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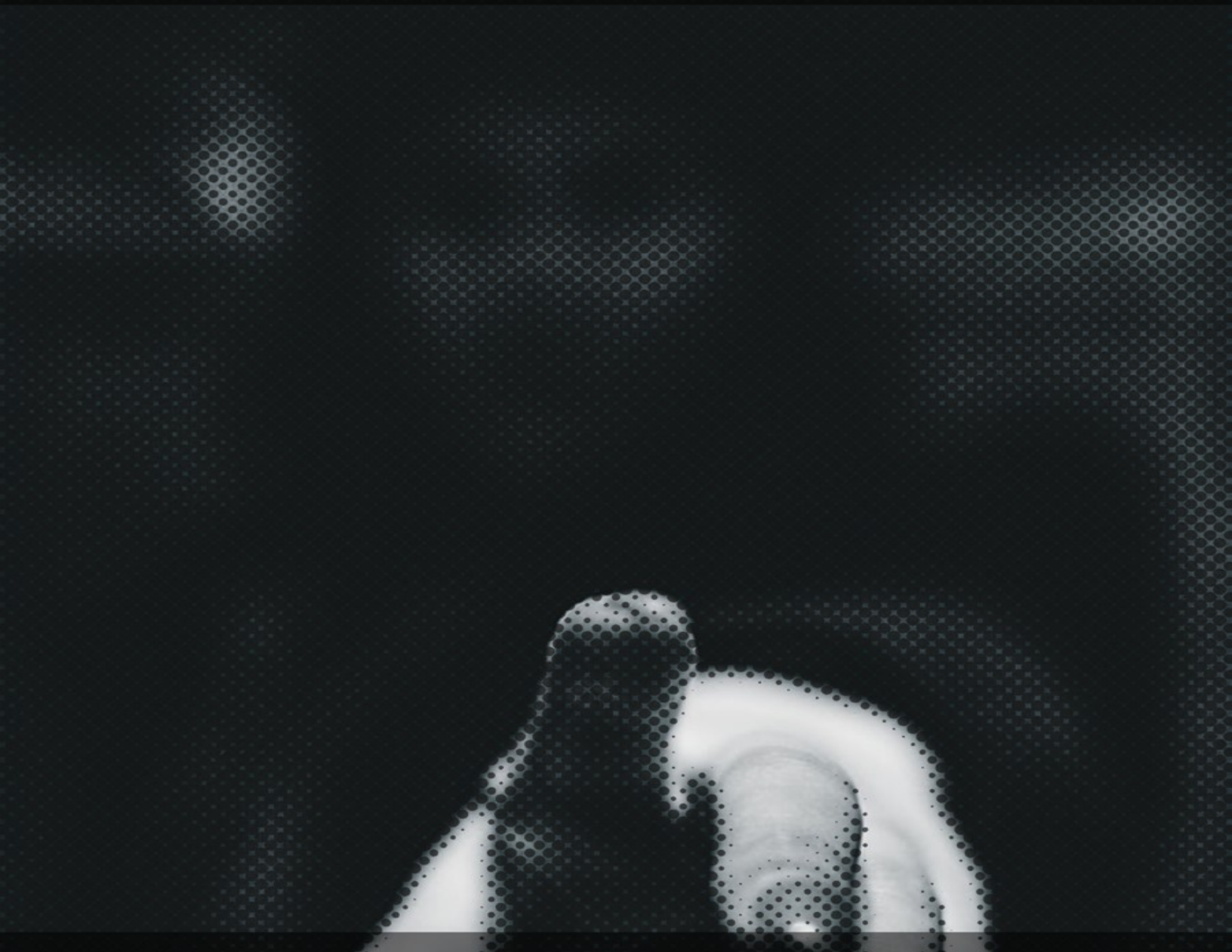

The Finger of Fate and Other Stories

Sapper

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I. — THE FINGER OF FATE

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THE funny thing about it was that I did not know George Barstow at all well. Had he been an intimate personal friend of mine, the affair might have seemed more natural. But he wasn't: he was just a club acquaintance with whom I was on ordinary club terms. We met sometimes in the bridge-room: occasionally we had an after-lunch brandy together. And that was all.

He had obviously a good deal of money. Something in the City, but a something that did not demand an extravagant amount of his time. His week-ends were of the Friday to Tuesday variety, and I gathered that he was on the border line of golfers who are eligible to compete in the Amateur Championship.

In appearance he was almost aggressively English. Clean-shaven, and ruddy of face, his natural position was with his legs apart on the hearth-rug and his back to the fire. Probably a whisky-and-soda in his hand, or a tankard of beer. Essentially a man's man, and yet one who by no means disliked the pleasures of the occasional night-club party. But one realised they must only be occasional.

He was, I suppose, about thirty-seven, though he was one of those men whose age is difficult to tell. He might quite easily have been in the early forties. His appearance was healthy rather than good looking: his physical strength was distinctly above the average. And to finish off this brief outline of the man, he had joined up in the earliest days of the war and finally risen to the command of a battalion.

I recognised him when he was a hundred yards away from the inn. He was coming towards me down the road, his hands in his pockets, his head sunk. But the walk was unmistakeable.

"Great Scott! Barstow!" I said as he came abreast of me, "what brings you here at this time of year?"

"Here" was a little village not far from Innsbruck.

He glanced up with a start, and I was shocked to see the change in his face. He looked positively haggard.

"Hullo! Staunton," he said moodily. Then he gave a sheepish little laugh. "I suppose it is a bit out of my beaten track."

"Come and have a spot of this," I remarked. "I've tasted much worse."

He came across the road and sat down, whilst I studied him covertly. Quite obviously something was wrong—seriously wrong, but in view of the slightness of our acquaintanceship it was up to him to make the first move if he wanted to.

"August and Austria hardly seem a usual combination for you," I said lightly. "I thought Scotland was your habitual programme."

"Habitual programmes have a way of being upset," he answered shortly. "Here's how."

He put his glass down on the table, and pulled out his tobacco pouch.

"Personally, I think this is a damnable country," he exploded suddenly.

"Then," I said mildly, "is there any essential reason why you should remain?"

He didn't answer, and I noticed he was staring down the road through narrowed eyes.

"The essential reason," he said at length, "will shortly pass this inn. No, don't look round," he went on, as I turned in my chair. "You will see all there is to be seen in a moment."

From behind me I heard the jingling of bells, and the noise of some horse-drawn vehicle approaching at a rapid rate. And a few seconds after, an almost mediaevally-magnificent equipage drew up at the door. I use the word "equipage" advisedly, because it was like no English carriage that I have ever seen, and I have no idea as to the correct local name for it.

The coachman was in scarlet: all the horses' trappings were scarlet also. But after a brief glance at the setting, my eyes fixed themselves on the man contained in it. Seldom, I think, have I seen a more arrogant and unpleasant-looking face. And yet it was the face of an aristocrat. Thin-lipped, nose slightly hooked, he was typical of the class of man who, in days gone by in France, would have ordered his servants to drive over a peasant in his way, rather than be delayed.

He waited without movement till a footman, also; in scarlet, had dashed to the door and opened it. Then he stepped out, and held out his sleeve for an imaginary speck of dust to be removed. And for an; instant the wild thought came to my mind that the man was acting for the films. The whole thing seemed unreal.

The next moment the landlord appeared bent nearly double. And my fascination increased. I'd forgotten

Barstow's words about the essential reason in my intense interest. He advanced slowly towards a table, the landlord backing in front of him, and sat down. At the same time the footman, who had been delving under one of the seats of the carriage, came up to his table and put a leather case in front of him. He opened it, and I gave an involuntary start. Inside were two revolvers.

"Good God!" I muttered and glanced at George Barstow. There was nothing mediaeval about those guns.

But he seemed to be taking no interest in the performance whatever. With his legs stretched in front of him he was puffing calmly at his pipe, apparently utterly indifferent to the whole thing.

But now even stranger doings were to take place. With great solemnity the footman advanced to a tree, and proceeded to fix an ordinary playing card to the trunk with a drawing pin. It was the five of hearts. Then he withdrew.

The man at the table took one of the revolvers from the case, and balanced it for a moment in his hand. Then he raised it and fired four times.

By this time I was beyond surprise. The whole thing was so incredibly bizarre that I could only sit there gaping. If the man had now proceeded to stand on his head, and drink a glass of wine in that position, I should have regarded it as quite in keeping. But apparently the performance was not yet over. Once again did the footman solemnly advance to the tree. He removed the card, and pinned up another—the five of spades. And the man at the table picked up the other revolver. Once again did four shots ring out, and then the

marksman, with great deliberation, leaned back in his chair after drawing a handkerchief delicately across his nostrils.

He accepted from the almost kneeling landlord a glass of wine: then he extended a languid hand for the two targets which the footman was holding out, and examined them with an air of bored indifference. Apparently the result of the inspection was favourable: he threw the two cards on the table and continued his wine.

Now I cannot say at what moment exactly a strong desire on my part to laugh was replaced by a curious pricking sensation at the back of my scalp. But it was the way George Barstow was behaving more than the theatrical display of the other man that caused the change. From first to last he had never moved, and it wasn't natural. No man can sit calmly in a chair while someone looses off eight shots behind his back. Unless, that is to say, it was an ordinary proceeding, which had lost its interest through constant repetition. Even then, surely, he would have made some remark about it: told me what to expect. But he hadn't: from the moment the man had stepped out of his carriage he had remained sunk in silence.

A movement from the other table made me look up. The stranger had finished his wine, and was standing up preparatory to going. He made a little gesture with his hand; the footman picked up the two cards. And then to my utter amazement he came over and threw them on the table between us, in a gratuitously offensive way.

"What the devil!" I began angrily, but I spoke to empty air. The man was already clambering up to his seat at the

back of the carriage. And it wasn't until the jingle of the bells had died away in the distance that I turned to Barstow.

"What on earth is the meaning of that pantomime," I demanded. "Does he often do it?"

George Barstow removed his pipe, and knocked it out on his heel.

"To-day is the sixth time," he said quietly. "But what's the great idea?" I cried.

"Not very great," he answered. "In fact, perfectly simple. His wife and I are in love with one another and he has found out."

"Good God!" I said blankly.

And then for the first time I looked closely at the two cards. The four outside pips had been shot out of each: only the centre one remained.

And once again I muttered: "Good God!" Farce had departed: what looked very like grim tragedy had replaced it. With George Barstow of all people. If one had searched the length and breadth of Europe it would have been impossible to find a human being less likely to find himself in such a position. Mechanically I lit a cigarette: something would have to be done. The trouble was what? But one thing was perfectly clear. A state of affairs which caused a performance such as I had just witnessed could not continue. The next move in the game would probably be to substitute Barstow for the playing card. And no one could be under any delusion as to the gentleman's ability to shoot.

"Look here, Staunton," said Barstow suddenly. "I'd like your advice. Not that there's the slightest chance of my taking it," he added with a faint smile, "because I know

perfectly well what it's going to be. It will be exactly the same advice as I should give myself to another man in my position. Still—if it won't bore you..."

"Fire right ahead," I answered. "And let's have another flagon of this stuff."

"It started in Paris three months ago," he began. "A luncheon party at Delmonico's. There were eight of us, and I found myself sitting next the Baroness von Talrein. Our friend of this morning is the Baron. Well, you'll probably see the Baroness before you've done—so I won't waste time in trying to describe her. Anyway I couldn't. I can give a man a mental description of a golf hole, but not of a woman. I'll merely say that as far as I am concerned, she is the only woman in the world.

"She is half English, half French. Speaks both languages like a native. And to cut the cackle, I was a goner from the first moment I set eyes on her. I don't pretend to be a moralist: I'm not. I've been what I called in love with other men's wives before, but I'd always survived the experience without much difficulty. This was something totally and utterly different."

He paused for a moment and stared over the fields.

"Totally and utterly different," he repeated. "But, except for one thing, it would have ended as other affairs of that sort have ended in the past and will in the future."

He pulled thoughtfully at his pipe.

"One doesn't mention such things as a general rule," he went on, "but the circumstances in this case are a little unusual. You're a fellow countryman: we know one another and so on. And as I say, but for this other thing you would

not have been treated to the performance this morning. I found out she was in love with me. Doesn't matter how: it was motoring back latish one night from Versailles. Well that fact put a totally different complexion on the matter."

"Interrupting you for one moment," I said, "had you met the Baron when you found this out?"

"No—not then. He arrived about three days later. She was stopping with friends in the Bois de Boulogne. And during those three days we were never out of one another's pockets. Foolish, I suppose—but there you are. We're dealing with what is, not what might have been.

"Then that specimen arrived, that you've seen to-day. And Eloise insisted that we must be terribly careful. She was frightened to death of the man—it had been one of those damnable arranged marriages. And I suppose I was in the condition where care was impossible. I mean affairs of that sort are given away by an intercepted glance, or something equally trivial. Or perhaps it was that the woman in whose flat Eloise was staying gave us away: I never trusted her an inch. Anyway the Baron had not been in Paris two days before he came round to see me at the Majestic.

"He was ushered into my sitting-room just before lunch, and I knew at once that he had found out. He stood by the door staring at me, and going through his usual elaborate ritual with his lace handkerchief. And at last he spoke.

"In my country, Mr. Barstow,' he said, 'it is the custom for a husband to choose his wife's friends. From now on you are not included in that category.'

"'And in my country, Baron,' I answered, 'we recognise no such archaic rules. When the Baroness confirms your

statement I shall at once comply. In the meantime...'

"'Yes,' he said softly, in the meantime.'

"'Lunch is preferable to your company.'

"And so matters came to a head. I suppose I might have been a bit more tactful, but I didn't feel like being tactful. He got my goat from the very first, apart altogether from the question of his wife. And that afternoon I decided to stake everything. I asked her to come away with me.

"I suppose," he went on after a little pause, "that you think I'm a fool. If I were in your place I certainly should. But I want you to realise one thing, Staunton. I am not a callow boy, suffering from calf love; I'm an old and fairly hardened man of the world. And I did it with my eyes open weighing the consequences."

"What did the Baroness say?" I asked.

"She agreed," he answered simply. "After considerable hesitation. But the hesitation was on my account—not hers. She was afraid of what he would do—not to her, but to me. The man is a swine, you see, of the first order of merit. And he sort of obsesses her mental outlook. You've seen him: you can judge for yourself. Fancy being condemned to live with that for the rest of your life. However, I soothed her as best I could: pointed out to her that we lived in a civilised country in the twentieth century, and that there was nothing he could do. And finally we agreed to bolt next day. There was to be no hole-and-corner work about it: I was going to write him a letter as soon as we had gone.

"Well—she never turned up. A pitiful little scrawl came, written evidently in frantic haste. Whether he had found out, or merely suspected our intentions, I don't know. But he had

left Paris early in the morning taking her with him. Back here."

Barstow waved a hand at a big château half hidden by trees that lay in front of us dominating the whole countryside.

"At first, I was furious. Why hadn't she refused to go? You can't compel a human being to do what they don't want to. But after a time the anger died. I met a friend of hers—a woman, and it was she who told me things I didn't know about this menage. Things about his treatment of her: things, Staunton, that made me see red. And then and there I made up my mind. I, too, would come here. That was a week ago."

George Barstow fell silent, and stared at his shoes. "Have you seen her?" I said.

"No. The first day I arrived I went up to call. Rather putting one's head in the lion's mouth—but I'm beyond trifles of that sort. He must have known I was coming: as you saw by the landlord's behaviour he is God Almighty in these parts. Anyway, I was met at the door by the major-domo, with three damned great Alsatians on leads. The Baroness was not at home, and it would be well if I remembered that the next time I came the Alsatians would not be on leads. Then he slammed the door in my face.

"The next morning the performance you saw to-day took place. It has been repeated daily since. And that's the position. What do you think about it?"

"Well, old man," I remarked, "you started off by saying that you wouldn't take my advice. And so there's not much good my giving it to you. What I think about it is that you

should pack, put your stuff in the back of my car—and hop it. My dear fellow," I went on a little irritably, "the position is impossible. Forgive my cold logic, and apparent lack of sympathy—but you must see that it is yourself. After all—she is his wife. And it seems to me that you have the alternative of a sticky five minutes with three savage Alsatians, or finding yourself in the position of acting as one of these cards. I quite agree with your estimate of the gentleman—but facts are facts. And it seems to me you haven't got a leg to stand on."

"I don't care a damn," he said obstinately. "I'm not going. Good God! man, don't you understand that I love her?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I don't see that sitting in that inn for the rest of your life is going to help much," I answered. "Look here, Barstow, this isn't England. They have codes of their own in this country. On your own showing that fellow is the great Pooh Bah here. What are you going to do if he challenges you to a duel? I don't know what you are like with a revolver."

"Hopeless. Perfectly hopeless."

"Well, I believe you'd have the choice of weapons. Are you any good at fencing?"

"Far, far worse than with a revolver. I've never had a foil in my hand in my life."

"Then," I cried, "you'd find yourself in the enviable position of either running away or being killed for a certainty. My dear old man, really—really, it isn't good enough. I'm extremely sorry for you and all that, but you must see that the situation is untenable. The man would kill you without the slightest compunction, and with the utmost

ease. And here it would simply be put down as an affair of honour. All the sympathy would be with him."

He shook his head wearily.

"Everything that you say is right. Doubly distilled right. And yet, Staunton, I can't go. I feel that anyway here, I am near her. Sorry to have bored you with all my troubles, but I felt I had to."

"You haven't bored me in the slightest," I said. "Only frankly it makes me angry, Barstow, to see a fellow like you making such a fool of himself. You've got nothing to gain and everything to lose."

"If only I could get her out of this country," he said again and again. "He ill-treats her, Staunton. I've seen the marks of his hand on her arms."

I sighed and finished the wine. He was beyond aid. And then suddenly he sat up with a jerk: he was staring at a peasant girl who was making peculiar signs at us from behind a tree some fifty yards away. And suddenly he rose and walked swiftly towards her. I saw her hand him a note, and then dodge rapidly away. And as he came back towards me, I realised that I might as well have been talking to a brick wall. His whole face had changed: he had forgotten my existence.

"A letter from her," he said as he sat down.

"You surprise me," I murmured cynically. "From your demeanour I imagined it was the grocer's bill."

And then I stopped—a little ashamed of the cheap sarcasm. For George Barstow's hand—phlegmatic, undemonstrative Englishman that he was—was shaking like a leaf. I turned away as he opened the envelope, wondering

what new complication was going to be introduced. And I wasn't left in ignorance for long. He positively jibbered at me, so great was his excitement. Unknown to her husband she had managed to get out of the house that morning, and she was hiding in the house of her maid's people in the next village.

I suppose it was foolish of me, but I think most men would have done the same. And to do him justice George Barstow didn't ask in so many words. He just looked, and his words came back to me—"If only I could get her out of the country "—I had a car: the Swiss frontier was sixty miles away.

"Get to it, Barstow," I said. "Pack your bag, and we'll hump it."

"Damn my bag!" he cried. "Staunton, you're a sportsman."

"On the contrary I'm a drivelling idiot," I answered. "And I wash my hands of you once we're in the Engadine."

"You can," he said happily. "Jove! But this is great."

"Is it," I remarked grimly, as I let her into gear. "It strikes me, my friend, that your lady fair's absence is no longer unknown to her husband."

Galloping down the side road that led from the château was the same barouche as we had seen that morning. You could spot the scarlet-coated coachman a mile off. But the main road was good, and a Bentley is a Bentley. We passed the turn when the Baron was still a quarter of a mile away. And then I trod on the gas and we moved.

"It's a race, my boy," I said. "He'll get a car as soon as he can. And if we get a puncture..."

"Don't croak," he answered. "We shan't."

We roared into the village, and there, standing in the middle of the road waiting for us was the most adorable creature I've ever seen. There was no time for rhapsodies: every second counted. But I did say to Barstow, "By Jove! old man—I don't blame you." Then we were off again. And as we left the village, Barstow, who was sitting in the back with his girl, shouted to me: "He's just come in sight."

Luckily I am one of those people who never forget a road. And in one hour and three-quarters the Austrian douane hove in sight. My triptyque was in order: the authorities were pleased to be genial. And a quarter of an hour later we were across the frontier.

"You might now introduce me," I murmured gently. "This is the first time in my life that I've assisted at an entertainment of this description, and I feel it ought to be celebrated."

And for a while we behaved like three foolish children. I know I was almost as excited as they were. The fact that half my kit and all George Barstow's was gone for good seemed too trifling to worry about. All that mattered was that the bus had gone like a scalded cat, and that somewhere on the road, miles back, a hook-nosed blighter was cursing like blazes in an elderly tin Lizzie.

It was the girl who pulled herself together first.

"We're not out of the wood yet, George," she said. "He'll follow us all over Europe. Let's get on."

And so we got on—a rather soberer party. George and his girl doubtless had compensations in the back seat, but now that the excitement of the dash was over I began to weigh

up the situation calmly. And the more I weighed it up the less I liked it. It's all very well to do a mad thing on the spur of the moment, but the time of reckoning comes. And the cold hard fact remained, that but for me George Barstow would not have been able to kidnap another man's wife. For that's what it came to, when shorn of its romance.

It was as we drove into Samaden that George leaned over and spoke to me.

"Look here, old man," he said gravely. "Eloise and I want you to leave us in St. Moritz and clear out. It isn't fair that you should be mixed up in this."

Exactly what I had been thinking myself, which was naturally sufficient to cause a complete revulsion.

"Go to blazes!" I cried. "Anyway we can't discuss anything till we've had lunch. It's all hopelessly foolish and reprehensible, but I've enjoyed myself thoroughly. So we'll crack a bottle, and I will drink your very good health."

It was stupid, of course, leaving the car outside the hotel. And yet, as things turned out it was for the best. The meeting had to take place some time: it was as well that I should be there when it did. It was also as well that we were late for luncheon: the room was empty.

We'd all forgotten the Baron for the moment—and then, suddenly, there he was standing in the doorway. George Barstow saw him first, and instinctively he took the girl's hand. Then I turned round, but the Baron had eyes for no one but Barstow. His face was like a frozen mask, but you could sense the seething hatred in his mind. Quite slowly he walked over to our table still staring at George Barstow, who rose as he approached. Then he picked up a glass of wine

and flung the contents in George's face. The next moment George's fist caught him on the point of the jaw, and the Baron disappeared from view.

But he rose to his feet at once, still outwardly calm. "I shall kill you for that," he remarked quietly. "Possibly," said Barstow, equally quietly.

"I challenge you to a duel," said the Baron.

"And I accept your challenge," answered Barstow. I heard the girl give a gasp of terror, and I gazed at him in blank astonishment.

"Good God! man!" I cried, "what are you saying? Surely the matter is capable of settlement without that?"

But George was speaking again.

"I shall not return to your country, Monsieur le Baron," he said. "We will find some neutral venue for the affair."

"As you please," said the Baron icily, but I saw the triumph that gleamed in his eyes.

"And before," went on George, "leaving the details to be settled by our seconds, it would be well to have one or two matters made clear. I love your wife: she loves me. The only reason—I admit an important one—that brings you into the affair is that you happen to be her husband. Otherwise you are beneath contempt. Your treatment of her has been such as to place you outside the pale. Nevertheless you are her husband. I wish to be. There is not room for both of us. So one of us will die."

"Precisely," agreed the other with a slight laugh. "One of us will die. I presume this gentleman will act as your second."

Without waiting for my answer he stalked out of the room.

"Barstow," I almost shouted at him, "are you mad? You haven't a hope."

And the girl turned to him in an agony of fear.

"Darling," she cried, "you mustn't. You can't."

"Darling," he said gravely, "I must. And I can."

"It's murder," I said dully. "I absolutely refuse to have anything to do with it."

But on Barstow's face there flickered a faint smile. "Or bluff," he remarked cryptically. "Though I admit it's a bluff to the limit of my hand." And not a word more would he say.

"I'll tell you everything when the time comes, old man," was the utmost I could get out of him.

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NOW various rumours have, I know, got abroad concerning this affair. Whether my name has been connected with it or not I neither know nor care. But it is in the firm belief that nothing but good can come from a plain statement of the truth, that I am writing this.

I suppose, strictly speaking, Barstow could have refused to fight. Duelling is forbidden by the laws of England. But he was an obstinate fellow, and he certainly did not lack pluck. Moreover he felt, and it was a feeling one couldn't help admiring, that he owed it to the Baron to meet him.

The girl, poor child, was almost frantic with fear. And for some strange reason he wouldn't tell her what was in his

mind. He adopted the line with her that he was no bad shot himself, and I followed his lead.

And it wasn't until he had said good-bye to her, and we were in the train, bound for Dalmatia that he told me.

(A certain uninhabited island off the Dalmatian coast was to be the scene of the duel.)

He had, of course, the choice of weapons, and when he first told me the terms on which he intended to fight I felt a momentary feeling of relief. But that feeling evaporated quickly. For what he proposed was *certain* death for one of them.

They were to fight with revolvers at a range of three feet. *But only one revolver was to be loaded*.

"I see it this way," he said to me. "I can't say that I *want* to risk my life on the spin of a coin. I can't say I want to fight this duel at all. But I've got to. I'm damned if I, an Englishman, am going to be found wanting in courage by any foreigner. If he refuses to fight on such terms, my responsibility ends. It will be he who is the coward."

"And if he doesn't refuse," I remarked.

"Then, old man, I'm going through with it," he said calmly. "One does a lot of funny things without thinking, Staunton. And though I should do just the same again over bolting with Eloise, I've got to face the music now."

Involuntarily I smiled at this repetition of my own thoughts.

"He is her husband, and there's not room for the two of us. But if he refuses to fight, then in his own parlance, honour is satisfied as far as I am concerned. Only one

proviso do I make under those circumstances: he must swear to divorce Eloise."

And so I will come to the morning of the duel. The Marquis del Vittore was the Baron's second—an Italian who spoke English perfectly. We rowed out from the mainland in separate boats. Barstow and I arrived first and climbed a steep path up the cliff to a small level space on top. Then the others arrived, and I remember noticing at the time, subconsciously, a strange blueness round the Baron's lips, and his laboured breathing. But I was too excited to pay much attention to it.

Barstow was seated on a rock staring out to sea and smoking a cigarette, when I approached del Vittore.

"My first condition," I said, "is that your principal should swear on his honour to divorce his wife in the event of his refusing to fight."

The Marquis stared at me in amazement.

"Refusing to fight!" he said. "But that is what we've come here for."

"Nevertheless I must insist," I remarked.

He shrugged his shoulders and went over to the Baron, who also stared in amazement. And then he began to laugh—a nasty laugh. Barstow gazed at him quite unmoved.

"If I refuse to fight," sneered the Baron, "I will certainly swear to divorce my wife."

"Good," said George laconically, and once more looked out to sea.

"Then shall we discuss conditions, Monsieur," said del Vittore.

"The conditions have been settled by my principal," I remarked, "as he is entitled to do, being the challenged party. The duel will be fought with revolvers, at a range of three feet and only one revolver will be loaded."

The Marquis stared at me in silence: the Baron, every vestige of colour leaving his face, rose to his feet.

"Impossible," he said harshly. "It would be murder."

"Murder with the dice loaded equally," I remarked quietly.

And for a space there was silence. George had swung round and was staring at the Baron. He was outwardly calm, but I could see a pulse throbbing in his throat.

"These are the most extraordinary conditions," said the Italian.

"Possibly," I answered. "But in England, as you may know, we do not fight duels. My principal has no proficiency at all with a revolver. He fails therefore to see why he should do a thing which must result in his certain death: though he is quite prepared to run an even chance. His proposal gives no advantage to either side."

"I utterly refuse," cried the Baron harshly.

"Splendid!" said George. "Then the matter is ended. You have refused to fight, and I shall be obliged if you will start divorce proceedings as soon as possible."

And then occurred one of those little things that are so little and do so much. He smiled at me, an "I told you so" smile. And the Baron saw it.

"I have changed my mind," he said. "I will fight on those conditions."

And once again there was silence. George Barstow stood very still; I could feel my own heart going in great sickening

thumps. And looking back on it now, I sometimes try to get the psychology of the thing. Did the Baron think he was calling a bluff: or did he simply accept the conditions in a moment of uncontrollable rage induced by that smile? What did Barstow himself think? For though he had never said so to me in so many words, I know that he had never anticipated that the Baron would fight. Hence the importance he had attached to his first condition.

And then suddenly the whole thing was changed. Impossible now, for anyone or anything to intervene. Barstow's conditions had been accepted: no man calling himself a man could back out. The Marquis drew me 'on one side.

"Can nothing be done?" he said. "This is not duelling: it is murder."

"So would the other have been," I answered.

And yet it seemed too utterly preposterous—a ghastly nightmare. In a minute, one of those two men would be dead. George, a little pale, but perfectly calm, was finishing his cigarette: the Baron, his face white as chalk, was walking up and down with stiff little steps. And suddenly I realised that it could not be—must not be.

Del Vittore, his hands shaking, took out the two revolvers. He handed me a round of ammunition, and then looked away.

"I don't even wish to know which revolver it is," he said. "Hand them both to me when you've finished."

I handed them to him, and then turned round.

"I will spin a coin," I said. "The Baron will call."

"Heads" he muttered.

"It's tails," I remarked. "Barstow, will you have the revolver in the Marquis's right hand or in his left?"

He flung away his cigarette.

"Right," he said laconically.

I handed it to him, and del Vittore gave the other to the Baron. Then we placed the two men facing one another.

And suddenly del Vittore lost his nerve.

"Get it over!" he shouted. "For God's sake get it over!"

There came a click: the Baron had fired. His revolver was not the loaded one. For a moment he stood there, while the full realisation of what it meant came to him. Then he gave a strangled scream of fear, and his hand went to his heart. His knees sagged suddenly and he collapsed and lay still.

"What's the matter with him?" muttered Barstow. "I haven't fired."

"He's dead," said del Vittore stupidly. "His heart—Weak..."

George Barstow flung his revolver away.

"Thank God! I didn't fire," he said hoarsely. And silence fell on us save for the discordant screaming of the gulls.

"The result of the exertion of climbing," said del Vittore after a while. "That's what we must say. And we must unload that revolver."

"There's no need," I said slowly. "It was never loaded. Neither of them were."

II. — THE DIAMOND HAIR-SLIDE

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"PITY one can't turn 'em on to fight it out like a couple of dogs." The doctor looked thoughtfully across the smoking-room.

"It won't be necessary to do much turning if this heat continues," I said. "As a matter of fact I thought they were going for one another last night."

As usual there was a woman at the bottom of it, and in this particular case it was aggravated by what appeared to be an instinctive dislike at first sight. Funnily enough I had happened to be a witness of their introduction to one another.

It was our first night out from England and I was having a gin and vermouth before dinner when one of them came in. A biggish red-faced man—the type who might have been in cattle in Australia. Mark Jefferson by name, and after he'd ordered a drink himself we started chatting. The usual desultory stuff: bad weather till we get to Gib—hot in the Red Sea, and so on.

Quite a decent fellow I thought—but the sort of man I'd sooner have as a friend than an enemy. Powerful great devil with a fist like a leg of mutton.

We'd just ordered the rest of the half section when the second of them appeared. Completely different stamp of man, but just as tough a nut. Tougher if anything. Hatchet-faced without much colour, but with an eye like a gimlet. His name was Stanton Blake, and at first sight you'd have thought him far the less powerful of the two. At second

you'd have realised that there wasn't much in it. Different sort of strength, that's all. The sinewy power of the thin steel rope as against the massive strength of the big rope cable.

However—to get on with it. The ship gave a roll, and Blake lurched into Jefferson. And Jefferson spilt his drink on his trousers. A thing that might happen to anyone. But I've always believed myself that there is such a thing as instinctive antipathy between two people. I mean the sort of dislike that isn't dependent on any specification or spoken word. And it was present in this case. The spilling of the drink was merely the spark that brought it to life.

Blake said, "Sorry." That I swear.

Jefferson growled something about "Clumsy devil" and turned his back. Which he had no right to do.

My own belief, in view of what I've seen since of Jefferson's alcoholic consumption, is that those two cocktails were not exactly his first that day. Not that he was in the slightest degree drunk; I've never seen any man on whom liquor had less obvious effect. But when a man who is quick-tempered by nature has had a few...Well, you know what I mean.

Be that as it may—the fat was in the fire. Blake controlled himself—he didn't say anything. But I saw the look that flashed into his eyes as he stared at the back of Jefferson's head. And there was no mistaking it. I remember it crossed my mind at the time that it would be better for all concerned if they weren't at the same table.

As a matter of fact they were at opposite ends of the saloon, but there was always the smoking-room as a

common meeting ground. And as they were both good sailors the foul passage we had as far as Gibraltar didn't affect them. But it affected most other people, which was a pity. For after dinner that night there were only five of us who were taking an interest in things and one of those didn't play bridge.

I confess that I very nearly refused to play myself. I am accounted a good player: I love the game. But I play it for pleasure. And after the little episode before dinner it struck me as problematical if much pleasure would be gained from a table which contained Jefferson and Blake.

I was right: the trouble started at once. I sat with Blake, against Jefferson and a man called Murgatroyd. Tea in Ceylon—he was. And the first thing naturally was how much we played for. I said, "Half-a-crown" straight away, and Murgatroyd agreed. But that wouldn't do for Jefferson. He looked at Blake and suggested a ten pound corner. And Blake shrugged his shoulders and agreed.

"Provided," he said, "we always have it through the trip, Mr. Jefferson."

The point of which remark became obvious as the evening went on. Jefferson was a player above the average: but Stanton Blake was easily the best bridge player I have ever sat down to a rubber with. His card sense was simply uncanny. And just once or twice the faintest suspicion of a smile would twitch round his lips—one hand, for instance, when Jefferson did quite obviously throw away a trick he should have made.

It wasn't until the last rubber that they cut together and by then Blake was thirty pounds up on Jefferson apart from

ordinary stake money. And it was during this last rubber that the buttons really came off the foils. Bridge, as we all know, can cease to be a pleasant pastime and become the vehicle of more concentrated rudeness and unpleasant back-chat than almost any other game. And though there was no actual rudeness on this occasion Blake got a thrust in that for sheer malignant venom was hard to beat.

Jefferson again made a mistake: I forget exactly what it was. He placed the king on his left when quite obviously it lay on his right, or something of that sort. And when the hand was over Blake picked out the trick containing the king in question. He spread it out on the table in front of him, and then he spoke.

"I suppose you wouldn't care to make our little arrangement a twenty pound corner, Mr. Jefferson?" Jefferson's face went purple.

"Thirty if you like," he said thickly.

"The limit is in your hands, Mr. Jefferson," said Blake. "However, thirty will suit me admirably."

You see—that was the trouble. From the very first those two men loathed one another: long before the girl came in to complicate the question. She turned the feeling between them into bitter, dangerous hatred—the hatred out of which murder arises. The night when the doctor spoke to me there was murder in the air.

But to go back again a bit. The girl was sitting at my table, and she appeared for breakfast next morning. And though it is only the very young who can work up much enthusiasm over the opposite sex in the early hours, I confess that she gave my elderly heart a very pleasant kick.