

Arthur Gask



The Hidden Door

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CHAPTER I. — BIRDS OF PREY

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GRIM and grey was Thralldom Castle. Eight hundred years and more its mighty walls had reared their heights to Heaven, scorched by the suns, buffeted by the tempests and fretted by the lashing rains.

Old, old was its story and many were the dark and sinister secrets that it held. Its dungeons had echoed to the groans of the dying and its vaults had witnessed many a hurried burial of the dead. All down the ages the tides of battle had beaten round it, cruel and devouring as the storm driven tides of the sea. Its great stones had been hewn and fashioned in the days of the lance, the battleaxe, and the arrow, and the turmoil and din of battle had been its cradle song and the anthem of its later years.

Generation upon generation of the fierce lords of Thralldom had been born there, and always the lust of strife and conflict had flowed strongly in their veins. Often, in the heyday of Merrie England they had fought for their kings, and often, again, they had fought against them, but always, the shadow of their might had loomed dark and chilling upon the country-side.

And now the last of the Thralldoms lived there, Roger, 27th lord of Thralldom, a frail, worn, and childless old man.

Grim and grey was Thralldom Castle.

THE well-dressed man spoke irritably, and with a frown upon his handsome, but rather dissipated-looking face.

"The telephone wires are all laid underground, there are burglar alarms to every door and window, and there is a bell in the belfry of the east tower that can be heard five miles away. There are four men-servants and at night they are all armed. The great door of the castle is locked and barred at ten and opened for no one after then. There is a strong steel grille cutting off the hall and, at the entrance to the picture gallery there is an even stronger one." He nodded emphatically. "I tell you the whole place is guarded like a prison and"—he flicked the ashes from his cigarette—"there are paintings there worth a hundred thousand pounds."

Four men were seated in a long oak-panelled room of an old house that stood close beside the sea-shore upon a lonely stretch of the Suffolk coast. It was late afternoon, the light was waning and the moan of the sea mingled with their low voices. From the windows, it could be seen that the sky was overcast with heavy clouds. A storm was working up from over the sea.

"And you can suggest then no way at all in which we can get in, Captain?" asked a tall, shrewd-looking man, with a small Vandyke beard, speaking with a slight American twang. He added sharply: "Surely, after all this time and with all the opportunities you have had, you must have formed some ideas."

"No satisfactory ones, Hudson," was the reply. "The place seems absolutely fool-proof to me."

"But with you staying right in the castle," went on the American, obviously in some annoyance, "could you not arrange for some door or window to be left unsecured one night?"

"Impossible," replied Captain Bonnett, "for directly it is dark, two of the men go round and bolt and lock every door and set the alarms, and as often as not, Lord Thralldom goes with them to see that it is properly done. He's a tottering old man, but he's fierce, and rules the castle with a rod of iron. As for the windows, they are barred outside with thick steel bars, and if you lift any of the sashes at night, the alarm rings instantly in the hall." He shook his head frowningly. "Besides, the only way in which you can approach the castle at all is through the big spiked doors on the drawbridge and they are locked at ten and an alarm switched on that would wake the dead."

"But we could avoid the drawbridge altogether," said Hudson, "by getting over across the moat."

"Ten feet deep," commented the captain dryly, "and a barbed wire fence on both banks." He shook his head again. "No, old Thralldom has thought of everything and we have a hard nut to crack."

"But I am certain, Captain Bonnett," said a third man with a high forehead, and the long and oval face of an artist, "that this secret passage under the moat exists. As I have told you, it is referred to most definitely three times in those 'Chronicles of East Anglia,' and the writer, from his perfectly confident tone, evidently knew what he was writing about."

The captain sighed. "But what good is that to us, Fenner," he replied, "if we don't know where the passage is?" He raised his voice a little. "But, mind you, I agree that the passage exists and I am certain Thralldom knows about it, too, for I brought up the matter casually at dinner last night, and he denied all knowledge of it in a way that made me

suspicious at once. He seemed most annoyed that I had mentioned it, and pressed me as to where I had got the idea. But I just told him all old castles were supposed to have secret passages and tried to pass it off at that. Still, he was annoyed, as I say, and showed his annoyance plainly."

"Of course he'd know all about it," exclaimed Hudson testily. "It's not likely that a man whose ancestors have been at Thralldom Castle for all these hundreds of years would not know everything about his own place." He snapped his fingers disdainfully. "But he's not going to shout about it to all the world, especially now he's got that Rubens there."

"Well, anyhow we ought to be making more efforts than we are to find it," said Fenner warmly, "for its discovery would solve our greatest difficulty at once." He raised one long slim forefinger solemnly. "Remember, the information I have obtained about it is exclusive, for it must have been more than 300 years since anyone had touched that manuscript until I chanced upon it among the archives in the Cathedral Library at Norwich. As I have told you, it was dated 1586, and the writing was so faded that I could hardly read it." He looked round challengingly at the others. "I risked my whole career in taking it, and I say we ought to concentrate upon finding the opening to that passage."

The captain shook his head. "But it is not practical, Fenner, for if you went searching anywhere in the castle grounds you'd be seen and it would be reported to Lord Thralldom at once."

"But I've been searching at night," replied Fenner quickly, "and these last three nights I have located several likely spots and one particularly—the ruins of the Priory, for it was

built about the same time as the castle and, although it is at least 300 yards away, still, the lie of the land would favour a passage there. I can only search, however, when there's a moon, for its dangerous crossing over the marshes in the dark."

Silas Hudson looked contemptuous. "Well, I don't think much of your secret passage and I never did." He turned sharply to the captain. "Have you made any attempt to look for it inside the castle?"

The captain seemed greatly amused. "Made any attempt!" he laughed. "Why,—although I've been his guest there for nearly three weeks now, and although he has known me since I was a boy and my father before me for nearly all his life—he would trust me little more than he would a perfect stranger and the walled-up part of the castle is barred to me, as to everyone else." His voice hardened in emphasis. "I tell you, now he's bought that Rubens, the safety of his paintings has become an obsession with him, a perfect mania, and since his friend, the Earl of Blair, lost those two Hogarths, night and day he is terrified that Thralldom Castle is going to be raided. He is crazed about it, and I hear him asking the servants a dozen times a day if they have noticed any suspicious strangers about." He shrugged his shoulders. "As to exploring any of the underground parts on my own—why, he's had a big iron door fitted at the top of the stairs leading to the dungeons and it's always kept locked."

A fourth man spoke gruffly. "Well, if a door can be locked, it can be unlocked, and I'd like to see the one that would trouble me for long."

The last speaker was quite different in appearance from any of the three men who had already spoken. He was obviously of the superior artisan class and dark and swarthy of complexion, and short and thick in stature, there was nothing attractive about him. His expression was a quarrelsome one, and he was now regarding his companions from scowling eyes under big and bushy eyebrows.

"All right, Kelly," said the captain in a careless, offhanded way, "we don't doubt that, of course, and if we could only put you alongside any door, I am sure that part of the business would be easy." He turned back to the others. "But I admit I'm quite at a dead-end now, and unless chance comes to our aid, I have little hope of our getting at any of those paintings." He added impatiently. "I've been there nearly three weeks already, and I can't stretch out the copying of that Turner for ever. If I hadn't been pretty competent with my brush, he'd have been suspicious of me long before now, but I'm really surprised at the colours I've managed to put in."

"Those burglar alarms could be knocked out of action, quick and lively," said Kelly, "and once in the castle, I'd soon make short work of them." He regarded the captain resentfully. "Surely they must go to sleep there sometime. They can't be keeping awake all night."

"That's true enough, Kelly," replied the captain, "but how to get you all into the castle when they are taking that sleep, and arrange for you to work undisturbed, is the difficulty."

"You may think the castle fool-proof," went on Kelly brusquely, "but if I could get a squint inside, I reckon I could

soon find a weak place somewhere."

"Yes, that's it," exclaimed Hudson, quickly, "and that's been our mistake. Kelly's the practical man when it comes to breaking in anywhere, and he ought to have been given a chance to look round."

"Quite so, Hudson," commented the captain dryly, "and it's so simple that I only wonder we did not think of it before." He smiled sarcastically. "We might drop his lordship a line—'Mr. Kelly presents his compliments and would like to look over the castle, with a view to effecting a forcible entry later on. If his lordship has no objection, Mr. Kelly will leave his bag of tools, ready to hand, just outside the premises.'"

"You're funny," snarled Kelly, "but it's not funny business we want, and as for those armed men-servants, I'm not worrying about them. I met one of the footmen in the bar of the Westleton pub last week, and, although he's a big lout of a chap, there wouldn't be much fight in him, besides"—and he looked more unattractive than ever—"two could play at that game, couldn't they?"

"But no violence, Kelly," exclaimed the American quickly. "I would never countenance that. We want a peaceful acquisition of those paintings, and we must come and go in complete secrecy. No one must see or hear us, and we must leave no trails behind."

"That's all very well," growled Kelly, "but how are we going to do it?" He laughed coarsely. "As for violence—you were pretty ready with your knuckle-duster, weren't you, that afternoon in the Jew's shop in Houndsditch? I remember you——"

"That'll do," interrupted Hudson hastily. "Our hands were forced then, and we had to make a quick getaway at any cost." He shook his head and looked very stern. "But Thralldom is not Houndsditch, Kelly, and those methods won't do here."

Kelly scoffed contemptuously and then directed his black looks again upon the captain. "And you told us it was going to be an easy job directly you got into the castle," he said sourly, "and the boss put up the money and rigged you up to go visiting your flash friends, and now after all these weeks,"—he sneered—"you come here and tell us the time's been wasted and there's nothing doing."

The captain reddened angrily. "Well, you don't want to be told a pack of lies do you? I'm doing my part and shirking nothing." He thumped his fist upon the table. "I'm up to the neck in this as deep as any of you, and if the thing's going to be done at all, I'll see it's going to be done properly, and we'll attempt nothing unless there's a reasonable chance of success." He dropped his voice suddenly to a cold contemptuous tone. "You can't barge into Thralldom Castle, Mr. Kelly, like a bull crashing through a gate. It needs thought and preparation and a certain amount of intelligence as well." He spoke most politely. "So we'll decide what is best to be done, Mr. Kelly, and then when the purely mechanical part is required"—he bowed—"your services will be most handy, I am sure."

Kelly looked as black as thunder and was obviously about to make some furious retort when the American broke in quickly.

"All right, all right," he said, "we'll take it you are doing your best, but all the same, it's annoying with expenses mounting up every day and nothing to show for them." He turned the subject abruptly. "Why didn't Lord Thralldom answer Fenner's letter?"

"He never will let people in to view his paintings," replied Captain Bonnett, "and it's his craze now to keep everyone away from the castle."

"But Fenner wrote he was the curator of the Norwich Art Gallery," went on Hudson, "and that should have been a passport anywhere." He pursed up his lips as if he were very puzzled. "Fenner wrote a most courteous letter."

"Too courteous," laughed the captain, "and so he just threw it in the waste-paper basket in consequence." He nodded his head. "Now, if Fenner had written and called him a selfish old fool for keeping his paintings to himself, he'd have probably taken some notice of the letter and sent an angry reply. He's a fiery old fellow, his lordship."

The American whistled. "Oh! he's like that, is he? Well, I'll write and call him one," he exclaimed. "I'll string him on into starting a correspondence and then perhaps I may get a look into the castle that way." His voice rose excitedly. "Yes, I know what I'll do. I'll write and tell him that his precious Rubens is not genuine. I'll write and say it's only an early Van Dyck." He rubbed his hands together. "That'll rattle him. He's sure to have heard of me as a dealer of some standing, and if I give that as my considered opinion, he's bound to take notice." He beamed round at the others. "I know these crazy collectors, and if you can only manage them properly, you can draw them every time. What do you say. Captain?"

The captain looked thoughtful. "Not at all a bad idea," he said after a moment. "You write like that and when he gets your letter I'll boost you up and say you're the biggest noise in the picture world over in New York. I'll tell him——" He stopped suddenly and eyed the American intently. "But if he's heard of you, he may have heard some queer things, Hudson. You've been in the newspapers a few times, remember, and although no one's been successful in their actions against you, still there've been some nasty remarks published about you."

"And I could have sued those who made them, if I'd wanted to," replied Hudson quickly, "but it wasn't worth my while."

"No-o," agreed the captain slowly, "it wasn't worth your while, was it."

"But where do I come in?" asked Kelly, frowningly, of the American. "Your getting into the castle will be no more good to us than the captain, here."

"Oh! won't it?" exclaimed Hudson gleefully. "You just see. If old Thralldom says I can inspect his Rubens, then I'll take you in with me as my servant as a matter of course. I'll make out I'm crippled with rheumatism and can't walk without your help." He turned to the captain. "What do you say to that, Bonnett?"

Captain Bonnett nodded. "If you can screw Thralldom up to the point of agreeing to let you into his gallery, I don't suppose he'd mind Kelly coming too." He laughed spitefully. "But Kelly'll have to cultivate a slightly more agreeable look, or the whole business may fall through directly he sees him."

Kelly made no comment and contented himself with regarding the speaker contemptuously.

The captain went on. "And another thing strikes me. If ever we are successful at getting at those paintings, we shall have to be devilish careful afterwards." He spoke impressively. "None of you here can bolt away at once."

"We never intended doing so," replied Hudson smiling. "We shall just hide the canvases and remain on here as simple holiday-makers until things have blown over."

He laughed. "We've thought of somewhere to hide them, where no one would look in a thousand years."

"Well, that's all right," said the captain, "because apart from Fenner being a known authority in the Art world and you a dealer in pictures,"—he grinned—"friend Kelly's got a sort of reputation as being an artist in his profession, too, and the police would be interested in him at once."

"There's never been any conviction recorded against me," exclaimed Kelly quickly; "the police have nothing on me."

"That may be," commented the captain dryly, "but don't you forget, Kelly, you've been up for trial, and the old judge said then you were devilishly lucky to have been given the benefit of the doubt, also——"

"Well, well," interrupted the American, anxious to prevent any quarrelling, "there's no need to go into that. We've got plenty of other things to think about, and we must find a way of getting that Rubens. After all this trouble we're not going to be beaten by a doddery old man."

"Oh! but he's not doddery," said Captain Bonnett quickly, "and don't you go imagining it for a moment. The

old boy's seventy-live, and weak and shaky in his legs, but in his mind he's as keen and alert as he ever was and, except in the matter of his paintings, he's a shrewd and capable old man."

"Well, I'll write that letter to him anyhow," commented Hudson, "and pitch it in hot and strong and we'll see what'll happen then." He stretched out his hand. "Now, pass over that plan you've made and it'll be hard luck if it doesn't come in useful some time."



CHAPTER II. — THE LORD OF THRALLDOM

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IT was breakfast time at Thralldom Castle and four persons were seated at one end of a long table, in a very large room that at one time had formed part of the old banqueting hall.

The room was replete with every comfort and furnished in a modern fashion with a rich, thick carpet covering the huge floor.

The meal was proceeding with its usual ceremony, and three men servants were in attendance, a butler and two footmen, with the latter attired in the Thralldom livery of gold and green.

The owner of the castle was seated at the head of the table, and notwithstanding his general appearance of weakness and ill-health, his sunken cheeks and pallor of complexion, he looked every inch a great lord of Thralldom.

Tall and gaunt and of tremendous frame, it was evident that at one time he had been of great strength, and if now his body were yielding to the infirmities of age, there were yet all signs that the spirit in him was still unquenched.

His whole mien was one of authority. He held his head in the commanding poise of a man who was accustomed to be obeyed. The lines of his face were set and stern, and his big, fierce eyes glared out of their bony sockets with the same fire with which his ancestors had glared over the battlefields of Agincourt and Crecy.

That he was not in a particularly good humour that morning was evidenced by the silence of the others participating in the meal.

Lady Deering, his niece by marriage, made no attempt to start any conversation; her step-daughter, Ann Devenham, was pensive and thoughtful and his guest Marmaduke Bonnett, looked bored and as if he would be glad when the meal were over.

Presently Lord Thralldom spoke, and his voice was deep and vibrant and very different from what might have been expected from his frail appearance.

"And are you sure, Bevan," he asked frowningly of the butler, "that Rawlings had not arrived before I sat down?"

"Quite sure, my lord," replied the butler with great deference.

"But I ordered him to be here at a quarter to nine," went on Lord Thralldom, looking round impressively at the others, "and it's a nice thing when my bailiff does not condescend to obey my orders."

"But he's generally most punctual, Uncle," remarked Lady Deering, meekly, "and I never remember him being unpunctual before." She was a pretty but rather faded-looking woman in the middle forties and evidently stood in great awe of her lordly relation.

"Well, he's not punctual this morning," boomed Lord Thralldom, "and I shall have something to say about it when he arrives." His voice hardened. "Ring up at once, Bevan, and ascertain why he's late." He turned to his grand-niece and eyed her sternly. "You look tired this morning, Ann. Didn't you sleep well, last night?"

Ann Devenham had just turned twenty-one, and a charmingly pretty girl, she showed all signs of her aristocratic ancestry. She was slightly built but of a beautifully proportioned figure. Her features were finely chiselled and she had large, very dark, blue eyes. Ordinarily of a bright disposition, just now she looked quiet and rather sad.

"Yes, thank you, Uncle," she replied in a melodious voice. "I slept quite well."

"But you look tired," went on Lord Thralldom. "I expect you had too many late nights last week at Saxmundham."

"But I didn't," replied the girl quickly. "The vicar would only allow me to go out twice." She smiled. "He said he had strict orders from you."

Lord Thralldom eyed her solemnly. "But your sleep was broken last night," he said. "You heard noises and were disturbed by the hooting of the owls."

"No, I was not," replied the girl. "I heard no noises at all and slept quite well, I tell you."

Lord Thralldom turned to one of the footmen. "You heard noises, you say, William? You heard the hooting of an owl?"

The footman addressed inclined his head in assent. "Several times, my lord," he replied. "It kept me awake."

Lord Thralldom frowned uneasily. "I don't like it," he remarked. "It was very disquieting. I heard it many times."

"But what's wrong in that, sir?" asked Captain Bonnett, looking very puzzled. "There are plenty of owls about here, and night is their time to hoot."

Lord Thralldom shook his head ominously. "But it wasn't an owl that hooted. It was a man."

Captain Bonnett put down the cup he was in the act of raising to his lips. "Good gracious!" he exclaimed, "but what was he hooting for?"

"That's what we want to know," replied his lordship sternly. "It was a signal of some sort. The castle is being watched." He turned to the footman whom he had addressed before. "It didn't sound like an owl, did it, William?"

"No, my lord," replied the footman instantly. "It didn't sound like one."

"It was someone trying to imitate an owl, wasn't it?" went on Lord Thralldom, and when William had at once acquiesced, he turned to the other footman. "And you heard it, too, didn't you, James?"

"Quite plainly, my lord," was the reply. "Several times."

His lordship looked satisfied. "Well, you always have your automatics ready, both of you?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord," instantly replied the two footmen together.

"Then don't hesitate to use them," said his lordship. "Shoot at once if you see any movement below the castle, at night."

"Oh Uncle! But it would be so very dreadful if anyone were killed," exclaimed Ann Devenham quickly. "It would be terrible—and they might be quite innocent people."

"Not they," returned Lord Thralldom brusquely. "They'd certainly be armed themselves, and at any rate, they'd be there for no good purpose. If they come round here spying at night and meet with any accident," he shrugged his shoulders, "then, that's their own look out."

"But it frightens me," went on the girl impulsively, "the very idea."

"Frightens you!" echoed Lord Thralldom. He laughed grimly. "Why, there's nothing in killing a man when he's out to kill you. It takes very little getting used to, and the novelty soon passes." He stirred his coffee slowly and continued reminiscently. "I was a young subaltern in India when I killed my first man, and I remember it was just as dawn was breaking in a deep valley between two high hills. I stabbed him in a hand-to-hand fight and I admit the look upon his face, as he fell, haunted me for quite a little while"—he frowned—"until I had had my breakfast, in fact, but after that I might never have thought of it again if I had not happened to have broken a good knife." He eyed Ann again very sternly. "But nothing ought to frighten you, Ann, for you have Thralldom blood in you and a Thralldom never knows fear."

"But I am frightened of lots of things," exclaimed the girl quickly, "and if I thought as you do, I should be afraid to be living here. Really, Uncle," she went on frowningly, "I am sure you must be imagining everything."

Lord Thralldom's eyes glowed like coals of fire. "I imagining!" he retorted angrily. "You don't know what you are talking about, girl." He clenched his bony hands together convulsively. "Why, since I bought that Rubens, six months ago, all eyes in the art world have been focused on this castle, and a thousand miscreants, if one, are scheming to obtain it." His voice rose in the intensity of his passion. "Night and day, if we only knew it, we are being watched, and only the utmost vigilance on our part can preserve my

collection of paintings intact." He glared round at everyone. "Night after night, when you have all been sleeping, I have laboured up on to the battlements and seen figures flitting through the mist. Yes, it may be thought that I am mad and crazy in my precautions, but I realise, only too well, that I am not."

The footmen preserved the uninterested and impassive expressions of well-trained servants, but the others at the table glanced covertly at one another and then turned down their eyes.

Suddenly the door opened and the butler glided in. "Well," enquired Lord Thralldom irritably, but dropping his voice at once to a quieter tone, "why is not Rawlings here?"

The butler spoke very quickly and in some excitement, "He's not at his home, my lord. He went out just before eleven and has not been home all night. No one knows where he is, and Mrs. Rawlings is very anxious. She thinks he must have met with some accident."

A moment's silence followed and then Lord Thralldom exclaimed angrily, "Rubbish! What possible accident can he have met with?" He glared at the butler as if he were the offender. "More likely she's had a quarrel with him and is afraid to say, and he's absenting himself now to teach her a lesson." He looked round at the others at the table. "His wife's a nagger and he's sick of it. That's it." He waved to the butler. "At any rate, ring up again and say I'm most annoyed."

The butler left the room and Lady Deering gave an amused little laugh. "Really," she said, addressing herself to Captain Bonnett, "it's becoming quite the fashion for

husbands about here to go off and leave their wives and now, if Rawlings has gone off, he'll be the third one who has done so in the last few weeks."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Captain Bonnett politely. "That's very strange."

"Yes," went on Lady Deering, "first there was Mr. McHenty, from the bank in Saxmundham, who went off with a school-teacher from Leiston, then——"

"Oh! Mother, don't be so horrid," broke in her stepdaughter warmly. "You are only repeating the scandal of these little towns. It may not be true at all that he went off with Miss Pascoe. No one is sure of it. He may just have lost his memory, like many over-worked people do and not remember where he lives."

Lady Deering smiled indulgently. "Well, they both disappeared the same night, dear, didn't they? And it came out afterwards, too, that they were both upon unexpectedly friendly terms." She turned again to Captain Bonnett. "Now it looks suspicious, doesn't it? A middle-aged man and a young girl both missing at the same time?"

The captain hesitated a moment. "On the face of it," he replied judicially, "I am afraid it does. When did it happen?" he asked.

"About a month ago," replied Lady Deering, "and nothing's been heard of either of them since. Of course it created a great sensation, because they were both naturally well-known where they lived." She smiled again. "But really, as I say, this running away seems to be quite infectious, for not a week after they were missing, a man who keeps an inn

at Yoxford, went off and left his wife in exactly the same way. Everyone said——"

"Nagging wives," interrupted Lord Thralldom sharply. "I tell you, men won't put up with what they did years ago, and Rawlings' wife must have tried his temper quite a lot."

"Oh! Uncle," reproved Ann Devenham reproachfully, "She's not a nagger. I'm sure of it. She's very quiet and good-tempered."

"Well, she never looks it to me," said Lord Thralldom coldly, "and I'm not likely to be mistaken in a woman at my time of life."

The butler brought in some letters upon a salver and handed them round. There were several for Lord Thralldom, two for Lady Deering and one for Ann. Ann did not open hers but, after one quick glance at the handwriting, laid the envelope, face-downwards, upon the table and turning to Captain Bonnett began talking to him in a subdued tone of voice.

The captain regarded her admiringly. She had beautiful, even, white teeth and a very pretty mouth and when she talked or smiled, an attractive dimple appeared upon her cheek. There was nothing in any way intimate in the nature of their conversation, and the girl was only apparently now indulging in it in order to give her relatives an opportunity of going through their correspondence undisturbed.

Presently rumbles of annoyance began to come from Lord Thralldom, and as usual with him when upset, he began talking to himself. He was reading a letter written in bold, big, handwriting, and his lips quivered and his face grew furious as his eyes travelled down the sheet.

"Impertinence!" he muttered, "insolence, a brazen piece of effrontery!" He looked up suddenly with blazing eyes. "Listen to this, Marmaduke," he said. "Can you conceive of greater impudence in all your life?"

"What is it, sir?" asked the captain with an appearance of great interest.

Lord Thralldom spoke in a tone of concentrated fury. "A man writes, a fellow writes"—he could hardly get his breath—"that my Rubens is not genuine and that it is only an early Van Dyck."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the captain, "quite a good joke." He scoffed. "Some jealous crank, probably, who just writes to annoy you."

"An early Van Dyck!" repeated Lord Thralldom breathlessly. "What colossal impertinence!" He scowled. "It certainly does annoy me. It annoys me a great deal."

"Well, tear it up," said the captain promptly, "and don't give it another thought." He shook his head. "I can never understand these anonymous letter-writers, wasting the price of a postage stamp."

"But it's not anonymous," frowned Lord Thralldom. "He signs his name and"—he scowled again at the sheet before him—"it looks like 'Hudson'."

"Hudson! Hudson!" repeated the captain. "Well, that's a very common name and I've never heard of any Hudson who knows anything about paintings except a Yank, and he's a Silas Hudson, of New York."

Lord Thralldom was glancing at the letter in his hand. "This signature," he said slowly, and there was just a little

quiver in his voice, "looks like 'Silas Hudson,' 'Silas Q. Hudson,' I think."

The captain almost fell back in his chair in astonishment. "Silas Q. Hudson!" he exclaimed. "Why that is he. Silas Quaver Hudson, one of the greatest experts in the United States." He leant forward excitedly. "Good heavens! What does he say?"

Lord Thralldom was now coldly contemptuous. "He writes this," he replied,

"Sir,

"I consider it my duty to inform you that I have strong reasons for believing that 'The Man of Sorrows' you purchased last March from Mr. Claud Happer is not a genuine Rubens. I think I know the painting, and if so, it is one of the early works of Van Dyck! If you wish, I shall be agreeable to examine it and pronounce my opinion. I am approaching you, because I happen to be in your neighbourhood and upon a holiday.

"Yours faithfully,

"Silas Q. Hudson."

A few moments' silence followed and then Lord Thralldom burst out angrily. "The man's an imbecile, a perfect fool! How dare he suggest such a thing?" He turned sharply to the captain. "You say you know him?"

Captain Bonnett nodded. "Slightly," he replied. "I was introduced to him, a couple of years or so back, in New York. I just spoke to him and that was all, for, as usual, he was monopolising all the conversation."

Lord Thralldom glared. "Well, he's mad, isn't he, quite mad?"

The captain shook his head. "I wouldn't like to say that, sir, for"—he hesitated and then admitted as if with some reluctance—"he's supposed to be about the cutest dealer on the other side."

"The sharpest, perhaps, the most unscrupulous," sneered Lord Thralldom. He lifted his hand suddenly. "Ah! I remember now. I've heard of him. It was he who paid that poor widow in Denver two thousand dollars for her Botticelli last year and sold it the same week to Sir Charles Medway for more than ten times that amount."

"Well, two thousand dollars," commented the captain slowly, "was all the executors under the will asked, and Hudson was quite justified in accepting those terms upon the spot, besides"—and he smiled—"that widow was not in any way poor. Her husband left her over a hundred thousand—not in dollars, but in pounds."

"Well, Hudson's a rogue, anyhow," said Lord Thralldom, "and I'd never trust him a yard." Anger flared up into his eyes again. "But what does he know about my Rubens? He's never seen it?"

The captain looked very impartial. "Oh! I wouldn't like to say that, sir. He's supposed to have seen every painting of note that's come into the market during the last twenty years, and remember—your 'Man of Sorrows' has changed hands three times since Lord Molesbury died."

"Yes," sneered Lord Thralldom, "and in the salerooms the greatest art experts in the world have examined it and pronounced it genuine, so this Hudson's opinion is of no

value and," he snapped his fingers together—"I'll ignore him."

"Yes, that's right," agreed the captain instantly. "Treat him with contempt and don't reply to his letter." An idea seemed to strike him suddenly and he shook his head slowly. "But the fellow's a great talker and of course he'd broadcast it all about that you don't dare to allow him to examine your painting."

"Don't dare?" sneered Lord Thralldom. "Don't condescend, you mean!"

"And it'll be disappointing in a way," went on the captain meditatively, "for I'd have loved to have watched him when you showed him the Rubens. He's such a cocksure beggar and it would have been such a slap in the face for him."

"Probably not," growled Lord Thralldom, "for whatever opinion he'd come to—to save his own face he'd still stick to it that he was right."

"No, no," exclaimed the captain most emphatically, "he'd never do that, for whatever his faults, Art is an obsession with him. His whole life is wrapped up in the works of the great masters and he thinks of nothing but them." He spoke with enthusiasm. "No, Silas Q. Hudson would grovel in abject humility before his worst enemy, if that enemy possessed a canvas of great beauty or note."

"Well, my 'Man of Sorrows' has great beauty," said Lord Thralldom slowly, "and it's one of the great paintings of the world," He was silent for a few moments and then went on hesitatingly, "Really, from what you tell me of the fellow, I'd like to humiliate him. I detest all Americans."

"Oh! you'd humiliate him right enough," laughed the captain. "In two minutes he'd be as limp as a rag."

"What's he like to look at?" asked Lord Thralldom thoughtfully.

"Well, you couldn't mistake him for anything else but an American," was the reply. "He's tall and skinny and has a sharp, hatchet face with hard, calculating eyes, and lips that are pressed up tight. He'd walk in here as if he owned the earth, with no respect for anyone, and as if he were better than you and, indeed, it would almost be an act of grace, I think, if he took off his hat."

Lord Thralldom regarded the letter again. "And he's on the telephone," he said slowly. "He's stopping at that old house on Minsmere Haven." He suddenly snarled savagely. "Gad! I'll have him up." He turned to the butler. "Ring up Minsmere House, Bevan. Ask for a man called Hudson, and instruct him to come up here at eleven this morning. Order him to be up at the exact time. And you, William and James," he went on, "see to it the whole time that this man is here, that you keep by him. Never leave his side unless I order you to."

The old man, with no further appetite for his breakfast, then rose shakily from his chair and with tottering steps, and leaning heavily upon Lady Deering's arm, passed out of the room.

A couple of minutes or so later the Captain and Ann Devenham were together in the music room. She had made a sign to him to follow her, and never loth to dance attendance upon a pretty girl, he had, with no demur, complied. But it was quickly apparent that it was for no

sentimental reason that she wished to speak to him alone, for addressing him at once, she said sharply,

"Captain Bonnett, I am very angry with you. You know what uncle is and yet you deliberately egged him on to ask that American to come up to the castle. It'll only upset him and perhaps make him downright ill again." She stamped her foot. "I don't know what you did it for, but you ought to have had more sense."

Captain Bonnett's face flushed. The accusation was so direct and so unexpected that, for the moment, he was not ready with any reply.

"Yes," went on the girl with her eyes flashing, "it was very clever the way you did it, and you may have thought no one would have seen through it, but I did."

The captain had quite recovered himself now, and smiled as if he were amused. "But you are really too clever, Miss Devenham, and like so many of your charming sex, too quick in jumping at conclusions." His voice hardened resentfully. "I never tried to influence your uncle in the slightest and am not in the least bit interested in this man, Hudson, coming up."

"Well, it looked like it," said Ann Devenham, "and at any rate, you might have influenced him the other way."

Captain Bonnett shrugged his shoulders. "But does it matter?" he asked. "Besides, if you want my candid opinion, it'll do him good. He wants to throw off this nonsensical idea that everybody is trying to rob him." He lowered his voice to gentleness. "But look here, Miss Devenham, you've not been at all nice to me these last few days, in fact ever since you came back from Saxmundham. I've noticed it in many

ways. You're different from what you were before you went away."

It was now the girl's turn to flush, but she answered quickly enough. "I am sure I don't know what you mean. I am no different from what I have ever been." She regarded him, as cold as ice. "I was never particularly nice to you at any time, was I?"

"But you let me kiss you that night in the chapel," he retorted, stung to anger by the contemptuous look she was now giving him.

"Let you!" she exclaimed indignantly. "It was done before I could prevent it. You kissed my arm when I was playing at the organ, and if the matter had been worth mentioning I should have spoken to my uncle about it." She inclined her head, and added cuttingly, "But it was after dinner, Captain Bonnett."

"Bah! a woman always knows when a man is wanting to kiss her," scoffed the captain, "and you deliberately put temptation in my way. You were quite——" but the girl had turned quickly and was leaving the room.

"Pretty little vixen," he remarked after she had gone. "She wants a good slapping, and I'd like to be the one to give it to her." He nodded his head smilingly. "But I'd make love to her well, first."

At eleven o'clock, when Lord Thralldom was reading in the great library of the castle, the door opened and the butler announced, "That Mr. Hudson has arrived, my lord."

His lordship looked up sharply from his book. "Oh! he has, has he?" he frowned. "Well, tell Captain Bonnett to come here and then bring the man in."