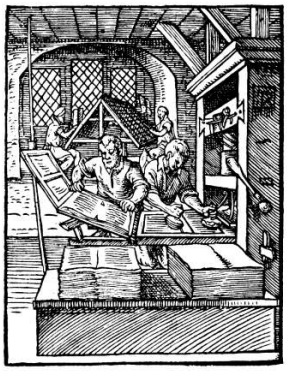
Sapper

Knock-Out

Sapper

Knock-Out



Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338051615

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
THE END

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

IT is difficult to say what it was that first caused Ronald Standish to adopt his particular profession. Indeed, it is doubtful whether it should be called a profession in view of the fact that he worked at it for love and only when the spirit moved him. Case after case he would turn down because they failed to interest him: then, apparently quite capriciously, he would take one up, vanish for a space, and then return as unobtrusively as he had departed to his ordinary life of sport.

That these sudden disappearances proved a little embarrassing to his friends is not to be wondered at. Captains of touring cricket elevens, secretaries of golf clubs, were wont to raise protesting hands to heaven when sometimes, at the last moment, Standish backed out of a match. But having played for his county at cricket, as well as being a genuine scratch man at golf, they forgave him and continued to include him in their teams.

Had he chosen to take up the art of detection seriously there is no doubt that he would have attained a world-wide reputation. He had an uncanny knack of sorting out the relevant from a mass of irrelevant facts, and refusing to be diverted by even the most ingenious red herring. But as he worked for fun and not because he had to, his ability was known to a comparatively small coterie only.

It was on a certain evening in March that, in stage parlance, the curtain rose and discovered him in his rooms in Clarges Street. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate: a

whisky tantalus adorned the table. Outside the wind was howling fitfully down the street, drowning the distant roar of traffic in Piccadilly, and an occasional scurry of rain lashed against the window.

The owner of the rooms was standing with his back to the fire, an intent look of concentration on his face. Balanced on one finger was a driver, and it was evident that judgment was about to be pronounced. It came at last.

"Too heavy in the head, Bill: undoubtedly too heavy in the head. You'll slice to glory with that club."

His audience uncoiled himself from an armchair. He was a lanky individual whose appearance was in striking contrast to the speaker. For Standish was, if anything, a little on the short side, and his lack of inches was accentuated by the abnormal depth of his chest. He was immensely powerful, but in a rough house suffered somewhat from lack of reach.

"Can anything be done, Ronald?" demanded Bill Leyton. "I've only just bought the blamed thing."

"You might try having a bit of lead scooped out at the back, old boy, but I'm afraid the balance will still be all wrong."

He put the club back in its bag, that profound look of awed mystery, without which no golfer can discuss an implement of the game, still present in his expression.

"Too heavy in the head," he repeated solemnly. "And you tend to slice at the best of times, Bill. Damn! Who's that? Answer it, old boy, will you, and if it's Teddy wanting me to play tomorrow tell him I've gone to Paris for a month and have given up golf."

The lanky being crossed the room in a couple of enormous strides and lifted the telephone receiver.

"Hullo!" he remarked. "Yes--these are Mr Standish's rooms. Who is speaking?"

He listened for a moment, and then covering the mouthpiece with his hand, turned round.

"Bloke by the name of Sanderson," he muttered. "Wants to speak to you urgently."

Standish nodded, and took the receiver from the other's hand.

"Hullo! Sanderson," he said. "Yes--Standish speaking. What now? My dear fellow--on a night like this... Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!"

His voice rose in a crescendo and Leyton stared at him in amazement.

"Can't you hear me? Speak, man, speak. Hullo! Hullo!" He rattled the receiver rest violently.

"Is that exchange?" he cried. "Look here, I've just been rung up by Hampstead 0024, and I've been cut off in the middle. Could you find out about it?"

He waited, one foot tapping feverishly on the floor.

"You can't get any reply, and the receiver is still off? Thank you."

He turned to Leyton.

"It's possible that he was called away; I'll hold on a bit longer."

But a minute later he gave it up and his face was very grave. "Something has happened, Bill; I'll have to go to Hampstead. Either he's ill, or..."

He left the sentence unfinished, and Leyton looked at him curiously.

"What was it you heard?" he asked.

"He had just asked me to go up and see him at once. The last words he said were--'I've got...' He was beginning a new sentence, and he never completed it. I heard a noise that sounded like a hiss; then came a clatter which might have been caused by the receiver of his machine dropping on to his desk. And there's been nothing since."

He crossed to a small cupboard in the corner, and Bill Leyton raised his eyebrows. He knew the contents of that cupboard, and things must be serious if Standish proposed utilising them.

"If you're taking a gun, old lad," he remarked, "I suppose I'd better come with you. And on the way there you shall explain to me who and what is Mr Sanderson."

A taxi was passing the door as they went out, and Standish gave the driver the address.

"Tread on the juice," he added briefly. "It's urgent. Now, Bill," he continued as the car swung into Curzon Street, "I'll put you wise as to Sanderson. He is a man who occupies rather a peculiar position in the Government. Very few people have ever heard of him: very few people even know that such a job as his exists. He is of Scotland Yard and yet not of Scotland Yard; the best way to describe him, I suppose, is to say that he is a secret service man. Crime as crime is outside his scope: if, however, it impinges in the slightest degree into the political arena, then he sits up and takes notice. His knowledge of things behind the scenes is probably greater than that of any other man in England:

information comes to him from all quarters in a way that it doesn't even to the police. And if he were to write a book the wildest piece of sensational fiction would seem like a nursery rhyme beside it. So you will see that he is a man who must have some very powerful enemies, enemies who would feel considerably happier if he was out of the way. In fact..."

He broke off abruptly, and leaning back in his corner lit a cigarette.

"Go on," said Leyton curiously.

"I was having a talk with him a few days ago," went on Standish. "And for him he was very communicative: generally he's as close as an oyster. It was confidential, of course, so I'm afraid I can't tell you what it was about now. We must wait and see what it was that caused him to stop so suddenly."

"So it was that talk that made you bring a gun," said Leyton.

"Exactly," answered the other, and relapsed into silence.

Five minutes later the car pulled up in front of a medium-sized detached house standing back from the road. A small garden with a few trees filled the gap between the iron railings and the front door; save for a light from one window on the first floor the place was in darkness.

Standish tipped the driver handsomely, and then waited till his tail lamp had disappeared before opening the gate. The rain had ceased, but it was still blowing hard, and by the light of a neighbouring street lamp Leyton saw that his face looked graver than ever.

"Look at that blind, Bill," he said, "where the light is. That's his study, and what man sits in a room with a blind flapping like that? I don't like it."

"Perhaps he's round at the back," suggested the other.

"Let's hope so," said Standish shortly, and walking up the steps to the front door he pressed the bell.

Faintly, but quite distinctly, they heard it ring in the back of the house, but no one came to answer to it. He tried again with the same result: then stooping down Standish peered through the letter-box.

"All in darkness," he said. "And a Yale lock. Bill, I like it less and less. Let's go round and see if there's a light on the other side."

There was none, and for a moment or two he hesitated.

"Look here, old boy," he said at length, "there's something devilish fishy about this show. Strictly speaking, I suppose we ought to get hold of the nearest policeman, but I have a very strong desire to dispense with official aid for a while. I'm going to commit a felony: are you on?"

"Break in, you mean?" said Leyton with a grin. "Lead on, old man: I'm with you. Which window do we tackle?"

"None: a child could open this back door."

From his pocket Standish produced a peculiar-looking implement, the end of which he inserted in the keyhole. For a moment or two he juggled with it, and then there came a click as the bolt shot back.

"Asking for it, most of these doors," he whispered, and then stood listening intently in the passage. A faint light filtered down a flight of stairs in front of them, coming from a street lamp on the other side of the house. On their left an

open door revealed the larder: next to it the dying embers of a fire in the kitchen grate showed that the servants had been about earlier, wherever they were at the moment.

Cautiously he led the way up the stairs into the hall, where everything was plainly visible in the glare from the glass over the front door. And at the foot of the next flight he paused to listen again. But, save for the howling of the wind, there was no sound.

"Come on, Bill," he muttered. "Not much good standing here all night."

They went up to the first story: the room with the flapping blind was marked by the line of light on the floor. And with a quick movement Standish flung open the door, his revolver gripped in his right hand--a hand which slowly fell to his side.

"My God!" he cried. "I was afraid of it."

Seated at the desk with his back to them was a man. He was sprawling forward with his left arm flung out, whilst his right hand, crumpled underneath him, still clutched the telephone receiver. And from the edge of the desk a little stream of blood trickled sluggishly on to the carpet.

For a while Standish stood where he was, taking in every detail of the room: then he crossed to the dead man and very gently lifted his head. And the next moment he gave an exclamation of horror.

"Great Scott! Bill," he cried, "the poor devil has been stabbed through the eye."

It was a terrible wound, and with a shudder Leyton turned away.

"Let's get the police, Ronald," he said. "We can't do anything for him and this ain't my idea of a happy evening."

But Standish with a puzzled frown on his forehead seemed not to hear.

"What an extraordinary thing," he said at length. "Death must have been instantaneous, and therefore if it had been accidental--if, for instance, he had suddenly become dizzy and his head had fallen forward on to one of those spike things you skewer letters on we should see it on the desk. Now there is nothing there that could possibly have caused such a wound, so we can rule out accident. Suicide is equally impossible for the same reason: in any event, a man doesn't commit suicide in the middle of a telephone call. So it is perfectly clear he was murdered, or killed accidentally."

"My dear old boy, even I can see that," said Leyton a little peevishly. "What about my notion of the police? Let's ring up." Standish shook his head.

"We can't do that, Bill. It would mean taking the receiver out of his hand, and everything must be left as it is. You can go to the window, if you like, and hail a bobby if you see one passing: personally I want to try to get at this. Go and stand behind his chair for a moment, will you."

Obediently Leyton did so, though he was clearly puzzled. "What's the great idea?" he demanded.

"I'm trying to reconstruct what happened," said Standish, "and I wanted to see if that light in the wall over there made your shadow fall on the desk. As you notice, it does, which makes it even more difficult. Let's try it from the beginning. Sanderson was sitting in the chair he is in now, the receiver to his face and in all probability his right elbow resting on

the desk. His conversation was perfectly normal: quite obviously he was completely unconscious of being in any danger. He begins a sentence--'I've got,' and at that moment he is killed in a most extraordinary fashion. 'I've got'--what? That's the point. Was he going to say--'I've got information of some sort'; or was he going to say--'I've got so and so with me here'? If the first, it is possible that he didn't know the murderer was in the room: that he was stolen on from behind. But in that event a shadow would have been thrown, and Sanderson with his training would have been out of that chair in a flash."

"It's possible," put in Leyton, "that only the light in the ceiling was on."

"And that the man who did it turned on that one before leaving?" Standish shook his head. "Possible, admittedly, Bill, but most unlikely. Surely every instinct in such a case would be to turn lights off and not on. However, one can't rule it out entirely. Let's go on. Supposing he was going to say--'I've got so and so here': where do we get then? We wash out in the first place the extreme difficulty of striking such an accurate blow blindly from behind. The man, whoever he was, could have been standing in front of Sanderson or beside him. But even so it's terribly hard to understand. If you try to stab me in the eye with a skewer I'm going to move damned quick. Even if the man was standing beside him, and did a sudden backhander with his weapon, it seems incredible to me that Sanderson couldn't dodge it. One's reaction, if anything is coming at one's eye, is literally instantaneous."

"The plain fact remains that the poor devil didn't dodge it," said Leyton.

"There is another very remarkable point about the whole thing, Bill," went on Standish. "Why did the man select the middle of a telephone conversation of all times to kill him? It seems the one moment of all others to avoid."

"That certainly is a bit of a poser," agreed Leyton.

"It's such a poser that there must be a good reason for it, and there's one that occurs to me. If a man is speaking into a telephone, even one of the desk type like this, he keeps his head still. And that was probably essential for the infliction of this wound. Well--I'm just going to have a look round and see if I can spot anything, and then we'll go for the police."

He glanced through the contents of a paper-rack: there was nothing save a couple of invitations and some bills. Then his eyes travelled slowly over the desk. There was not much on it: a tray containing pens; a calendar; an open bottle of Stephens' ink. In the middle were several sheets of blotting-paper folded together into a pad, one corner of which was stained a vivid crimson--the dead man's head had fallen there.

"His pockets we had better not touch," said Standish, "but possibly the waste-paper basket might reveal something."

But it was almost empty: a torn-up letter, and a small fragment of blotting-paper with an ink stain in the centre of it was the total bag.

"Nothing much in that lot," he continued. "Hullo! this ink is still damp. And there's the place on the pad where this bit

was torn from. Cheer up, Bill," he added with a faint smile, "I've nearly done. By the way, I wonder where the cork of that bottle is?"

And Bill Leyton exploded.

"Damn it, Ronald, I don't know and I don't care. This room, with that poor blighter sitting dead there, is giving me the willies. What does it matter where the cork is? It probably was taken out of the bottle and fell on the desk and made a blot. Then that bit of blotting-paper was torn off to wipe it up with."

"And the cork was then thrown out of the window in a fit of pique," added Standish with mild sarcasm.

"But what can it matter, old boy?" said Leyton irritably. "The wound can't have been done with a cork."

And then he shrugged his shoulders: there had appeared on the other's face an expression he knew only too well. Standish was following up some idea in his mind, and nothing short of an earthquake would disturb his concentration. What possible importance could be attached to the fact that the ink bottle was minus a cork Leyton failed to see, but he knew the futility of arguing.

"You don't shake an ink bottle, Bill, before you open it," said Standish suddenly. "And that one is half empty."

"What the deuce?" began Leyton feebly.

"It's got this to do with it," said the other. "The cork would be dry when it came out. Therefore the ink that that little piece of blotting-paper was used to mop up did not come from the cork."

He stiffened abruptly.

"Listen," he whispered, "don't make a sound. There's someone moving downstairs."

The two men stood motionless, straining their ears. The wind had dropped a little, and in a momentary lull they distinctly heard the creak of a board in the hall below.

"Get behind the curtains, Bill," he muttered. "It may be that the murderer has come back for something."

They stood waiting tensely, one on each side of the window. Between them the blind, with a sort of devilish perversity, flapped more than ever, so that it was quite impossible to hear any noise in the house. And since the door opened towards the window the passage outside was invisible from where they stood.

Through a little chink Leyton could see most of the room: the dead man sprawling over the desk; the half-open door; the switches on the wall beyond. But it was at the door he was staring, fascinated: who was going to come round it in a few moments?

Suddenly he heard a stifled exclamation from outside, and glancing across at Standish he saw that he was standing rigid, his revolver ready in his hand. Then he once more looked at the door: the visitor had arrived. Seconds dragged on into minutes: the suspense was becoming unbearable when, happening to glance at the two switches, he saw a hand resting on them. And the next moment the room was in darkness save for the light from the street lamp outside.

He could no longer see the door itself, only the desk with its motionless occupant looking even more dreadful in the eerie half-light. But an unmistakable creak from the side of

the room told him the unknown had entered. What was going to happen now? he wondered; and the next instant he knew. Some hard object struck him a crashing blow in the face and in the stomach, and he let out a shout of pain.

"Splendid," came a voice from near the wall, "I thought I wasn't mistaken. I've got you covered, so just step into the lighted area by the window and step darned quick, or the next thing that hits you won't be a table."

Leyton glanced across at Standish, and saw him give a quick nod. The game was clear: evidently the table thrower thought there was only one man behind the curtains. So he stepped out obediently and waited. His nose felt as if it was broken, and he was half winded, but those were trifles compared to the shock the other man was going to get in a moment or two.

"You look a bit of a streak of misery in silhouette, don't you," went on the voice. "Let's have a look at you in real life. Peter--switch on."

And then things happened. He had a momentary glimpse of a vast individual about four feet away from him, and another man by the door. And the next instant he was tackled round the waist, and went crashing backwards, knocking over Standish, who had come out from his curtain and was standing just behind him.

"Two of 'em, Peter," roared the big man, "and one's got a gun."

What the result would have been is doubtful: he was wedged in a struggling mass between Standish, who was on the floor, and someone who felt rather like Carnera on top of him. But the end came most unexpectedly.

"Quit it, Hugh," cried another voice, "there's some mistake. I know this bloke."

"What's that?" The big man scrambled to his feet. "A mistake. There was no mistake about the revolver I saw in his hand."

"It's Ronald Standish. I've played cricket with him."

"Good Lord! it's Peter Darrell. Well, I'm damned." Standish was sitting on the floor rubbing his head. "Who in the name of heaven is your pal?"

"Drummond, old boy: Captain Hugh Drummond."

"I'm most dreadfully sorry," said Drummond. "I seem to have bloomered badly. But I saw poor old Jim Sanderson dead at his desk, and I could just see through the crack by the hinges of the door that there was someone behind this curtain. I couldn't see the other one, and I jumped to the conclusion that whoever it was couldn't be up to any good. So I drew the fox by bunging a table at it, and then I suddenly realised I was looking down a gun, when it doesn't do to stand on ceremony. However, those are all trifles: what on earth has happened here?"

"The poor old chap has been murdered," said Standish gravely.

"I'm not altogether surprised," remarked Drummond quietly. "He told me today that he thought the ice was getting darned thin. You've no idea who did it, I suppose?"

Standish was silent for a few moments while he studied the other.

"None," he said at length. "May I ask what brought you here tonight, Captain Drummond?"

"Nothing can prevent you asking what you like, Mr Standish," answered Drummond affably. "And perhaps I'll tell you if you'll answer the same question yourself."

"Cut it out, you two," said Darrell. "I personally guarantee each of you to the other. And it seems to me it would be best if we all pooled our knowledge."

"Bravely spoken, Peter," said Drummond. "But as that may be a longish job, oughtn't we to do something about this first? I suppose it will be necessary to get the police."

Standish glanced at him sharply.

"Of course it will," he cried. "What an extraordinary suggestion."

"Peter--I believe he suspects us," said Drummond. "You must explain to him some time or other that in the past we have always tried to dispense with their help. And mark you, Standish, we're on something pretty big: his murder proves it."

He went nearer the dead man and bent over him.

"My God! what an awful wound. Shot clean through the eye."

"Not shot," said Standish, "or I should have heard it. He was telephoning to me when he was killed. That's what brought Leyton and me up here."

"Not shot," echoed Drummond. "Then how in the name of fortune was that wound made?"

"Exactly," agreed Standish. "How?"

"At any rate, Peter, we now know why we couldn't get any reply on the 'phone," said Drummond after a pause. "Which, if you want to know, Standish, is what brought *us* up here also."

But Standish was not listening: he was staring at something under the desk.

"The plot thickens," he remarked as he stooped down to pick it up. "There is a lady in the case."

He held in his hand a fine bronze hairpin.

"It was lying half hidden," he said, "and the light happened to catch it."

"And he wasn't married," remarked Drummond thoughtfully. "That certainly looks the nearest approach to a clue there seems to be. Of course, it may belong to one of the servants. By the way--where are the servants? We haven't been exactly silent, have we?"

And as if in answer to his question they heard voices in the hall below. A man was speaking, and then came a woman's reply. They stood waiting, their eyes on the door. Someone was coming up the stairs; someone who evidently had no idea that anything was wrong, for they could hear him whistling under his breath. There came a perfunctory knock on the half-open door and a man appeared, who halted in amazement as he saw the four of them watching him. Then his eyes fell on the motionless figure at the desk, and with a gasp he staggered back against the wall.

"What's 'appened?" he stammered. "In Gawd's name--what's 'appened?"

"Who are you?" said Standish quietly.

"Mr Sanderson's butler, sir. I've just come in."

"What is your name?"

"Perkins, sir. I've just come in with my wife, sir. 'Ow did it 'appen, sir?"

"That, Perkins, is what we want to try and find out," said Standish. "Try and pull yourself together, my man, because I should like you to answer a few questions. Was that your wife I heard you talking to downstairs?"

"Yes, sir. We've just got in from the pictures."

"And when did you go out?"

"Quarter to eight, sir. Mr Sanderson let us go before he finished his dinner."

"Was anyone having dinner with him?"

"No, sir. He was alone."

"Did he say anything to you about expecting anybody after?"

"No, sir--not a word."

"Now, Perkins, here's a hairpin. Can you tell me if that belongs to your wife?"

The butler shook his head decisively.

"No, sir. That I know it doesn't. The missus has black ones."

"Is there any other maidservant in the house?"

Once again the man shook his head.

"No, sir. My wife and I do all the work."

"And you're quite certain, Perkins, that Mr Sanderson said nothing to you about expecting anyone this evening?"

"Quite positive, sir. His last words to me were--'Come back when you like and I hope you enjoy yourselves.' And seeing the light in the window, sir, I just came up to see if he wanted anything. What's 'appened, sir? Lumme--this will break the missus' heart. One of the kindest gentlemen I ever knew."

The man's grief was obvious, and Drummond laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"He's been foully murdered, Perkins," he said.

"Who's the swine what did it?" cried the butler. "Strewth! if I could get my hands on him he'd go the same way."

"That's what we all feel," said Standish. "And with luck we'll do it. But I want you now to do something. Go out and get hold of the first policeman you see, and bring him back here."

"Very good, sir: I'll go. As a matter of fact, there was one not far from the house when we came in."

With a last look at his master he left the room, and a moment or two later the front door slammed.

"There's no good interrogating the wife," said Standish. "The police can do that if they want to, and we've found out all we can from Perkins. By the way, Drummond--what made you say a little while ago that we were up against something pretty big?"

"I think that that had better keep," said the other quietly. "There are footsteps on the drive which must be Perkins returning with the necessary peeler. Tomorrow we can compare notes. But there is one thing we must settle at once. The mere fact that you were talking to him over the telephone is sufficient to account for you being here, but not for Peter and me. So until we've compared notes shall we have it that we were all playing a quiet game of push-halfpenny in your rooms and came together?"

For a moment Standish hesitated, and a faint smile flickered round his lips. He was beginning to remember one or two yarns Peter Darrell had told him on cricket tours in

the past which concerned Hugh Drummond--stories which he had largely discounted in view of the obvious hero-worship of the teller. But now he began to wonder if they were exaggerated. As a pretty shrewd judge of a rough house he had to admit that Drummond was a past master and could give him points. A glance at the unfortunate Leyton's nose, which was now a rich blue, and the feeling of his own elbow from which every particle of skin had been removed were sufficient confirmation of that fact.

"Don't forget," continued Drummond quietly, "that unless you agree I shall have to give my real reason for being here. The mere fact that I could get no answer to the telephone is not enough. And that means that things will come out at the inquest."

He looked at Standish searchingly.

"Things," he went on, "of which I don't think you are in complete ignorance yourself. Do we want them in the newspapers--yet?"

Voices could already be heard on the stairs: Perkins, wild and incoherent--the other stolid and unemotional.

"Right," said Standish, making up his mind. "We were all playing bridge in my rooms."

"Would to Allah we had been," muttered Leyton ruefully.

"Then I shouldn't be wanting a new face."

"This way, officer: here's the room."

Perkins flung open the door, and a policeman entered who, after a glance at the dead man, gave the other four a look of keen scrutiny.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. "This looks a bad business. May I ask what you know about it?"

"I'll tell you all we know about it, officer," said Standish.

The policeman listened attentively, making a note from time to time with a stubby pencil.

"Nine-forty, you say, sir, when you were telephoning. And there was no trace of anyone here when you arrived."

"The house was empty," said Standish.

"Then may I ask, sir, how you got in?"

"A very natural question, officer," remarked Standish.

"Feeling convinced that something was very much amiss I took the law into my own hands and broke in."

The policeman shook his head gravely.

"That's an offence, sir: you had no right to do so."

"I am fully aware of that fact," said Standish. "And I will take full responsibility for it when the time comes. I may say my name is very well known at Scotland Yard."

"Well, sir--it's your affair, not mine. And while I think of it, I'd just like the names and addresses of all you gentlemen."

They gave them to him, and he wrote them down in his notebook.

"Now, sir," he continued, "do you know of anyone who had a grudge against Mr Sanderson?"

"I can't say that I do," said Standish. "But his job was one in which he would almost certainly have made powerful enemies." The policeman nodded portentously, and then proceeded to examine the body. But after a short time he straightened up and shook his head.

"Well, sir, this is too big a job for me to handle: I must get the Inspector. Will you gentlemen be good enough to remain here while I go to the station. I shan't be long."

"All right, officer: we'll wait."

The policeman picked up his helmet, and a few seconds later the front door slammed behind him.

"You can wait downstairs, Perkins," said Standish. "Don't go to bed, of course, and you'd better tell your wife what has happened."

The butler left the room, and suddenly Standish began to laugh.

"Sorry, Bill: can't help it. Your face is one of the funniest sights I've seen for a long while."

"Glad you think so," grunted Leyton.

"I apologise, laddie," said Drummond. "I apologise profusely. But it's a dangerous hobby--hiding behind curtains. Look here, why don't you toddle off and get a raw steak on it: if you beat up a butcher he'll give you his whole shop as soon as he sees you."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Standish. "In fact, it's a good one, Bill. Luckily that policeman asked no questions, but the Inspector is bound to want to know what you've been doing. So you push off: I'll say you weren't feeling up to the scratch."

"And, Peter, you go with him," said Drummond. "I've got a hunch, Standish--may be right, may be wrong. But we're in a two-man show."

"What do you mean?" asked Standish, looking a little mystified.

"A show when it will be better for all concerned to move in couples," answered the other quietly. "There's every reason for Peter going with him if he's under the weather, and it would be a ghastly thing if he was knocked out properly before the fun begins."

"But you don't think..." began Standish.

"I do," said Drummond shortly. "The game has begun, I tell you, and Rule A is--Take no unnecessary chances. So get a move on, you two, or you'll be butting into the Inspector. And vet the taxi, Peter, if there's one loitering about near the house."

"You seem to have had a certain amount of experience in this sort of thing," said Standish when the other two had disappeared down the road.

Drummond gave a short laugh.

"Just a little," he confessed. "There have been times in the past when Fate has been very kind to me. And I'm thinking that she is still smiling. Tell me, Standish, did poor old Sanderson say anything important over the 'phone? Give you any names or information?"

Standish shook his head.

"Not a word. What about you at lunch today?"

"Nothing at all. He told me that he had been aware for some time of a big organisation in England which was definitely hostile to the country. Some of the smaller fry had been laid by the heels, but that until a few days ago he had had no idea who the big men were. He also said that things were getting very ticklish and that there might be something doing in my line."

"Which, I gather," said Standish with a smile, "is hitting first and talking after."

"Something of that sort," agreed Drummond vaguely. "I can push a feller's face in rather quicker than most."

"It's much the same as what he said to me," said Standish, growing serious again. "And I'm afraid I was rather

inclined to laugh at the old chap. By Jove! there's not much to laugh at over this development."

"That's a fact," agreed Drummond. "Who the devil was here, I wonder. Can it have been a woman alone?"

"A woman do that?" Standish pointed to the dead man. "Why not? I've known at any rate one in the past who'd do it and ask for more."

"It's the actual wound that staggers me, Drummond, as I was saying to Bill Leyton earlier. It was either the most astounding fluke that the aim was so accurate, or else his head must have been held from behind."

"Then," objected Drummond, "he would surely have bellowed down the 'phone. Anyway, one thing is clear: this organisation he was talking about is a reality and he had found out too much for their peace of mind."

"It looks like it, I agree."

Standish glanced at his watch.

"It strikes me that that inspector is a damned long time coming," he remarked. "The station is only about a quarter of a mile away."

"Do you know him by any chance?"

"Yes. A man called McIver: he's quite capable."

"Not old McIver?" cried Drummond. "Why, he and I are the greatest pals. We once chased an elusive gentleman called Peterson together, though I must admit that I did most of the chasing, and he didn't altogether approve of my methods. By the way, have you been through the drawers in the desk?"

"I haven't," said Standish. "Your somewhat unexpected arrival interrupted matters."

"We might fill in the time till the police come having a look, don't you think? There are his keys on that steel chain."

He gently removed the bunch from the dead man's trouser pocket, and unfastened it from the chain. The centre drawer they could not get at, as it would have entailed moving the body, but they went through all the side ones systematically. But save for one small scrap of paper they found nothing of interest. It had evidently been torn out of a cheap note-book, and on it was scrawled in an illiterate handwriting--"The day of the week backwards. If two, omit first."

The two men stared at it mystified.

"That's certainly not his writing," said Standish. "What the deuce does it mean?"

"Must be something important," remarked Drummond, "or he wouldn't have kept it. But it's got me beat."

"Same here," admitted Standish, and once again he looked at his watch. "Do you realise," he said, "that it's forty minutes since that policeman left? Even if McIver was out someone else ought to have come by now."

They looked at one another thoughtfully.

"Can't have done the policeman in, can they?" said Drummond. "No object that I can see."

"Well, I'm not going to stop here any more," cried Standish. "I'm going to the station myself. Will you come too?"

"Yes," said Drummond. "I will. I've still got that hunch about a two-man show, and I can't do any good here."