"

"No, sir, he did not buy a newspaper; he had one under his arm—the *Morning Telegram*. I remember that, because I noticed that he'd put a blue pencil mark round one of the agony advertisements on the front page, and I was wondering what it was all about. I kept a copy of that day's *Morning Telegram*: I've got it now."

He went into the little parlour at the back of the shop and returned with a dingy newspaper, which he laid on the counter.

"There are six there, but I don't know which one it was."

Michael examined the agony advertisements. There was one frantic message from a mother to her son, asking him to return and saying that "all would be forgiven." There was a cryptogram message, which he had not time to decipher. A third, which was obviously the notice of an assignation. The fourth was a thinly veiled advertisement for a new hair-waver, and at the fifth he stopped. It ran:

"Troubled. Final directions at address I
gave you. Courage. Benefactor."

"Some 'benefactor,' " said Mike Brixan. "What was he like—the man who called? Was he worried?"

"Yes, sir: he looked upset—all distracted like. He seemed like a chap who'd lost his head."

"That seems a fair description," said Mike.

CHAPTER IV

THE LEADING LADY

In the studio of the Knebworth Picture Corporation the company had been waiting in its street clothes for the greater part of an hour.

Jack Knebworth sat in his conventional attitude, huddled up in his canvas chair, fingering his long chin and glaring from time to time at the clock above the studio manager's office.

It was eleven when Stella Mendoza flounced in, bringing with her the fragrance of wood violets and a small, unhappy Peke.

"Do you work to summer-time?" asked Knebworth slowly. "Or maybe you thought the call was for afternoon? You've kept fifty people waiting, Stella."

"I can't help their troubles," she said with a shrug of shoulder. "You told me you were going on location, and naturally I didn't expect there would be any hurry. I had to pack my things."

"Naturally you didn't think there was any hurry!"

Jack Knebworth reckoned to have three fights a year. This was the third. The first had been with Stella, and the second had been with Stella, and the third was certainly to be with Stella.

"I wanted you to be here at ten. I've had these boys and girls waiting since a quarter of ten."

"What do you want to shoot?" she asked with an impatient jerk of her head.

"You mostly," said Jack slowly. "Get into No. 9 outfit and don't forget to leave your pearl ear-rings off. You're supposed to be a half-starved chorus girl. We're shooting at Griff Towers, and I told the gentleman who lent us the use of the house that I'd be through the day work by three. If you were Pauline Frederick or Norma Talmadge or Lillie Gish, you'd be worth waiting for, but Stella Mendoza has got to be on this lot by ten—and don't forget it!"

Old Jack Knebworth got up from his canvas chair and began to put on his coat with ominous deliberation, the flushed and angry girl watching him, her dark eyes blazing with injured pride and hurt vanity.

Stella had once been plain Maggie Stubbs, the daughter of a Midland grocer, and old Jack had talked to her as if she were still Maggie Stubbs and not the great film star of coruscating brilliance, idol (or her press agent lied) of the screen fans of all the world.

"All right, if you want a fuss you can have it, Knebworth. I'm going to quit—now! I think I know what is due to my position. That part's got to

be rewritten to give me a chance of putting my personality over. There's too much leading man in it, anyway. People don't pay real money to see men. You don't treat me fair, Knebworth: I'm temperamental, I admit it. You can't expect a woman of my kind to be a block of wood."

"The only thing about you that's a block of wood is your head, Stella," grunted the producer, and went on, oblivious to the rising fury expressed in the girl's face. "You've had two years playing small parts in Hollywood, and you've brought nothing back to England but a line of fresh talk, and you could have gotten that out of the Sunday supplements! Temperament! That's a word that means doctors' certificates when a picture's half taken, and a long rest unless your salary's put up fifty per cent. Thank God this picture isn't a quarter taken or an eighth. Quit, you mean-spirited guttersnipe—and quit as soon as you darn please!"

Boiling with rage, her lips quivering so that she could not articulate, the girl turned and flung out of the studio.

White-haired Jack Knebworth glared round at the silent company.

"This is where the miracle happens," he said sardonically. "This is where the extra girl who's left a sick mother and a mortgage at home leaps to fame in a night. If you don't know that kinder thing happens on every lot in Hollywood you're no students of fiction. Stand forth, Mary Pickford the second!"

The extras smiled, some amused, some uncomfortable, but none spoke. Adele was frozen stiff, incapable of speech.

"Modesty don't belong to this industry," old Jack sneered amiably. "Who thinks she can play 'Roselle' in this piece—because an extra's going to play the part, believe me! I'm going to show this pseudo-actress that there isn't an extra on this lot that couldn't play her head off. Somebody talked about playing a part yesterday—you!"

His forefinger pointed to Adele, and with a heart that beat tumultuously she went toward him.

"I had a camera test of you six months ago," said Jack suspiciously. "There was something wrong with her: what was it?"

He turned to his assistant. That young man scratched his head in an effort of memory.

"Ankles?" he hazarded a guess at random—a safe guess, for Knebworth had views about ankles.

"Nothing wrong with them—get out the print and let us see it."

Ten minutes later, Adele sat by the old man's side in the little projection room and saw her "test" run through.

"Hair!" said Knebworth triumphantly. "I knew there was something. Don't like bobbed hair. Makes a girl too pert and sophisticated. You've grown it?" he added as the lights were switched on.

"Yes, Mr. Knebworth."

He looked at her in dispassionate admiration.

"You'll do," he said reluctantly. "See the wardrobe and get Miss Mendoza's costumes. There's one thing I'd like to tell you before you go," he said, stopping her. "You may be good and you may be bad, but, good or bad, there's no future for you—so don't get heated up. The only woman who's got any chance in England is the producer's wife, and I'll never marry you if you go down on your knees to me! That's the only kind of star they know in English films—the producer's wife; and unless you're that, you haven't——!"

He snapped his finger.

"I'll give you a word of advice, kid. If you make good in this picture, link yourself up with one of those cute English directors that set three flats and a pot of palms and call it a drawing-room! Give Miss What's-her-name the script, Harry. Say—go out somewhere quiet and study it, will you? Harry, you see the wardrobe. I give you half an hour to read that script!"

Like one in a dream, the girl walked out into the shady garden that ran the length of the studio building, and sat down, trying to concentrate on the typewritten lines. It wasn't true—it could not be true! And then she heard the crunch of feet on gravel and looked up in alarm. It was the young man who had seen her that morning—Michael Brixan.

"Oh, please—you mustn't interrupt me!" she begged in agitation. "I've got a part—a big part to read."

Her distress was so real that he hastened to take his departure.

"I'm awfully sorry——" he began.

In her confusion she had dropped the loose sheets of the manuscript, and, stooping with her to pick them up, their heads bumped.

"Sorry—that's an old comedy situation, isn't it?" he began.

And then he saw the sheet of paper in his hand and began to read. It was a page of elaborate description of a scene.

"The cell is large, lighted by a swinging lamp. In centre is a steel gate through which a soldier on guard is seen pacing to and fro——"

"Good God!" said Michael, and went white.

The "u's" in the type were blurred, the "g" was indistinct. The page had been typed on the machine from which the Head-Hunter sent forth his gruesome tales of death.