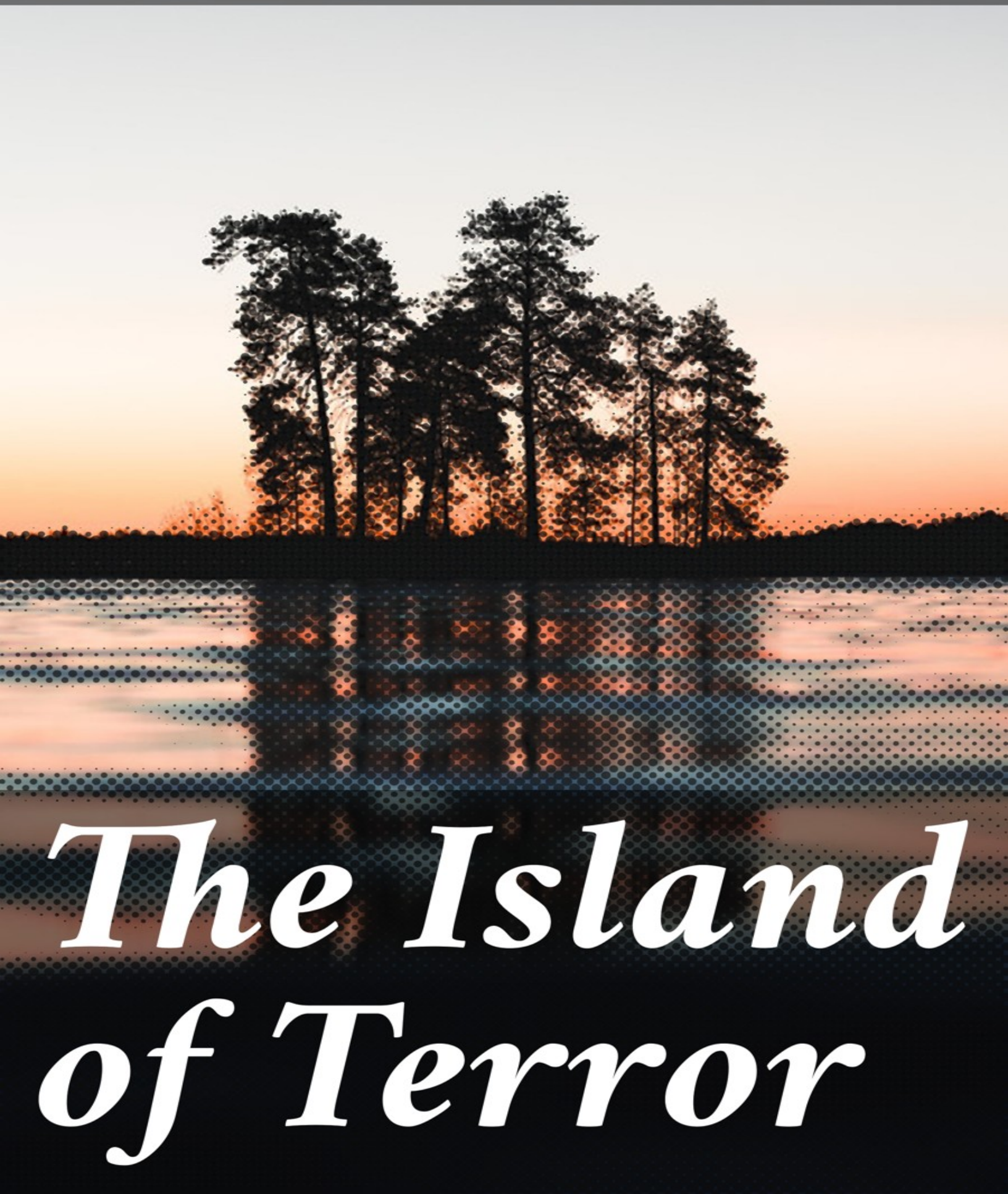
Sapper



The Island of Terror

Sapper

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CHAPTER I

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JIM MAITLAND tilted his top-hat a little farther back on his head, and lit a cigarette. In front of him twinkled the myriad lights of London; behind the door he had just closed twinkled the few candles that had not yet guttered out. The Bright Young Things liked candles stuck in empty bottles as their illuminations.

The hour was two of a summer's morning; the scene—somewhere in Hampstead. And as he walked down the steps into the drive he pondered for the twentieth time on the asininity of man—himself in particular. Why on earth had he ever allowed that superlative idiot Percy to drag him to such a fool performance?

Percy was his cousin, a point he endeavoured unsuccessfully to forget. In fact the only thing to be said in favour of Percy's continued existence was that since he embodied in his person every known form of fatuitousness, he might be regarded as doing duty for the rest of the family.

He had seen Percy afar off in the club before dinner, and with a strangled grunt of terror had fled into the cloak-room only to realise a moment later that he had delivered himself bound hand and foot into the enemy's hands. For the cloak-room was a cul-de-sac, and already a strange bleating cry could be heard outside the entrance. Percy had spotted him, and relinquishing the idea of burying himself in the dirty towel basket he prepared to meet his fate.

"Jim, my dear old friend and relative, you are the very bird I want. When did you return to the village?"

He gazed dispassionately at his cousin through his eyeglass, and a slight shudder shook him.

"Hullo! Percy," he remarked. "I hoped you hadn't seen me. Are you still as impossibly awful as you were when I last met you?"

"Worse, far worse, old lad. We dine together—what?"

Another shudder shook him; short of physical violence all hope was gone. He was in the clutches of this throw back to the tail period.

"But for the fact that I adore your dear mother nothing would induce me to dine anywhere near you," he answered. "As it is I happen to be free, so I will."

"Splendid. And afterwards I shall take you to a gathering of the chaps."

"What chaps?"

"You'll love 'em, old fruit. We have one once a month. Starts about midnight. Just a rag, don't you know. We're meeting this time in a cellar up in Hampstead. Beer and bones. Or perhaps scrambled eggs. Or even kippers. Except that kippers whiff a bit in a cellar, don't they?"

He suffered Percy to lead him to the dining-room, and as he looked round the familiar room it seemed impossible that it was more than five years since he had last been in it. A new face or two amongst the waiters—though not amongst the senior ones, they were all there; a few new faces, of course, amongst the members; otherwise it might have been yesterday that he was dining there with Terence Ogilvy and Teddy Burchaps preparatory to their departure for the

interior of Brazil. And of the three of them only he had returned....

"You're looking very fit, sir."

He glanced up to find the wine steward standing by the table.

"Thank you, Soames, I am. And you?"

"Much the same, sir. There is still some of the Lafite vintage wine left."

Good old Soames! Remembering that after five years. And yet—why not? That was life; to him a member's taste in wine was a thing of paramount importance. Especially, though he did not add this mentally, when the member was Jim Maitland.

That he was a sort of legendary hero in the club, was a fact of which Jim was completely ignorant. And had anyone hinted at it he would either have been annoyed or else roared with laughter. To him a journey to the interior of Turkestan came as naturally as one to Brighton comes to the ordinary man. He had been born with wanderlust in his bones; and being sufficiently endowed with this world's goods to avoid the necessity of working for a living, he had followed his bent ever since he left Oxford.

And the result, had he known it, would have surprised him. For it was not only in the club that a glamour lay round his name, but in a hundred odd places fringing the seven seas. Anywhere, in fact, where the men who do things are gathered together, you will sooner or later hear his name mentioned. And if some of the stories grow in the telling it is hardly to be wondered at, though in all conscience the originals are good enough without any embroidery.

Talk to deep-sea sailors from Shanghai to Valparaiso; talk to cattlemen on the *estancias* of the Argentine and after a while, casually introduce his name. Then you will know what I mean.

"Jim Maitland! The guy with a pane of glass in his eye. But if you take my advice, stranger, you won't mention it to him. Sight! his sight is better'n yourn or mine. I reckons he keeps that window there so that he can just find trouble when he's bored. He's got a left like a steam hammer, and he can shoot the pip out of the ace of diamonds at twenty yards. A dangerous man, son, to run up against, but I'd sooner have him on my side than any other three I've yet met."

Thus do they speak of him in the lands that lie off the beaten track, the man with a taste for Château Lafite. And as he sat sipping his wine, warmed to the exact temperature by the paragon Soames, there came the glint of a smile into his eyes. Dimly he was aware that near at hand the impossible Percy was drivelling on, but it seemed as far removed from him as the buzzing of an insect outside a mosquito curtain. White tie, white waistcoat, boiled shirt—and six weeks ago...London: the solidity, the respectability of his club—and six weeks ago...

"Have you ever hit a man on the base of the skull with a full bottle of French vermouth, Percy?" he said suddenly. "I suppose you haven't. You'd wait for an introduction, wouldn't you, before taking such a liberty?"

"I don't believe you've heard a word I've said, Jim," answered his cousin plaintively.

"I haven't, thank God! I heard a continuous droning noise somewhere: was that you?"

"Are you coming to-night?"

"Coming where?"

"I knew you hadn't been listening. To this meeting of the chaps in Hampstead."

"Nothing would induce me to. I don't want to see them, and they don't want to see me."

"But they do, dear old lad. I've told 'em about you, and they're all simply crazy to meet you."

"What have you told 'em about me?"

"All sorts of things. You see, I sort of swore I'd bring you along the first possible chance I had, and what could be fairer than this?"

And in the end Jim Maitland had allowed himself to be persuaded. Though he ragged him unmercifully for the good of his soul, he was really quite fond of his cousin: moreover, he was possessed of a genuine curiosity to gaze upon the post-war young in bulk. Since 1918 he had spent exactly seven months in England, so that his knowledge of the genus was confined to what he had read in books.

Presumably they were much the same as the young have ever been *au fond*. Only conditions to-day afforded them so much more freedom. Certainly the lad Percy could drive a motor-car all right, he reflected. He had one of the big Bentleys. Providence in the shape of a defunct aunt of doubtful sanity endowed him with more money than he knew what to do with. But he drove it magnificently, and Jim Maitland was a man who loathed inefficiency.

The traffic was thinning as they spun across Oxford Street, and Percy who had been silent for nearly five minutes began to give tongue again. He rattled off a string of names—the blokes, as he called them, who would probably be there. And then he paused suddenly.

"By Jove! That reminds me. I wonder if she'll roll up. The last of these shows I went to," he explained, "a girl beetled in who was a new one on me. Came with Pamela Greystone and her bunch. And I happened to be talking about you at the time. Well, as soon as this wench heard that you knew something about South America she was all over it."

"I should think there must be quite a number of people who know something about South America," said Jim, mildly sarcastic.

"Yes, but I was telling 'em, you see, that you knew all about the interior."

"All about the interior!" Jim laughed. "My dear old Percy, draw it mild."

"Anyway, she's damned keen to meet you. Got a brother out there or something."

"As long as she doesn't feel certain that I must have met him as we were both out there at the same time, I can bear it. What's her name, by the way?"

"Haven't an earthly, old lad. As far as I remember, Pamela called her Judy. But I'm not even certain about that. Here we are!"

They drew up in front of a largish house standing in its own grounds. Half a dozen other cars were already there, and two more were in the drive. A large notice board

proclaimed that the place was for sale, and Jim remarked on it to his cousin.

"Been for sale for months, old lad. Belongs to the father of one of our push, and he lets us use it. Let's get in: there's most of 'em here already."

He approached the front door and knocked twice, upon which the top of the letter-box was lifted.

"Pink Gin with guest," said Percy.

"Pass Pink Gin and guest," answered a voice, and the door opened.

"To prevent gate crashing," explained Percy solemnly. "We have a different pass-word each time, and it's always the name of some drink."

"I see," said Jim gravely. "A most necessary precaution. What do we do now?"

"Go below to the cellar and drink beer."

"Excellent," remarked Jim. "But why the cellar?"

"My dear old lad, why not?"

With which unanswerable remark Percy led the way.

The cellar was a big room, and Jim looked round him curiously. Some thirty people were there, and every one of them seemed to be talking at the top of their voices. The air was blue with cigarette smoke, and a strong aroma of kipper smote the nostrils.

"That's the filly I was telling you about, Jim," said Percy in his ear. "The girl in grey over there in the corner."

She was talking to two men, one of whom was evidently a licensed buffoon; and Jim glanced at her idly. Then once again his gaze travelled round the room. It all seemed very harmless, and very uncomfortable, and rather stupid. Why a

large number of presumably wealthy young people should elect to sit in a cellar in Hampstead and drink beer, when they could have done so in comfort anywhere else they liked, defeated him.

He realised that Percy was introducing him to various girls, and he grinned amiably. Now that he had come he had better make the best of it. And then suddenly he found himself looking into a pair of level blue eyes—eyes with a faintly mocking challenge in them. The buffoon had drifted away: for the moment the girl in grey and he were alone.

"And what," she remarked, "brings the celebrated Jim Maitland into this galaxy?"

"Curiosity," he answered simply. "But why, in Heaven's name, celebrated?"

"Our little Percy has insisted so long and so often that you are, that we've got to believe him in common politeness. Well—what do you think of it?"

"Frankly, I think it's all rather childish," he said. "Does it really amuse you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It's a change," she answered. "Let's go into that corner and sit down. I want to talk to you. Rescue some cushions from somewhere."

He studied her thoughtfully as she sat down with legs tucked under her. A slightly tip-tilted nose; a complexion, unaided as far as he could see, that only the word Perfect could do justice to: a slim, delicious figure. Her hands were capable but beautifully kept: her hair clung tightly to a boyish head.

"Well," she said calmly, "do you approve?"

He smiled: said as she said it the remark rang natural.

"Entirely," he answered. "But before we go any further, has it occurred to you that the egregious Percy has omitted the small formality of telling me your name."

"Draycott. Judy Draycott."

She took a cigarette from her case, and Jim held a match for her.

"Tell me, Mr. Maitland, are we very different to the pre-war vintage?"

"That's rather a poser," he said, sitting down beside her. "You see, I've been so little in England since the war that I'm not a very good judge."

"But—this." She waved her hand at the room.

"Good Lord!" he laughed, "what has this got to do with it? This is nothing: a tiny symptom in a tiny set."

"You know you are of what I always call the lost generation," she said. "What Daddy would call the senior subaltern brand."

He stared at her in silence, a little nonplussed by her serious tone.

"You were our age just before the war," she went on, "and you're still young enough to play. But there are so few of you left."

"True," he said gravely. "I suppose my contemporaries took it worst."

"There are the old people, and there are us. But the connecting link has gone—you and yours."

"The lost generation," he repeated slowly. "A nice idea—that."

"And that's why I asked you what you thought of us," she said. "You are one of the few who are qualified to judge."

He lit another cigarette before replying.

"Am I? I wonder. One can see changes—naturally, but who am I to say whether they are for the better or for the worse. This show, for instance. Frankly, I can't quite see this happening twenty years ago. Nor did everyone call everyone else 'darling' on sight."

"Trifles," she said impatiently. "Just trifles. What about the big things?"

"I should say," he answered without hesitation, "no change. Different methods, perhaps: different ways of doing them—but, in the end, the same."

"You don't think we're softer than you were?"

"I think this age is more comfort loving, undoubtedly, if that's what you mean. But that, I suppose, is only natural in view of the advance of science. Then one hacked to a meet—now one goes in a car."

"But are we as keen on adventure?"

Jim laughed.

"Adventure! Where is adventure to be found these days?"

"You ought to know," she said, "if half the stories I've heard about you are true."

"I'm afraid I'm a hard-bitten case," he answered. "But I can assure you that even I have noticed the difference in the last few years. Everything is getting far too quiet."

"Even in South America?" she asked.

South America! Percy's remark came back to him, and he wondered what was coming next. This, apparently, was what she had been leading up to.

"You can get a bit of fun out there at times," he said lightly. "But then if one looked for it I dare say one could get it in London."

"What sort of people are they?"

He laughed again.

"My dear Miss Draycott," he said, "they vary as much as the inhabitants of Europe. But by your question I assume you mean the brand that we generally lump together as dagos. Well—just like every other breed, you will find all sorts and conditions. I have excellent—very excellent friends amongst them. But they are people who require careful handling. For instance, there is one thing you must never do to a dago, unless you know him extremely well. Never pull his leg. He doesn't understand it: he takes it as an insult. There's another thing too. You stick a knife into one—or shoot him up—and he'll understand it. You hit him with your fist on the jaw and he'll never forgive you."

"Are they very quick with a knife?" she asked.

"Very—and with a gun. Moreover, they will shoot on the smallest provocation. You'll understand, of course, that I'm not talking about the vast majority of them, who are perfectly harmless people. But to show you what I mean about the minority I'll tell you a thing I saw with my own eyes. It was in Buenos Aires about seven years ago, and a *festa* was in progress. Streets crammed with people and cars: the whole place *en fête*. I was on the side walk, and a motor-car alongside me was being held up by a man who was standing just in front of the mudguard. So the driver sang out to him to move. He didn't, and after a while the driver very slowly drove forward, and hit the man a glancing

blow on the leg. Now it was a blow that wouldn't have hurt a fly: it didn't even make the man stumble. But what happened next? As the driver came abreast of the man, he calmly stepped on to the running-board, drew his gun and blew out the driver's brains. And this, mark you, with the wife in the back of the car."

"But didn't they arrest the murderer?" cried the girl.

"Not a hope," said Jim. "He just vanished into the crowd. No—they want watching, especially if they've got a drop too much liquor on board."

He pressed out his cigarette.

"Is it permitted to ask why you are so interested in South America?"

For a moment or two she hesitated, staring in front of her. Then she turned to him.

"I am almost tempted to use that stereotyped beginning, Mr. Maitland, and ask you not to laugh at me."

"Then I'll make the stereotyped reply and assure you that I shan't," he said quietly.

"I've got a brother," she went on, "a twin brother. Arthur is his name. And for the past two years he's been knocking about in South America. Brazil, Uruguay, and the Argentine. Now I know that must seem very small beer to you—I mean I don't think he's been much off the beaten track. But at any rate he's been out there, cutting away from this."

"Has he been on a job?" asked Jim.

"He went out there to start with for a big oil firm. Quite a good salary. And of course Daddy allows him something. But after two or three months he found he couldn't stick it—his

manager was a swine—so he chucked it. Since then he's been drifting about."

"I see," said Jim quietly. Only too many youngsters had he met drifting about on something allowed by Daddy, and the brand did not inspire him with confidence. Then feeling that his remark had been a little too curt, he added—"It's difficult to get jobs out there—jobs that are any good, that is—unless a man is an expert. And it's a devilish expensive place to drift in."

"I know it is," she answered. "Arthur often wrote me to say how fearfully difficult he found it. At any rate he managed to carry on, until he had the most amazing piece of luck about six months ago. And now I'm coming to where I'm afraid you may laugh."

"Risk it," said Jim with a smile.

"If I'd known you were coming this evening I'd have brought his letter, but I think I can remember all that matters. It seems that he did some kindness to a broken-down sailor in Monte Video—an Englishman. And this sailor on his deathbed told him some wonderful story of buried treasure."

Jim's face remained expressionless, though this was worse than he had expected.

"I hope he didn't part with any money for it," he said quietly.

"I thought you'd take it that way," she cried. "I did myself when I first read it. But he didn't pay anything: the sailor gave him the whole secret. And, anyway, he'd only got his allowance: he had no capital to give away."

"What is the secret?" he enquired.

"That I don't know," she said. "He wrote something about a map, and fitting out an expedition, and from that moment I never heard another word till three weeks ago when I got a letter saying he was coming home by the next boat. He also said that if anything should happen to him I should find a letter addressed to me at my bank."

"If anything happened to him," repeated Jim thoughtfully. "Have you been to the bank to enquire?"

"Yes. I was actually in there this morning, and there was nothing."

"Then everything seems plain sailing, Miss Draycott. Presumably nothing has happened to him, and if you got his letter three weeks ago he ought to be in England by now. And as soon as you see him you'll be able to get the whole story."

"I know. But it is there that I wondered if you could help."

She looked at him appealingly.

"Me! I shall be delighted. But how?"

"By going into the whole thing with him, and telling him what you think. You know so much more than he does, Mr. Maitland, and if there's anything in it, it would be wonderful if we could have your advice."

For a while he hesitated: then he looked her straight in the face.

"I'm going to be perfectly frank, Miss Draycott," he said. "The story, as you've told it to me, is, not to mince words, as old as the hills. From time immemorial drunken seamen have babbled in their cups of treasure trove—gold ingots, diamonds, and all the rest of the paraphernalia. Generally, too, they have a roughly-scrawled map, with, as often as

not, a skull and cross bones in the corner to make it more realistic. In fact the one point in which this story differs from the others is that he did not apparently touch your brother for money. Had he done that I should have advised you to dismiss the whole thing from your mind at once."

"You don't think there is anything in it, then," she said despondently.

"I don't want to be brutal," he answered with a smile, "but I fear that is my opinion. I'm not going to deny that there must be treasure—probably priceless treasure—hidden away in odd parts of the globe: relics of the old pirate days. I'm not going to deny that the Spanish Main, and the coast of South America are very likely localities for the hiding-places. But what I do feel doubtful about is the likelihood of a down-and-out seaman in Monte Video knowing anything about it, or getting the clue to its whereabouts."

"But as you said yourself he took no money," she persisted.

"I know that," he agreed. "And I think it is quite possible that the sailor *genuinely* believed what he was saying—they're the most gullible brand of men on earth. I think it is more than likely that when your brother befriended him he really intended to do him a good turn. What I'm doubtful of is the value of the information. Certainly I would say one thing. Unless your brother, when you see him, has something very much more definite to go on than the ramblings of a seaman on his last legs, and this map he was given it would be nothing short of madness to sink any money in an attempt to discover it."

"I quite see your point," she said. "But would it be too much to ask you to hear what he's got to say? And then give us your advice."

"Of course not," cried Jim. "I shall be only too delighted. The Dorchester Club always finds me when I'm in London, and I shall be very interested to hear what he has to tell us. I know that country better than most men, and if I can be of any assistance—count me in. But for Heaven's sake—don't build any false hopes on it."

A sudden surge of Bright Young Things bearing kippers and beer descended on them, and carried her away, leaving Jim with an intense female who shook him to the marrow on sight. He suffered her for five minutes, at the end of which period, to his inexpressible relief, Percy bore down on him.

"I never thought I should be glad to see you, Percy," he said, as the female drifted away, "but that woman is a menace to society."

"She is pretty grim," agreed his cousin. "What price the other girl? I saw you with your noses touching for about half an hour!"

"A nice little soul," said Jim. "Do you know anything about her?"

"Just been asking Pamela. Her father is a retired General: got a house down in Sussex."

"Has he got any money?"

"Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!" Percy dug him in the ribs. "So that's how the land lies, does it?"

"Don't be such a damned fool," said Jim curtly. "To say nothing of being infernally offensive."

"Sorry, old man. I but spoke in jest. As a matter of fact, I think not. In fact Pamela said he was darned hard up. There's a pretty useless waster of a son, I gather. Out in South America somewhere."

Jim glanced at his watch: the time was two o'clock.

"Not going yet, old lad, are you?" cried Percy. "We're only just beginning."

"You needn't come," said Jim. "I shall walk. This terrific excitement is too much for me. Do I have to whisper some mystic countersign to get out of the place?"

"No, just open the front door and beetle away. Sure you don't want me to take you in the bus?"

"Quite," said Jim, and beetled.

Thus did we find him, top-hat tilted, pondering on things in general with the lights of London in front of him. He strolled slowly along drawing in great lungsful of fresh air. Lord! what an atmosphere there had been in that cellar. And what a damned-fool performance. Yet, in a way he was glad he had gone: the girl in grey was rather a dear. Stupid of him not to have asked her address: probably get it when this young brother of hers rolled up.

He grinned to himself: the hidden treasure yarn had whiskers on it even when compared to the old Spanish prisoner chestnut. No less than four times had it been put up to him—vouched for chapter and verse. Still he was sorry for the girl, especially as there was not much money. Probably been building on it a bit: only natural that she should. But the brother must be a fool as well as a waster to be taken in by it.

A belated taxi homeward bound hailed him, but he shook his head. He was not in the least sleepy, and the combined reek of smoke and kipper still clung to him. Young asses! He tried to picture what any of them would do in a really tight corner. That fellow who had been thumping the piano for instance, and thumping it damned well, to do him justice. But imagine him in a bar in Valparaiso, for instance, when a rough house started.

He threw away his cigarette: was he being quite fair? After all, none of them had had any experience of such a show. And maybe if they did do the wrong thing it would be from lack of knowledge, not from lack of guts. It wasn't given to many to have the opportunities he had had, even if the desire to have them was there.

Men had often told him that he looked for trouble, but that was not quite the case. There was no need for him to look: it came of its own accord. True, he never went out of his way to avoid it: he would even admit that he welcomed it with both hands. Something out of the ordinary, off the beaten track: something with a spice of danger in it—that was all he asked of life. And up-to-date life had given him full measure, pressed down and running over.

He glanced up at the houses he was passing: solid lumps of respectability, symbolic of everything that he was not. In them reposed lawyers, stock-brokers, city magnates—men who formed the backbone of the Medes and Persians. Not there was adventure in London to be found: the mere thought of it was an outrage. In Dockland, perhaps, but that was cheap: the glamour of Limehouse exists only in the imagination of the novelist. No—though he had told the girl

that it could be found he was wrong: it could not be found anywhere these days....

And at that moment, clear and distinct in the still, night air, there rang out the sharp crack of a revolver shot.

CHAPTER II

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JIM MAITLAND stopped dead in his tracks, and then with the instinct bred of many years he sought the cover of a neighbouring tree. In the country he had just come from he would not have given the matter a second thought—gun work was part of the ordinary day's round. But in London, especially in this part of London, it was a very different affair. The sound had come from the house in front of him—a house very similar to the one he had just left, save that it was not for sale. It was in darkness, but some kind of subconscious instinct told him that there had been a light in one of the upper windows a few seconds previously.

He glanced up and down the road: not a soul was in sight. He looked at the two neighbouring houses: there was no sign of movement. And then, as was his way, he summed up the situation. He was unarmed: whoever had fired the shot obviously was not. Short of breaking in there was no way in which he could get into the house. And finally it was no earthly business of his. Wherefore, by three very good reasons to *nil* he should have continued his leisurely walk towards home. Which was quite sufficient to decide him to do nothing of the sort. He would give it a few minutes at any rate to see if anything further happened.

He turned the collar of his evening overcoat up so as to cover the white patch of dress shirt. Then motionless as a statue he seemed to merge himself into the trees in front of him. For a while nothing happened: then from one of the windows there came a gleam of light. It was extinguished

almost at once, only to appear in the one just below it and then go out again. Someone was coming down the stairs. It shone for a second over the front door, and then the door itself opened, and two men came out.

Jim realised they would have to pass within a few feet of him, and pressed himself still closer against the trees. He could hear their voices—one furiously angry, the other seemingly apologetic—though as yet he could not make out their actual words. One was a big man, the other a head shorter, and it was the big man who was in a rage.

"You damned, blithering fool, Ernesto."

The words suddenly rang out clearly as they approached the gate.

"You've wrecked the whole thing."

The latch clicked, and Jim waited for the smaller man's reply.

"He should not have struck me," he said. "I do not like to be struck."

The two men stood peering up and down the road.

"Not a cursed thing in sight," growled the big man. "However, perhaps it is as well. No one heard. We'll walk. But we've got to get a move on."

They strode off, and Jim waited till their voices died away in the distance. The big man was obviously English: the other from his accent and name seemed Spanish. Or possibly South American. And it struck him that it was a queer coincidence that he should have been mentioning that characteristic of the dago to the girl only a little time previously—their hatred of being hit.

He came out from behind the tree, and began to size things up. In the house in front of him was a man who had been shot. He might be dead: he might only be wounded. The great point was—was there anyone else inside? If there were servants, some of them at any rate would have been roused by the noise of the shot, and lights would have been turned on. But the house was still in darkness. On balance therefore he decided against servants.

What about the owner of the house? Was it the big man himself? That seemed quite probable, and if so what was he going to do? To leave a dead man, or even a seriously-wounded man lying about the place would prove an awkward matter. He recalled his last words about getting a move on. What had he meant? And putting himself in his place Jim decided that the only possible course would be to take the body away and dump it elsewhere. It would be unsafe even to leave it till the following night, since any doctor would know that the man had been dead some time, and it would be most improbable for a corpse to lie through the day in the open undiscovered.... It would therefore give a strong pointer to the police that the body had been moved *after* death, whereas if it was done at once they might be deceived. So it boiled down to the fact that if he was going to do anything at all, it must be done at once. He crossed the pavement rapidly, opened the gate and skirted up the short drive keeping in the shadow of the bushes.

That he was proposing to break into somebody else's house disturbed him not at all. His position, even if he was discovered, was a far stronger one than the owners who would have to explain the presence of a dead or wounded

man on his premises. But he had no intention of being discovered. Amongst other attributes possessed by Jim Maitland was an almost catlike gift for silent moving at night, and he proposed to utilise it to the full.

He glided up the steps like a dark shadow, only to find as he had expected that the door was locked. Yale latch-key: no hope there. Then keeping close to the walls he made a circuit of the house. There was a basement and with any luck he hoped to find a window open, or at any rate one he could force easily. There was just sufficient light for him to see without having to strike matches, and suddenly he gave a little exclamation. There, straight in front of him, was a broken pane of glass. He reached down, unfastened the bolt, and a moment later he was inside.

The darkness now was far more intense, and after taking two or three cautious steps forward he struck a match. It was a risk, but the window by which he had entered was at the back of the house, so the light could not be seen from the road. He held it above his head, and as he peered round a puzzled frown came over his face. The shortcomings of modern servants he had been told about, but the filth of the room called for some further explanation than that.

The dust was thick on the table and on the floor: clearly the place had not been touched for months. And when he opened the door and continued his exploration he found it was the same everywhere. Kitchen, scullery, and larder were all in like condition: the basement evidently was not used. Where, then, did they do the cooking?

A flight of stairs led to the next floor, and he went up them noiselessly. Luckily the door at the top was not locked.