


H. C. MCNEILE

A sepia-toned photograph of a hand reaching up from the surface of the ocean. The hand is pale and appears to be reaching out from the water, with fingers spread. The background is a vast, calm sea under a hazy, reddish-brown sky.

***BULL-DOG
DRUMMOND:
THE ADVENTURES
OF A DEMOBILISED
OFFICER WHO
FOUND PEACE
DULL***

A hand is seen reaching up from the surface of a dark, choppy sea. The background is a hazy, reddish-brown sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

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DRUMMOND:
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Bull-dog Drummond: The Adventures of a Demobilised Officer Who Found Peace Dull

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PROLOGUE

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In the month of December 1918, and on the very day that a British Cavalry Division marched into Cologne, with flags flying and bands playing as the conquerors of a beaten nation, the manager of the Hotel Nationale in Berne received a letter. Its contents appeared to puzzle him somewhat, for having read it twice he rang the bell on his desk to summon his secretary. Almost immediately the door opened, and a young French girl came into the room.

"Monsieur rang?" She stood in front of the manager's desk, awaiting instructions.

"Have we ever had staying in the hotel a man called le Comte de Guy?" He leaned back in his chair and looked at her through his pince-nez.

The secretary thought for a moment and then shook her head.

"Not as far as I can remember," she said.

"Do we know anything about him? Has he ever fed here, or taken a private room?"

Again the secretary shook her head.

"Not that I know of."

The manager handed her the letter, and waited in silence until she had read it.

"It seems on the face of it a peculiar request from an unknown man," he remarked as she laid it down. "A dinner of four covers; no expense to be spared. Wines specified

and if not in hotel to be obtained. A private room at half-past seven sharp. Guests to ask for room X."

The secretary nodded in agreement.

"It can hardly be a hoax," she remarked after a short silence.

"No." The manager tapped his teeth with his pen thoughtfully. "But if by any chance it was, it would prove an expensive one for us. I wish I could think who this Comte de Guy is."

"He sounds like a Frenchman," she answered. Then after a pause: "I suppose you'll have to take it seriously?"

"I must." He took off his pince-nez and laid them on the desk in front of him. "Would you send the *maître d'hôtel* to me at once."

Whatever may have been the manager's misgivings, they were certainly not shared by the head waiter as he left the office after receiving his instructions. War and short rations had not been conducive to any particularly lucrative business in his sphere; and the whole sound of the proposed entertainment seemed to him to contain considerable promise. Moreover, he was a man who loved his work, and a free hand over preparing a dinner was a joy in itself. Undoubtedly he personally would meet the three guests and the mysterious Comte de Guy; he personally would see that they had nothing to complain of in the matter of the service at dinner....

And so at about twenty minutes past seven the *maître d'hôtel* was hovering round the hall-porter, the manager was hovering round the *maître d'hôtel*, and the secretary was

hovering round both. At five-and-twenty minutes past the first guest arrived....

He was a peculiar-looking man, in a big fur coat, reminding one irresistibly of a cod-fish.

"I wish to be taken to Room X." The French secretary stiffened involuntarily as the *maître d'hôtel* stepped obsequiously forward. Cosmopolitan as the hotel was, even now she could never hear German spoken without an inward shudder of disgust.

"A Boche," she murmured in disgust to the manager as the first arrival disappeared through the swing doors at the end of the lounge. It is to be regretted that that worthy man was more occupied in shaking himself by the hand, at the proof that the letter was *bona fide*, than in any meditation on the guest's nationality.

Almost immediately afterwards the second and third members of the party arrived. They did not come together, and what seemed peculiar to the manager was that they were evidently strangers to one another.

The leading one—a tall gaunt man with a ragged beard and a pair of piercing eyes—asked in a nasal and by no means an inaudible tone for Room X. As he spoke a little fat man who was standing just behind him started perceptibly, and shot a bird-like glance at the speaker.

Then in execrable French he too asked for Room X.

"He's not French," said the secretary excitedly to the manager as the ill-assorted pair were led out of the lounge by the head waiter. "That last one was another Boche."

The manager thoughtfully twirled his pince-nez between his fingers.

"Two Germans and an American." He looked a little apprehensive. "Let us hope the dinner will appease everybody. Otherwise——"

But whatever fears he might have entertained with regard to the furniture in Room X, they were not destined to be uttered. Even as he spoke the door again swung open, and a man with a thick white scarf around his neck, so pulled up as almost completely to cover his face, came in. A soft hat was pulled down well over his ears, and all that the manager could swear to as regards the newcomer's appearance was a pair of deep-set, steel-grey eyes which seemed to bore through him.

"You got my letter this morning?"

"M'sieur le Comte de Guy?" The manager bowed deferentially and rubbed his hands together. "Everything is ready, and your three guests have arrived."

"Good. I will go to the room at once."

The *maître d'hôtel* stepped forward to relieve him of his coat, but the Count waved him away.

"I will remove it later," he remarked shortly. "Take me to the room."

As he followed his guide his eyes swept round the lounge. Save for two or three elderly women of doubtful nationality, and a man in the American Red Cross, the place was deserted; and as he passed through the swing doors he turned to the head waiter.

"Business good?" he asked.

No—business decidedly was not good. The waiter was voluble. Business had never been so poor in the memory of man.... But it was to be hoped that the dinner would be to

Monsieur le Comte's liking.... He personally had superintended it.... Also the wines.

"If everything is to my satisfaction you will not regret it," said the Count tersely. "But remember one thing. After the coffee has been brought in, I do not wish to be disturbed under any circumstances whatever." The head waiter paused as he came to a door, and the Count repeated the last few words. "Under no circumstances whatever."

"Mais certainement, Monsieur le Comte.... I, personally, will see to it...."

As he spoke he flung open the door and the Count entered. It cannot be said that the atmosphere of the room was congenial. The three occupants were regarding one another in hostile silence, and as the Count entered they, with one accord, transferred their suspicious glances to him.

For a moment he stood motionless, while he looked at each one in turn. Then he stepped forward....

"Good evening, gentlemen"—he still spoke in French—"I am honoured at your presence." He turned to the head waiter. "Let dinner be served in five minutes exactly."

With a bow the man left the room, and the door closed.

"During that five minutes, gentlemen, I propose to introduce myself to you, and you to one another." As he spoke he divested himself of his coat and hat. "The business which I wish to discuss we will postpone, with your permission, till after the coffee, when we shall be undisturbed."

In silence the three guests waited while he unwound the thick white muffler; then, with undisguised curiosity, they studied their host. In appearance he was striking. He had a

short dark beard, and in profile his face was aquiline and stern. The eyes, which had so impressed the manager, seemed now to be a cold grey-blue; the thick brown hair, flecked slightly with grey, was brushed back from a broad forehead. His hands were large and white; not effeminate, but capable and determined: the hands of a man who knew what he wanted, knew how to get it, and got it. To even the most superficial observer the giver of the feast was a man of power: a man capable of forming instant decisions and of carrying them through....

And if so much was obvious to the superficial observer, it was more than obvious to the three men who stood by the fire watching him. They were what they were simply owing to the fact that they were not superficial servers of humanity; and each one of them, as he watched his host, realised that he was in the presence of a great man. It was enough: great men do not send fool invitations to dinner to men of international repute. It mattered not what form his greatness took—there was money in greatness, big money. And money was their life....

The Count advanced first to the American.

"Mr. Hocking, I believe," he remarked in English, holding out his hand. "I am glad you managed to come."

The American shook the proffered hand, while the two Germans looked at him with sudden interest. As the man at the head of the great American cotton trust, worth more in millions than he could count, he was entitled to their respect....

"That's me, Count," returned the millionaire in his nasal twang. "I am interested to know to what I am indebted for

this invitation."

"All in good time, Mr. Hocking," smiled the host. "I have hopes that the dinner will fill in that time satisfactorily."

He turned to the taller of the two Germans, who without his coat seemed more like a cod-fish than ever.

"Herr Steinemann, is it not?" This time he spoke in German.

The man whose interest in German coal was hardly less well known than Hocking's in cotton, bowed stiffly.

"And Herr von Gratz?" The Count turned to the last member of the party and shook hands. Though less well known than either of the other two in the realms of international finance, von Gratz's name in the steel trade of Central Europe was one to conjure with.

"Well, gentlemen," said the Count, "before we sit down to dinner, I may perhaps be permitted to say a few words of introduction. The nations of the world have recently been engaged in a performance of unrivalled stupidity. As far as one can tell that performance is now over. The last thing I wish to do is to discuss the war—except in so far as it concerns our meeting here to-night. Mr. Hocking is an American, you two gentlemen are Germans. I"—the Count smiled slightly—"have no nationality. Or rather, shall I say, I have every nationality. Completely cosmopolitan.... Gentlemen, the war was waged by idiots, and when idiots get busy on a large scale, it is time for clever men to step in... That is the *raison d'être* for this little dinner.... I claim that we four men are sufficiently international to be able to disregard any stupid and petty feelings about this country and that country, and to regard the world outlook at the

present moment from one point of view and one point of view only—our own."

The gaunt American gave a hoarse chuckle.

"It will be my object after dinner," continued the Count, "to try and prove to you that we have a common point of view. Until then—shall we merely concentrate on a pious hope that the Hôtel Nationale will not poison us with their food?"

"I guess," remarked the American, "that you've got a pretty healthy command of languages, Count."

"I speak four fluently—French, German, English, and Spanish," returned the other. "In addition, I can make myself understood in Russia, Japan, China, the Balkan States, and—America."

His smile, as he spoke, robbed the words of any suspicion of offence. The next moment the head waiter opened the door, and the four men sat down to dine.

It must be admitted that the average hostess, desirous of making a dinner a success, would have been filled with secret dismay at the general atmosphere in the room. The American, in accumulating his millions, had also accumulated a digestion of such an exotic and tender character that dry rusks and Vichy water were the limit of his capacity.

Herr Steinemann was of the common order of German, to whom food is sacred. He ate and drank enormously, and evidently considered that nothing further was required of him.

Von Gratz did his best to keep his end up, but as he was apparently in a chronic condition of fear that the gaunt

American would assault him with violence, he cannot be said to have contributed much to the gaiety of the meal.

And so to the host must be given the credit that the dinner was a success. Without appearing to monopolise the conversation he talked ceaselessly and well. More—he talked brilliantly. There seemed to be no corner of the globe with which he had not a nodding acquaintance at least; while with most places he was as familiar as a Londoner with Piccadilly Circus. But to even the most brilliant of conversationalists the strain of talking to a hypochondriacal American and two Germans—one greedy and the other frightened—is considerable; and the Count heaved an inward sigh of relief when the coffee had been handed round and the door closed behind the waiter. From now on the topic was an easy one—one where no effort on his part would be necessary to hold his audience. It was the topic of money—the common bond of his three guests. And yet, as he carefully cut the end of his cigar, and realised that the eyes of the other three were fixed on him expectantly, he knew that the hardest part of the evening was in front of him. Big financiers, in common with all other people, are fonder of having money put into their pockets than of taking it out. And that was the very thing the Count proposed they should do—in large quantities....

"Gentlemen," he remarked, when his cigar was going to his satisfaction, "we are all men of business. I do not propose therefore to beat about the bush over the matter which I have to put before you, but to come to the point at once. I said before dinner that I considered we were sufficiently big to exclude any small arbitrary national

distinctions from our minds. As men whose interests are international, such things are beneath us. I wish now to slightly qualify that remark." He turned to the American on his right, who with his eyes half closed was thoughtfully picking his teeth. "At this stage, sir, I address myself particularly to you."

"Go right ahead," drawled Mr. Hocking.

"I do not wish to touch on the war—or its result; but though the Central Powers have been beaten by America and France and England, I think I can speak for you two gentlemen"—he bowed to the two Germans—"when I say that it is neither France nor America with whom they desire another round. England is Germany's main enemy; she always has been, she always will be."

Both Germans grunted assent, and the American's eyes closed a little more.

"I have reason to believe, Mr. Hocking, that you personally do not love the English?"

"I guess I don't see what my private feelings have got to do with it. But if it's of any interest to the company you are correct in your belief."

"Good." The Count nodded his head as if satisfied. "I take it then that you would not be averse to seeing England down and out."

"Wal," remarked the American, "you can assume anything you feel like. Let's get to the show-down."

Once again the Count nodded his head; then he turned to the two Germans.

"Now you two gentlemen must admit that your plans have miscarried somewhat. It was no part of your original

programme that a British Army should occupy Cologne...."

"The war was the act of a fool," snarled Herr Steinemann. "In a few years more of peace, we should have beaten those swine...."

"And now—they have beaten you." The Count smiled slightly. "Let us admit that the war was the act of a fool if you like, but as men of business we can only deal with the result ... the result, gentlemen, as it concerns us. Both you gentlemen are sufficiently patriotic to resent the presence of that army at Cologne I have no doubt. And you, Mr. Hocking, have no love on personal grounds for the English.... But I am not proposing to appeal to financiers of your reputation on such grounds as those to support my scheme.... It is enough that your personal predilections run with and not against what I am about to put before you—the defeat of England ... a defeat more utter and complete than if she had lost the war...."

His voice sank a little, and instinctively his three listeners drew closer.

"Don't think that I am proposing this through motives of revenge merely. We are business men, and revenge is only worth our while if it pays. This will pay. I can give you no figures, but we are not of the type who deal in thousands, or even hundreds of thousands. There is a force in England which, if it be harnessed and led properly, will result in millions coming to you.... It is present now in every nation—fettered, inarticulate, unco-ordinated.... It is partly the result of the war—the war that the idiots have waged.... Harness that force, gentlemen, co-ordinate it, and use it for your own ends.... That is my proposal. Not only will you humble that

cursed country to the dirt, but you will taste of power such as few men have tasted before...." The Count stood up, his eyes blazing. "And I—I will do it for you."

He resumed his seat, and his left hand, slipping off the table, beat a tattoo on his knee.

"This is our opportunity—the opportunity of clever men. I have not got the money necessary: you have...." He leaned forward in his chair, and glanced at the intent faces of his audience. Then he began to speak...

Ten minutes later he pushed back his chair.

"There is my proposal, gentlemen, in a nutshell. Unforeseen developments will doubtless occur; I have spent my life overcoming the unexpected. What is your answer?"

He rose and stood with his back to them by the fire, and for several minutes no one spoke. Each man was busy with his own thoughts, and showed it in his own particular way. The American, his eyes shut, rolled his toothpick backwards and forwards in his mouth slowly and methodically; Steinemann stared at the fire, breathing heavily after the exertions of dinner: von Gratz walked up and down—his hands behind his back—whistling under his breath. Only the Comte de Guy stared unconcernedly at the fire, as if indifferent to the result of their thoughts. In his attitude at that moment he gave a true expression to his attitude on life. Accustomed to play with great stakes, he had just dealt the cards for the most gigantic gamble of his life.... What matter to the three men, who were looking at the hands he had given them, that only a master criminal could have conceived such a game? The only question which occupied their minds was whether he could carry it through. And on

that point they had only their judgment of his personality to rely on.

Suddenly the American removed the toothpick from his mouth, and stretched out his legs.

"There is a question which occurs to me, Count, before I make up my mind on the matter. I guess you've got us sized up to the last button; you know who we are, what we're worth, and all about us. Are you disposed to be a little more communicative about yourself? If we agree to come in on this hand, it's going to cost big money. The handling of that money is with you. Wal—who are you?"

Von Gratz paused in his restless pacing and nodded his head in agreement; even Steinemann, with a great effort, raised his eyes to the Count's face as he turned and faced them....

"A very fair question, gentlemen, and yet one which I regret I am unable to answer. I would not insult your intelligence by giving you the fictitious address of—a fictitious Count. Enough that I am a man whose livelihood lies in other people's pockets. As you say, Mr. Hocking, it is going to cost big money; but compared to the results the costs will be a flea-bite.... Do I look—and you are all of you used to judging men—do I look the type who would steal the baby's money-box which lay on the mantelpiece, when the pearls could be had for opening the safe.... You will have to trust me, even as I shall have to trust you.... You will have to trust me not to divert the money which you give me as working expenses into my own pocket.... I shall have to trust you to pay me when the job is finished....

"And that payment will be—how much?" Steinemann's guttural voice broke the silence.

"One million pounds sterling—to be split up between you in any proportion you may decide, and to be paid within one month of the completion of my work. After that the matter will pass into your hands ... and may you leave that cursed country grovelling in the dirty..." His eyes glowed with a fierce, vindictive fury; and then, as if replacing a mask which had slipped for a moment, the Count was once again the suave, courteous host. He had stated his terms frankly and without haggling: stated them as one big man states them to another of the same kidney, to whom time is money and indecision or beating about the bush anathema.

"Take them or leave them." So much had he said in effect, if not in actual words, and not one of his audience but was far too used to men and matters to have dreamed of suggesting any compromise. All or nothing: and no doctrine could have appealed more to the three men in whose hands lay the decision....

"Perhaps, Count, you would be good enough to leave us for a few minutes." Von Gratz was speaking. "The decision is a big one, and..."

"Why, certainly, gentlemen." The Count moved towards the door. "I will return in ten minutes. By that time you will have decided—one way or the other."

Once in the lounge he sat down and lit a cigarette. The hotel was deserted save for one fat woman asleep in a chair opposite, and the Count gave himself up to thought. Genius that he was in the reading of men's minds, he felt that he knew the result of that ten minutes' deliberation.... And then

... What then? ... In his imagination he saw his plans growing and spreading, his tentacles reaching into every corner of a great people—until, at last, everything was ready. He saw himself supreme in power, glutted with it—a king, an autocrat, who had only to lift his finger to plunge his kingdom into destruction and annihilation.... And when he had done it, and the country he hated was in ruins, then he would claim his million and enjoy it as a great man should enjoy a great reward.... Thus for the space of ten minutes did the Count see visions and dream dreams. That the force he proposed to tamper with was a dangerous force disturbed him not at all: he was a dangerous man. That his scheme would bring ruin, perhaps death, to thousands of innocent men and women, caused him no qualm: he was a supreme egoist. All that appealed to him was that he had seen the opportunity that existed, and that he had the nerve and the brain to turn that opportunity to his own advantage. Only the necessary money was lacking ... and ... With a quick movement he pulled out his watch. They had had their ten minutes ... the matter was settled, the die was cast....

He rose and walked across the lounge. At the swing doors was the head waiter, bowing obsequiously....

It was to be hoped that the dinner had been to the liking of Monsieur le Comte ... the wines all that he could wish ... that he had been comfortable and would return again....

"That is improbable." The Count took out his pocket-book. "But one never knows; perhaps I shall." He gave the waiter a note. "Let my bill be prepared at once, and given to me as I pass through the hall."

Apparently without a care in the world the Count passed down the passage to his private room, while the head waiter regarded complacently the unusual appearance of an English five-pound note.

For an appreciable moment the Count paused by the door, and a faint smile came to his lips. Then he opened it, and passed into the room....

The American was still chewing his toothpick; Steinemann was still breathing hard. Only von Gratz had changed his occupation, and he was sitting at the table smoking a long thin cigar. The Count closed the door, and walked over to the fireplace....

"Well, gentlemen," he said quietly, "what have you decided?"

It was the American who answered.

"It goes. With one amendment. The money is too big for three of us: there must be a fourth. That will be a quarter of a million each."

The Count bowed.

"Have you any suggestions as to who the fourth should be?"

"Yep," said the American shortly. "These two gentlemen agree with me that it should be another of my countrymen—so that we get equal numbers. The man we have decided on is coming to England in a few weeks—Hiram C. Potts. If you get him in, you can count us in too. If not, the deal's off."

The Count nodded, and if he felt any annoyance at this unexpected development he showed no sign of it on his face.

"I know of Mr. Potts," he answered quietly. "Your big shipping man, isn't he? I agree to your reservation."

"Good," said the American. "Let's discuss some details."

Without a trace of emotion on his face the Count drew up a chair to the table. It was only when he sat down that he started to play a tattoo on his knee with his left hand....

Half an hour later he entered his luxurious suite of rooms at the Hotel Magnificent.

A girl, who had been lying by the fire reading a French novel, looked up at the sound of the door. She did not speak, for the look on his face told her all she wanted to know.

He crossed to the sofa and smiled down at her.

"Successful ... on our own terms. To-morrow, Irma, the Comte de Guy dies, and Carl Peterson and his daughter leave for England. A country gentleman, I think, is Carl Peterson. He might keep hens, and possibly pigs."

The girl on the sofa rose, yawning.

"Mon Dieu! what a prospect! Pigs and hens—and in England! How long is it going to take?"

The Count looked thoughtfully into the fire.

"Perhaps a year—perhaps six months ... It is on the lap of the gods...."

CHAPTER I

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IN WHICH HE TAKES TEA AT THE CARLTON AND IS SURPRISED

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I

Captain Hugh Drummond, D.S.O., M.C., late of His Majesty's Royal Loamshires, was whistling in his morning bath. Being by nature of a cheerful disposition, the symptom did not surprise his servant, late private of the same famous regiment, who was laying breakfast in an adjoining room.

After a while the whistling ceased, and the musical gurgle of escaping water announced that the concert was over. It was the signal for James Denny—the square-jawed ex-batman—to disappear into the back regions and get from his wife the kidneys and bacon which that most excellent woman had grilled to a turn. But on this particular morning the invariable routine was broken. James Denny seemed preoccupied, distrait.

Once or twice he scratched his head, and stared out of the window with a puzzled frown. And each time, after a brief survey of the other side of Half Moon Street, he turned back again to the breakfast table with a grin.

"What's you looking for, James Denny?" The irate voice of his wife at the door made him turn round guiltily. "Them kidneys is ready and waiting these five minutes."

Her eyes fell on the table, and she advanced into the room wiping her hands on her apron.

"Did you ever see such a bunch of letters?" she said.

"Forty-five," returned her husband grimly, "and more to come." He picked up the newspaper lying beside the chair and opened it out.

"Them's the result of that," he continued cryptically, indicating a paragraph with a square finger, and thrusting the paper under his wife's nose.

"Demobilised officer," she read slowly, "finding peace incredibly tedious, would welcome diversion. Legitimate, if possible; but crime, if of a comparatively humorous description, no objection. Excitement essential. Would be prepared to consider permanent job if suitably impressed by applicant for his services. Reply at once Box X10."

She put down the paper on a chair and stared first at her husband and then at the rows of letters neatly arranged on the table.

"I calls it wicked," she announced at length. "Fair flying in the face of Providence. Crime, Denny—crime. Don't you get 'aving nothing to do with such mad pranks, my man, or you and me will be having words." She shook an admonitory finger at him, and retired slowly to the kitchen. In the days of his youth James Denny had been a bit wild, and there was a look in his eyes this morning—the suspicion of a glint—which recalled old memories.

A moment or two later Hugh Drummond came in. Slightly under six feet in height, he was broad in proportion. His best friend would not have called him good-looking, but he was the fortunate possessor of that cheerful type of ugliness which inspires immediate confidence in its owner. His nose had never quite recovered from the final one year in the Public Schools Heavy Weights; his mouth was not small. In fact, to be strictly accurate, only his eyes redeemed his face from being what is known in the vernacular as the Frozen Limit.

Deep-set and steady, with eyelashes that many a woman had envied, they showed the man for what he was—a sportsman and a gentleman. And the combination of the two is an unbeatable production.

He paused as he got to the table, and glanced at the rows of letters. His servant, pretending to busy himself at the other end of the room, was watching him surreptitiously, and noted the grin which slowly spread over Drummond's face as he picked up two or three and examined the envelopes.

"Who would have thought it, James?" he remarked at length. "Great Scot! I shall have to get a partner."

With disapproval showing in every line of her face, Mrs. Denny entered the room, carrying the kidneys, and Drummond glanced at her with a smile.

"Good morning, Mrs. Denny," he said. "Wherefore this worried look on your face? Has that reprobate James been misbehaving himself?"

The worthy woman snorted. "He has not, sir—not yet, leastwise. And if so be that he does"—her eyes travelled up

and down the back of the hapless Denny, who was quite unnecessarily pulling books off shelves and putting them back again—"if so be that he does," she continued grimly, "him and me will have words—as I've told him already this morning." She stalked from the room, after staring pointedly at the letters in Drummond's hand, and the two men looked at one another.

"It's that there reference to crime, sir, that's torn it," said Denny in a hoarse whisper.

"Thinks I'm going to lead you astray, does she, James?"

Hugh helped himself to bacon. "My dear fellow, she can think what she likes so long as she continues to grill bacon like this. Your wife is a treasure, James—a pearl amongst women; and you can tell her so with my love." He was opening the first envelope, and suddenly he looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. "Just to set her mind at rest," he remarked gravely, "you might tell her that, as far as I can see at present, I shall only undertake murder in exceptional cases."

He propped the letter up against the toast-rack and commenced his breakfast. "Don't go, James." With a slight frown he was studying the typewritten sheet. "I'm certain to want your advice before long. Though not over this one.... It does not appeal to me—not at all. To assist Messrs. Jones & Jones, whose business is to advance money on note of hand alone, to obtain fresh clients, is a form of amusement which leaves me cold. The waste-paper basket, please, James. Tear the effusion up and we will pass on to the next."

He looked at the mauve envelope doubtfully, and examined the postmark. "Where is Pudlington, James? and

one might almost ask—why is Pudlington? No town has any right to such an offensive name." He glanced through the letter and shook his head. "Tush! tush! And the wife of the bank manager too—the bank manager of Pudlington, James! Can you conceive of anything so dreadful? But I'm afraid Mrs. Bank Manager is a puss—a distinct puss. It's when they get on the soul-mate stunt that the furniture begins to fly."

Drummond tore up the letter and dropped the pieces into the basket beside him. Then he turned to his servant and handed him the remainder of the envelopes.

"Go through them, James, while I assault the kidneys, and pick two or three out for me. I see that you will have to become my secretary. No man could tackle that little bunch alone."

"Do you want me to open them, sir?" asked Denny doubtfully.

"You've hit it, James—hit it in one. Classify them for me in groups. Criminal; sporting; amatory—that means of or pertaining to love; stupid and merely boring; and as a last resort, miscellaneous." He stirred his coffee thoughtfully. "I feel that as a first venture in our new career—ours, I said, James—love appeals to me irresistibly. Find me a damsel in distress; a beautiful girl, helpless in the clutches of knaves. Let me feel that I can fly to her succour, clad in my new grey suiting."

He finished the last piece of bacon and pushed away his plate. "Amongst all that mass of paper there must surely be one from a lovely maiden, James, at whose disposal I can place my rusty sword. Incidentally, what has become of the damned thing?"

"It's in the lumber-room, sir—tied up with the old humberella and the niblick you don't like."

"Great heavens! Is it?" Drummond helped himself to marmalade. "And to think that I once pictured myself skewering Huns with it. Do you think anybody would be mug enough to buy it, James?"

But that worthy was engrossed in a letter he had just opened, and apparently failed to hear the question. A perplexed look was spreading over his face, and suddenly he sucked his teeth loudly. It was a sure sign that James was excited, and though Drummond had almost cured him of this distressing habit, he occasionally forgot himself in moments of stress.

His master glanced up quickly, and removed the letter from his hands. "I'm surprised at you, James," he remarked severely. "A secretary should control itself. Don't forget that the perfect secretary is an it: an automatic machine—a thing incapable of feeling...."

He read the letter through rapidly, and then, turning back to the beginning, he read it slowly through again.

"My dear Box X10,—I don't know whether your advertisement was a joke: I suppose it must have been. But I read it this morning, and it's just possible, X10, just possible, that you mean it. And if you do, you're the man I want. I can offer you excitement and probably crime.

"I'm up against it, X10. For a girl I've bitten off rather more than I can chew. I want help—badly. Will you come to the Carlton for tea to-morrow afternoon? I want to have a look at you and see if I think you are genuine. Wear a white flower in your buttonhole."

Drummond laid the letter down, and pulled out his cigarette-case. "To-morrow, James," he murmured. "That is to-day—this very afternoon. Verily I believe that we have impinged upon the goods." He rose and stood looking out of the window thoughtfully. "Go out, my trusty fellow, and buy me a daisy or a cauliflower or something white."

"You think it's genuine, sir?" said James thoughtfully.

His master blew out a cloud of smoke. "I know it is," he answered dreamily. "Look at that writing; the decision in it—the character. She'll be medium height, and dark, with the sweetest little nose and mouth. Her colouring, James, will be ——"

But James had discreetly left the room.