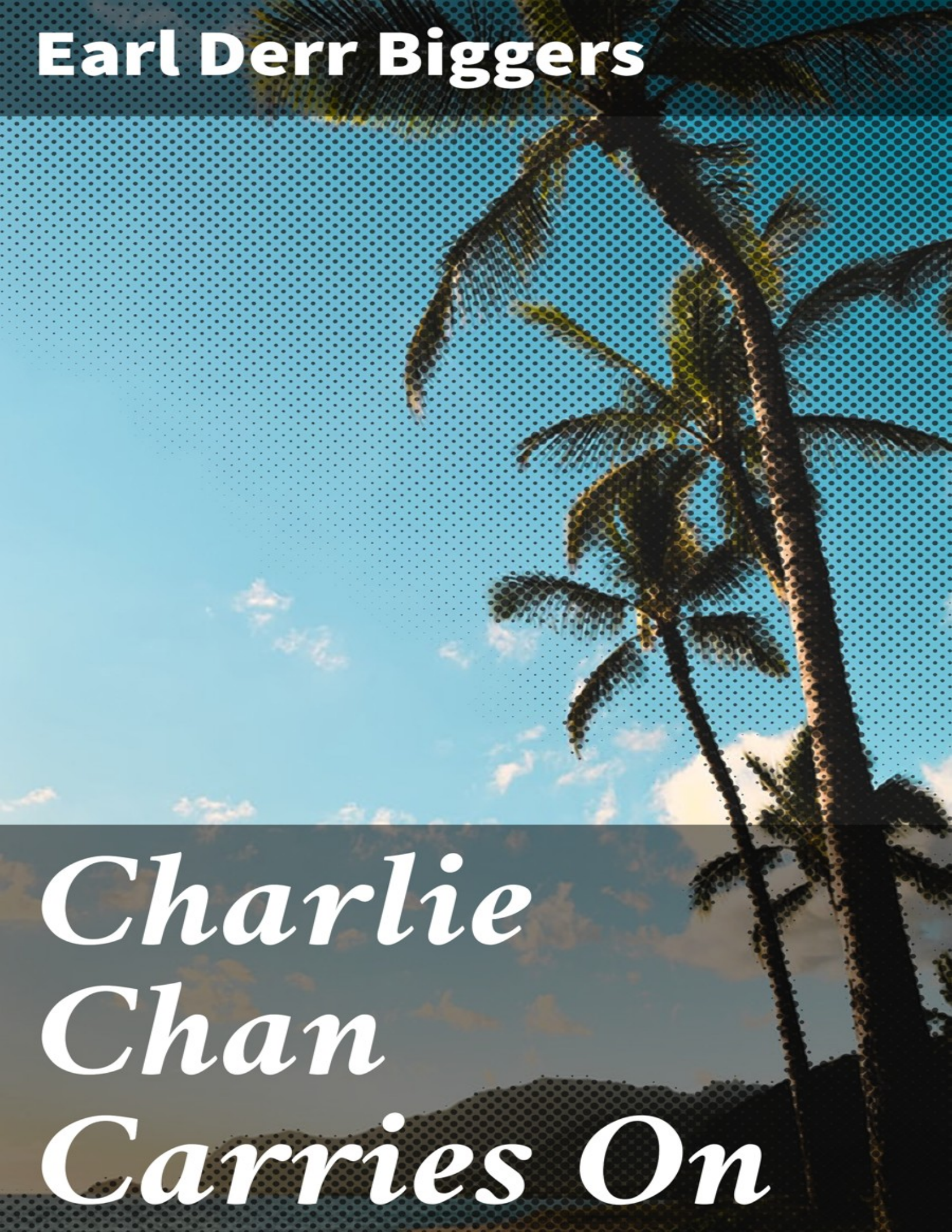
Earl Derr Biggers



Charlie Chan Carries On

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
Rain in Piccadilly

Table of Contents

CHIEF INSPECTOR DUFF, of Scotland Yard, was walking down Piccadilly in the rain. Faint and far away, beyond St. James's Park, he had just heard Big Ben on the Houses of Parliament strike the hour of ten. It was the night of February 6, 1930. One must keep in mind the clock and the calendar where chief inspectors are concerned, although in this case the items are relatively unimportant. They will never appear as evidence in court.

Though naturally of a serene and even temperament, Inspector Duff was at the moment in a rather restless mood. Only that morning a long and tedious case had come to an end as he sat in court and watched the judge, in his ominous black cap, sentence an insignificant, sullen-looking little man to the scaffold. Well, that was that, Duff had thought. A cowardly murderer, with no conscience, no human feeling whatever. And what a merry chase he had led Scotland Yard before his final capture. But perseverance had won—that, and a bit of the Duff luck. Getting hold of a letter the murderer had written to the woman in Battersea Park Road, seeing at once the double meaning of a harmless little phrase, seizing upon it and holding on until he had the picture complete. That had done it. All over now. What next?

Duff moved on, his ulster wrapped close about him. Water dripped from the brim of his old felt hat. For the past three hours he had been sitting in the Marble Arch Pavilion,

a cinema theater, hoping to be taken out of himself. The story had been photographed in the South Seas—palm-fringed shores, blazing skies, eternal sunshine. As he watched it Duff had thought of a fellow detective, encountered some years before in San Francisco. A modest chap who followed the profession of man-hunting against such a background. Studied clues where the trade-winds whispered in flowering trees and the month was always June. The inspector had smiled gently at the recollection.

With no definite destination in mind, Duff wandered along down Piccadilly. It was a thoroughfare of memories for him, and now they crowded about him. Up to a short time ago he had been divisional detective-inspector at the Vine Street station, and so in charge of the C. I. D. in this fashionable quarter. The West End had been his hunting preserve. There, looming in dignified splendor through the rain, was the exclusive club where, with a few quiet words, he had taken an absconding banker. A darkened shop front recalled that early morning when he had bent over the French woman, murdered among her Paris gowns. The white façade of the Berkeley brought memories of a cruel blackmailer seized, dazed and helpless, as he stepped from his bath. A few feet up Half Moon Street, before the tube station, Duff had whispered a word into a swarthy man’s ear, and seen his face go white. The debonair killer wanted so badly by the New York police had been at breakfast in his comfortable quarters at the Albany when Duff laid a hand on his shoulder. In Prince’s restaurant, across the way, the inspector had dined every night for two weeks, keeping a careful eye upon a man who thought that evening clothes

concealed successfully the sordid secret in his heart. And here in Piccadilly Circus, to which he had now come, he had fought, one memorable midnight, a duel to the death with the diamond robbers of Hatton Garden.

The rain increased, lashing against him with a new fury. He stepped into a doorway and stared at the scene before him. London's quiet and restrained version of a Great White Way. The yellow lights of innumerable electric signs blurred uncertainly in the downpour, little pools of water lay shining in the street. Feeling the need of companionship, Duff skirted the circle and disappeared down a darker thoroughfare. A bare two hundred yards from the lights and the traffic he came upon a grim building with iron bars at the ground floor windows and a faintly burning lamp before it. In another moment he was mounting the familiar steps of Vine Street Police Station.

Divisional Inspector Hayley, Duff's successor at this important post, was alone in his room. A spare, weary-looking man, his face brightened at sight of an old friend.

"Come in, Duff, my boy," he said. "I was feeling the need of a chat."

"Glad to hear it," Duff answered. He removed the dripping hat, the soggy ulster, and sat down. Through the open door into the next room he noted a group of detectives, each armed with a halfpenny paper. "Rather quiet evening, I take it?"

"Yes, thank heaven," Hayley replied. "We're raiding a night club a bit later—but that sort of thing, as you know, is our chief diversion nowadays. By the way, I see that congratulations are again in order."

“Congratulations?” Duff raised his heavy eyebrows.

“Yes—that Borough case, you know. Special commendation for Inspector Duff from the judge—splendid work—intelligent reasoning—all that sort of thing.”

Duff shrugged. “Yes, of course—thanks, old man.” He took out his pipe and began to fill it. “But that’s in the past—it will be forgotten to-morrow.” He was silent for a moment, then he added: “Odd sort of trade, ours, what?”

Hayley gave him a searching look. “The reaction,” he nodded. “Always feel it myself after a hard case. What you need is work, my boy. A new puzzle. No period for reflection between. Now, if you had this post——”

“I’ve had it,” Duff reminded him.

“So you have—that’s true. But before we dismiss the past from our minds—and it’s a good plan, I agree with you—mayn’t I add my own humble word of praise? Your work on this case should stand as an example——”

Duff interrupted him. “I had luck,” he said. “Don’t forget that. As our old chief, Sir Frederic Bruce, always put it—hard work, intelligence and luck, and of these three, luck is the greatest by far.”

“Ah, yes—poor Sir Frederic,” Hayley answered.

“Been thinking about Sir Frederic to-night,” Duff continued. “Thinking about him, and the Chinese detective who ran down his murderer.”

Hayley nodded. “The chap from Hawaii. Sergeant Chan—was that the name?”

“Charlie Chan—yes. But he’s an inspector now, in Honolulu.”

“You hear from him then?”

“At long intervals, yes.” Duff lighted his pipe. “Busy as I am, I’ve kept up a correspondence. Can’t get Charlie out of my mind, somehow. I wrote him a couple of months ago, asking for news of himself.”

“And he answered?”

“Yes—the reply came only this morning.” Duff took a letter from his pocket. “There are, it appears, no news,” he added, smiling.

Hayley leaned back in his chair. “None the less, let’s hear the letter,” he suggested.

Duff drew two sheets of paper from the envelope and spread them out. For a moment he stared at those lines typed in another police station on the far side of the world. Then, a faint smile still lingering about his lips, he began to read in a voice strangely gentle for a Scotland Yard inspector:

“Revered and Honorable Friend:

“Kindly epistle from you finished long journey with due time elapsed, and brought happy memories of past floating into this despicable mind. What is wealth? Write down list of friends and you have answer. Plenty rich is way I feel when I know you still have space in honorably busy brain for thoughts of most unworthy C. Chan.

“Turning picture over to inspect other side, I do not forget you. Never. Pardon crude remark which I am now about to inscribe, but such suggestion on your part is getting plenty absurd. Words of praise you once heaped upon me linger on in memory, surrounded always by little glow of unseemly pride.

“Coming now to request conveyed in letter regarding the news with me, there are, most sorry to report, none whatever. Water falls from the eaves into the same old holes, which is accurate description of life as I encounter it. Homicides do not abound in Honolulu. The calm man is the happy man, and I offer no hot complaint. Oriental knows that there is a time to fish, and a time to dry the nets.

“But maybe sometimes I get a little anxious because there is so much drying of the nets. Why is that? Can it be that Oriental character is slipping from me owing to fact I live so many years among restless Americans? No matter. I keep the affair hidden. I pursue not very important duties with uncommunicative face. But it can happen that I sit some nights on lanai looking out across sleepy town and suffer strange wish telephone would jangle with important message. Nothing doing, to quote my children, who learn nice English as she is taught in local schools.

“I rejoice that gods have different fate waiting for you. Often I think of you in great city where it is your lot to dwell. Your fine talents are not allowed to lie like stagnant water. Many times the telephone jangles, and you go out on quest. I know in heart that success will always walk smiling at your side. I felt same when I enjoyed great privilege of your society. Chinese, you know, are very psychic people.

“How kind of you to burden great mind with inquiry for my children. Summing up quickly, they number now eleven. I am often reminded of wise man who said: To govern a kingdom is easy; to govern a family is difficult. But I struggle onward. My eldest daughter Rose is college student on mainland. When I meet for first time the true cost of

American education, I get idea much better to draw line under present list of offspring and total up for ever.

“Once more my warmest thanks for plenty amiable letter. Maybe some day we meet again, though appalling miles of land and water between us make thought sound dreamy. Accept anyhow this fresh offering of my kind regards. May you have safe walk down every path where duty leads you. Same being wish of

“Yours, with deep respect,

“Charlie Chan.”

Duff finished reading and slowly folded the missive. Looking up, he saw Hayley staring at him, incredulous.

“Charming,” said the divisional inspector. “But—er—a bit naïve. You don’t mean to tell me that the man who wrote that letter ran down the murderer of Sir Frederic Bruce!”

“Don’t be deceived by Charlie’s syntax,” Duff laughed. “He’s a bit deeper than he sounds. Patience, intelligence, hard work—Scotland Yard has no monopoly on these. Inspector Chan happens to be an ornament to our profession, Hayley. Pity he’s buried in a place like Honolulu.” The palm-fringed shore he had seen at the cinema flitted before his eyes. “Though perhaps, at that, the calm man is the happy man.”

“Perhaps,” Hayley answered. “But we’ll never have a chance to test it, you and I. You’re not going, are you?” For Duff had risen.

“Yes—I’ll be getting on to my diggings,” the chief inspector replied. “I was rather down when I came in, but I feel better now.”

“Not married yet, eh?” Hayley inquired.

“Married no end,” Duff told him. “Haven’t time for anything else. Married to Scotland Yard.”

Hayley shook his head. “That’s not enough. But it’s no affair of mine.” He helped Duff on with his coat. “Here’s hoping you won’t be long between cases. Not good for you. When the telephone on your desk—what was it Chan said?—when it jangles with an important message—then, my boy, you’ll be keen again.”

“Water,” Duff shrugged, “dropping from the eaves into the same old holes.”

“But you love to hear it drop. You know you do.”

“Yes,” nodded the chief inspector. “You’re quite right. As a matter of fact, I’m not happy unless I do. Good-by, and luck at the night club.”

At eight o’clock on the following morning, Inspector Duff walked briskly into his room at Scotland Yard. He was his old cheery self; his cheeks were glowing, a heritage of the days on that Yorkshire farm whence he had come to join the Metropolitan Police. Opening his desk, he ran through a small morning mail. Then he took up his copy of the *Telegraph*, lighted a good cigar, and began a leisurely perusal of the news.

At eight-fifteen his telephone jangled suddenly. Duff stopped reading and stared at it. It rang again, sharply, insistently, like a call for help. Duff laid down his paper and picked up the instrument.

“Morning, old chap.” It was Hayley’s voice. “Just had a bit of news from my sergeant. Sometime during the night a man was murdered at Broome’s Hotel.”

“At Broome’s,” Duff repeated. “You don’t mean at Broome’s?”

“Sounds like an incredible setting for murder, I know,” Hayley replied. “But none the less, it’s happened. Murdered in his sleep—an American tourist from Detroit, or some queer place like that. I thought of you at once—naturally, after our chat last evening. Then, too, this is your old division. No doubt you know your way about in the rarified atmosphere of Broome’s. I’ve spoken to the superintendent. You’ll get your orders in a moment. Hop into a car with a squad and join me at the hotel at your earliest.”

Hayley rang off. As he did so, Duff’s superior came hastily into the room.

“An American murdered in Half Moon Street,” he announced. “At Broome’s Hotel, I believe. Mr. Hayley has asked for help, and suggested you. A good idea. You’ll go at once, Mr. Duff——”

Duff was already in the doorway, wearing hat and coat. “On my way, sir.”

“Good,” he heard the superintendent say as he dashed down the stairs.

In another moment he was climbing into a little green car at the curb. Out of nowhere appeared a finger-print expert and a photographer. Silently they joined the party. The green car traveled down the brief length of Derby Street and turned to the right on Whitehall.

The rain of the night before had ceased, but the morning was thick with fog. They crept along through an uncertain world, their ears assailed by the constant honking of motor horns, the shrill cries of police whistles. To right and left the

street lamps were burning, pale, ineffectual blobs of yellow against a gloomy gray. Somewhere back of the curtain, London went about its business as usual.

The scene was in striking contrast with that the inspector had witnessed at the cinema the night before. No blazing sunlight here, no white breakers, no gently nodding palms. But Duff was not thinking of the South Seas. All that was swept from his mind. He sat hunched up in the little car, his eyes trying vainly to pierce the mist that covered the road ahead—the road that was to lead him far. He had completely forgotten everything else—including his old friend, Charlie Chan.

Nor was Charlie at that moment thinking of Duff. On the other side of the world this February day had not yet dawned—it was, in fact, the night of the day before. The plump inspector of the Honolulu police was sitting on his lanai, serenely indifferent to fate. From that perch on Punchbowl Hill he gazed across the twinkling lights of the town at the curving shore line of Waikiki, gleaming white beneath the tropic moon. He was a calm man, and this was one of the calmest moments of his life.

He had not heard the jangle of the telephone on Inspector Duff’s desk at Scotland Yard. No sudden vision of the start of that little green car had flashed before him. Nor did he see, as in a dream, a certain high-ceilinged room in Broome’s famous London hotel, and on the bed the for ever motionless figure of an old man, strangled by means of a luggage strap bound tightly about his throat.

Perhaps the Chinese are not so very psychic after all.

CHAPTER II
Fog at Broome's Hotel

Table of Contents

TO SPEAK of Broome's Hotel in connection with the word murder is more or less sacrilege, but unfortunately it must be done. This quaint old hostelry has been standing in Half Moon Street for more than a hundred years, and it is strong in tradition, though weak in central heating and running water. Samuel Broome, it is rumored, started with a single house of the residential type. As the enterprise prospered, more were added, until to-day twelve such houses have been welded into a unit, and Broome's not only has a wide frontage on Half Moon Street, but stretches all the way to Clarges Street in the rear, where there is a second entrance.

The various residences have been joined in haphazard fashion, and a guest who walks the corridors of the upper floors finds himself in a sort of mystic maze. Here he mounts three steps, there he descends two more, he turns the most eccentric corners, doors and archways bob up before him where he least expects them. It is a bit hard on the servants who carry coals for the open fires, and hot water in old-fashioned cans for the guests who have not been able to secure one of the rare bathrooms, installed as a half-hearted afterthought.

But do not think that because it lacks in modern comforts, a suite at Broome's is easily secured. To be admitted to this hotel is an accolade, and in the London

season an impossible feat for an outsider. Then it is filled to overflowing with good old county families, famous statesmen and writers, a sprinkling of nobility. Once it accommodated an exiled king, but his social connections were admirable. Out of the season, Broome's has of late years let down the bars. Even Americans have been admitted. And now, this foggy February morning, one of them had got himself murdered above-stairs. It was all very distressing.

Duff came through the Half Moon Street entrance into the dim, hushed interior. He felt as though he had stepped inside a cathedral. Taking off his hat, he stood as one awaiting the first notes of an organ. The pink-coated servants, however, who were flitting noiselessly about, rather upset this illusion. No one would ever mistake them for choir-boys. Almost without exception they seemed to date back to the days when Samuel Broome had only one house to his name. Old men who had grown gray at Broome's, thin old men, fat old men, most of them wearing spectacles. Men with the aura of the past about them.

A servant with the bearing of a prime minister rose from his chair behind the porter's desk and moved ponderously toward the inspector.

"Good morning, Peter," Duff said. "What's all this?"

Peter shook a gloomy head. "A most disturbing accident, sir. A gentleman from America—the third story, room number 28, at the rear. Quite defunct, they tell me." He lowered his quavering voice. "It all comes of letting in these outsiders," he added.

"No doubt," Duff smiled. "I'm sorry, Peter."

“We’re all sorry, sir. We all feel it quite keenly. Henry!” He summoned a youngster of seventy who was feeling it keenly on a near-by bench. “Henry will take you wherever you wish to go, Inspector. If I may say so, it is most reassuring to have the inevitable investigation in such hands as yours.”

“Thanks,” Duff answered. “Has Inspector Hayley arrived?”

“He is above, sir, in the—in the room in question.”

Duff turned to Henry. “Please take these men up to room 28,” he said, indicating the photographer and the finger-print man who had entered with him. “I should like a talk first with Mr. Kent, Peter. Don’t trouble—he’s in his office, I presume?”

“I believe he is, sir. You know the way.”

Kent, the managing director of Broome’s, was resplendent in morning coat, gray waistcoat and tie. A small pink rose adorned his left lapel. For all that, he appeared to be far from happy. Beside his desk sat a scholarly-looking, bearded man, wrapped in gloomy silence.

“Come in, Mr. Duff, come in,” the manager said, rising at once. “This is a bit of luck, our first this morning. To have you assigned here—that’s more than I hoped for. It’s a horrible mess, Inspector, a horrible mess. If you will keep it all as quiet as possible, I shall be eternally——”

“I know,” Duff cut in. “But unfortunately murder and publicity go hand in hand. I should like to learn who the murdered man was, when he got here, who was with him, and any other facts you can give me.”

“The chap’s name was Hugh Morris Drake,” answered Kent, “and he was registered from Detroit—a city in the

States, I understand. He arrived on last Monday, the third, coming up from Southampton on a boat train after crossing from New York. With him were his daughter, a Mrs. Potter, also of Detroit, and his granddaughter. Her name—it escapes me for the moment." He turned to the bearded man. "The young lady's name, Doctor Lofton?"

"Pamela," said the other, in a cold, hard voice.

"Ah, yes—Miss Pamela Potter. Oh, by the way, Doctor Lofton—may I present Inspector Duff, of Scotland Yard?" The two men bowed. Kent turned to Duff. "The doctor can tell you much more about the dead man than I can. About all the party, in fact. You see, he's the conductor."

"The conductor?" repeated Duff, puzzled.

"Yes, of course. The conductor of the tour," Kent added.

"What tour? You mean this dead man was traveling in a party, with a courier?" Duff looked at the doctor.

"I should hardly call myself a courier," Lofton replied. "Though in a way, of course I am. Evidently, Inspector, you have not heard of Lofton's Round the World Tours, which I have been conducting for some fifteen years, in association with the Nomad Travel Company."

"The information had escaped me," Duff answered dryly. "So Mr. Hugh Morris Drake had embarked on a world cruise, under your direction——"

"If you will permit me," interrupted Lofton, "it is not precisely a world cruise. That term is used only in connection with a large party traveling the entire distance aboard a single ship. My arrangements are quite different—various trains and many different ships—and comparatively a very small group."

“What do you call a small group?” Duff inquired.

“This year there are only seventeen in the party,” Lofton told him. “That is—there were last night. To-day, of course, there are but sixteen.”

Duff’s stout heart sank. “Plenty,” he commented. “Now, Doctor Lofton—by the way, are you a medical doctor?”

“Not at all. I am a doctor of philosophy. I hold a large number of degrees——”

“Ah, yes. Has there been any trouble on this tour before last night? Any incident that might lead you to suspect an enmity, a feud——”

“Absurd!” Lofton broke in. He got up and began to pace the floor. “There has been nothing, nothing. We had a very rough crossing from New York, and the members of the party have really seen very little of one another. They were all practically strangers when they arrived at this hotel last Monday. We have made a few excursions together since, but they are still——Look here, Inspector!” His calmness had vanished, and his face was flushed and excited beneath the beard. “This is a horrible position for me. My life work, which I have built up by fifteen years of effort—my reputation, my standing—everything is likely to be smashed by this. In heaven’s name, don’t begin with the idea that some member of the party killed Hugh Drake. It’s impossible. Some sneak thief—some hotel servant——”

“I beg your pardon,” cried the manager hotly. “Look at my servants. They’ve been with us for years. No employee of this hotel is involved in any way. I’d stake my life on it.”

“Then some one from outside,” Lofton said. His tone was pleading. “I tell you it couldn’t have been any one in my

group. My standards are high—the best people, always." He laid his hand on Duff's arm. "Pardon my excitement, Inspector. I know you'll be fair. But this is a serious situation for me."

"I know," Duff nodded. "I'll do all I can for you. But I must question the members of your party as soon as possible. Do you think you could get them together for me in one of the parlors of the hotel?"

"I'll try," Lofton replied. "Some of them may be out at the moment, but I'm certain they'll all be in by ten o'clock. You see, we are taking the ten-forty-five from Victoria, to connect with the Dover-Calais boat."

"You *were* taking the ten-forty-five from Victoria," Duff corrected him.

"Ah, yes, of course—we were leaving at that hour, I should have said. And now—what now, Inspector?"

"That's rather difficult to say," Duff answered. "We shall see. I'll go up-stairs, Mr. Kent, if I may."

He did not wait for an answer, but went quickly out. A lift operator who was wont to boast of his great-grandchildren took him up to the third floor. In the doorway of room 28, he encountered Hayley.

"Oh, hello, Duff," the man from Vine Street said. "Come in."

Duff entered a large bedroom in which the odor of flashlight powder was strong. The room was furnished in such fashion that, had Queen Victoria entered with him, she would have taken off her bonnet and sat down in the nearest rocking-chair. She would have felt at home. The bed stood in an alcove at the rear, far from the windows. On it

lay the body of a man well along in years—the late sixties, Duff guessed. It did not need the luggage strap, still bound about the thin throat of the dead man, to tell Duff that he had died by strangulation, and the detective's keen eyes saw also that the body presented every evidence of a frantic and fruitless struggle. He stood for a moment looking down at his newest puzzle. Outside, the fog was lifting, and from the pavement below came the notes of *Silver Threads among the Gold*, played by one of the innumerable street orchestras that haunt this section of London.

"Divisional surgeon been here?" Duff inquired.

"Yes—he's made his report and gone," Hayley replied. "He tells me the chap's been dead about four hours."

Duff stepped forward and removed, with his handkerchief, the luggage strap, which he handed to the finger-print man. Then he began a careful examination of all that was mortal of Mr. Hugh Morris Drake, of Detroit. He lifted the left arm, and bent back the clenched fingers of the hand. As he prepared to do the same with the right, an exclamation of interest escaped him. From between the lean stiff fingers something glittered—a link from a slender, platinum watch-chain. Duff released the object the right hand was clutching, and it fell to the bed. Three links of the chain, and on the end, a small key.

Hayley came close, and together they studied the find as it lay on Duff's handkerchief. On one side of the key was the number "3260" and on the other, the words: "Dietrich Safe and Lock Company, Canton, Ohio." Duff glanced at the blank face on the pillow.

“Good old boy,” he remarked softly. “He tried to help us. Tore off the end of his assailant’s watch-chain—and kept it, by gad.”

“That’s something,” Hayley commented.

Duff nodded. “Perhaps. But it begins to look too much American for my taste, old chap. I’m a London detective, myself.”

He knelt beside the bed for a closer examination of the floor. Some one entered the room, but Duff was for the moment too engrossed to look up. When he finally did so, what he saw caused him to leap to his feet, giving the knees of his trousers a hasty brush in passing. A slender and attractive American girl was standing there, looking at him with eyes which, he was not too busy to note, were something rather special in that line.

“Ah—er—good morning,” the detective said.

“Good morning,” the girl answered gravely. “I’m Pamela Potter, and Mr. Drake—was my grandfather. I presume you’re from Scotland Yard. Of course you’ll want to talk to one of the family.”

“Naturally,” Duff agreed. Very composed and sure of herself, this girl was, but there were traces of tears about those violet eyes. “Your mother, I believe, is also with this touring party?”

“Mother is prostrated,” the girl explained. “She may come round later. But just at present I am the only one who can face this thing. What can I tell you?”

“Can you think of any reason for this unhappy affair?”

The girl shook her head. “None whatever. It’s quite unbelievable, really. The kindest man in the world—not an

enemy. It's preposterous, you know."

Up from Clarges Street came the loud strains of *There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding*. Duff turned to one of his men. "Shut that window," he ordered sharply. "Your grandfather was prominent in the life of Detroit?" he added, to the girl. He spoke the name uncertainly, accenting the first syllable.

"Oh, yes—for many years. He was one of the first to go into the automobile business. He retired from the presidency of his company five years ago, but he kept a place on the board of directors. For the past few years he has been interested in charitable work—gave away hundreds of thousands. Everybody honored and respected him. Those who knew him loved him."

"He was, I take it, a very wealthy man?"

"Of course."

"And who——" Duff paused. "Pardon me, but it's a routine question. Who will inherit his money?"

The girl stared at Duff. "Why, I hadn't thought of that at all. But whatever isn't left to charity will, I suppose, go to my mother."

"And in time—to you?"

"To me and my brother. I fancy so. What of it?"

"Nothing, I imagine. When did you last see your grandfather? Alive, I mean."

"Just after dinner, last evening. Mother and I were going to the theater, but he didn't care to go. He was tired, he said, and besides he couldn't, poor dear, enjoy a play."

Duff nodded. "I understand. Your grandfather was deaf."

The girl started. "How did you know—oh——" Her eyes followed those of the inspector to a table where an ear-

phone, with a battery attached, was lying. Suddenly she burst into tears, but instantly regained her self-control. “Yes—that was his,” she added, and reached out her hand.

“Do not touch it, please,” Duff said quickly.

“Oh, I see. Of course not. He wore that constantly, but it didn’t help a lot. Last night he told us to go along, that he intended to retire early, as he expected to-day would be tiring—we were all starting for Paris, you know. We warned him not to oversleep—our rooms are on the floor below. He said he wouldn’t, that he had arranged with a waiter to wake him every morning just before eight. We were down in the lobby expecting him to join us for breakfast at eight-thirty, when the manager told us—what had happened.”

“Your mother was quite overcome?”

“Why not—such horrible news? She fainted, and I finally got her back to her room.”

“You did not faint?”

The girl looked at Duff with some contempt. “I don’t belong to a fainting generation. I was naturally terribly shocked.”

“Naturally. May I step out of character to say that I’m frightfully sorry?”

“Thank you. What else can I tell you?”

“Nothing now. I hope very much that you can arrange for me to see your mother a moment before I go. I must, you understand. But we will give her another hour or so. In the meantime, I am meeting the other members of your travel party in a parlor below. I won’t ask you to come——”

“Nonsense,” cried the girl. “Of course I’ll come. I’m no weakling, and besides, I want a good look at the members

of this party. We haven't had time to get acquainted—the trip across was rather trying. Yes, I'll be there. This thing is too meaningless, too cruel. I shan't rest until I know what is behind it. Anything I can do, Mr.——"

"Inspector Duff," he answered. "I'm glad you feel that way. We'll hunt the answer together, Miss Potter."

"And we'll find it," she added. "We've got to." For the first time she glanced at the bed. "He was so—so kind to me," she said brokenly, and went quickly out.

Duff stood looking after her. "Rather a thoroughbred, isn't she?" he commented to Hayley. "Amazing how many American girls are. Well, let's see. What have we? A bit of chain and a key. Good as far as it goes."

Hayley looked rather sheepish. "Duff, I have been an ass," he said. "There was something else. The surgeon picked it up from the bed—it was lying beside the body. Just carelessly thrown there, evidently."

"What?" Duff asked tersely.

"This." Hayley handed over a small, worn-looking bag of wash leather, fastened at the top with a slip cord. It was heavy with some mysterious contents. Duff stepped to a bureau, unloosed the cord, and poured the contents out on the bureau top. For a time he stared, a puzzled frown on his face.

"What—what should you say, Hayley?"

"Pebbles," Hayley remarked. "Little stones of various shapes and sizes. Some of them smooth—might have been picked up from a beach." He flattened out the pile with his hand. "Worthless little pebbles, and nothing else."

“A bit senseless, don’t you think?” murmured Duff. He turned to one of his men. “I say—just count these, and put them back in the bag.” As the officer set about his task, Duff sat down in an old-fashioned chair, and looked slowly about the room. “The case has its points,” he remarked.

“It has indeed,” Hayley answered.

“A harmless old man, making a pleasure trip around the world with his daughter and granddaughter, is strangled in a London hotel. A very deaf, gentle old soul, noted for his kindnesses and his benefactions. He rouses from sleep, struggles, gets hold of part of his assailant’s watch-chain. But his strength fails, the strap draws tighter, and the murderer, with one final gesture, throws on to the bed a silly bag of stones. What do you make of it, Hayley?”

“I’m rather puzzled, I must say.”

“So am I. But I’ve noted one or two things. You have too, no doubt?”

“I was never in your class, Duff.”

“Rot. Don’t be modest, old chap. You haven’t used your eyes, that’s all. If a man stood beside a bed, engaged in a mortal struggle with another man, his shoes would disturb the nap of the carpet to some extent. Especially if it were an old thick carpet such as this. There is no indication of any such roughing of the carpet, Hayley.”

“No?”

“None whatever. And—take a look at the bed, if you please.”

“By Jove!” The eyes of the Vine Street man widened. “I see what you mean. It’s been slept in, of course, but——”

“Precisely. At the foot and at one side, the covers are still tucked into place. The whole impression is one of neatness and order. Was there a struggle to the death on that bed, Hayley?”

“I think not, Duff.”

“I’m sure there was not.” Duff gazed thoughtfully about him. “Yes—this was Drake’s room. His property is all about. His ear-phone is on the table. His clothes are on that chair. But something tells me that Hugh Morris Drake was murdered elsewhere.”

CHAPTER III
The Man with a Weak Heart

Table of Contents

AFTER this surprising statement, Duff was silent for a moment, staring into space. Kent, the hotel manager, appeared in the doorway, his round face still harassed and worried.

“I thought perhaps I might be of some help here,” he remarked.

“Thank you,” Duff replied. “I should like to interview the person who first came upon this crime.”

“I rather thought you might,” the manager answered. “The body was found by Martin, the floor waiter. I have brought him along.” He went to the door and beckoned.

A servant with a rather blank face, much younger than most of his fellows, entered the room. He was obviously nervous.

“Good morning,” said Duff, taking out his note-book. “I am Inspector Duff, of Scotland Yard.” The young man’s manner became even more distressed. “I want you to tell me everything that happened here this morning.”

“Well, sir, I—I had an arrangement with Mr. Drake,” Martin began. “I was to rouse him every morning, there being no telephones in the rooms. He preferred to breakfast below, but he was fearful of oversleeping. A bit of a job it was, sir, to make him hear, him being so deaf. Twice I had to go to the housekeeper for a key, and enter the room.

“This morning, at a quarter before eight, I knocked at his door. I knocked many times, but nothing happened. Finally I went for the housekeeper’s key, but I was told it had disappeared yesterday.”

“The housekeeper’s key was lost?”

“It was, sir. There was another master key below-stairs, and I went for that. I had no thought of anything wrong—I had failed to make him hear me on those other mornings. I unlocked the door of this room and came in. One window was closed, the curtain was down all the way. The other was open and the curtain was up, too. The light entered from there. Everything seemed to be in order—I saw the ear-telephone on the table, Mr. Drake’s clothes on a chair. Then I approached the bed, sir—and it was a case of notifying the management immediately. That—that is all I can tell you, Inspector.”

Duff turned to Kent. “What is this about the housekeeper’s key?”

“Rather odd about that,” the manager said. “This is an old-fashioned house, as you know, and our maids are not provided with keys to the rooms. If a guest locks his door on going out, the maids are unable to do the room until they have obtained the master key from the housekeeper. Yesterday the lady in room 27, next door, a Mrs. Irene Spicer, also a member of Doctor Lofton’s party, went out and locked her door, though she had been requested not to do so by the servants.

“The maid was forced to secure the housekeeper’s key in order to enter. She left it in the lock and proceeded about

her work. Later, when she sought the key, it had disappeared. It is still missing."

"Naturally," smiled Duff. "It was in use, no doubt, about four o'clock this morning." He looked at Hayley. "Deliberately planned." Hayley nodded. "Any other recent incidents around the hotel," he continued to Kent, "about which we should know?"

The manager considered. "Yes," he said. "Our night-watchman reports two rather queer events that took place during the night. He is no longer a young man and I told him to lie down in a vacant room and get a little rest. I have sent for him, however, and he will see you presently. I prefer that you hear of these things from him."

Lofton appeared in the doorway. "Ah, Inspector Duff," he remarked. "I find a few of our party are still out, but I am rounding up everybody possible. They will all be here, as I told you, by ten o'clock. There are a number on this floor, and——"

"Just a moment," Duff broke in. "I am particularly interested in the occupants of the rooms on either side of this one. In 27, Mr. Kent tells me, there is a Mrs. Spicer. Will you kindly see if she is in, Doctor Lofton, and if so, bring her here?"

Lofton went out, and Duff stepped to the bed, where he covered over the face of the dead man. As he returned from the alcove, Lofton reentered, accompanied by a smartly dressed woman of about thirty. She had no doubt been beautiful, but her tired eyes and the somewhat hard lines about her mouth suggested a rather gay past.

“This is Mrs. Spicer,” Lofton announced. “Inspector Duff, of Scotland Yard.”

The woman stared at Duff with sudden interest. “Why should you wish to speak with me?” she asked.

“You know what has happened here this morning, I take it?”

“I know nothing. I had breakfast in my room, and I have not until this moment been outside it. Of course, I have heard a great deal of talking in here——”

“The gentleman who occupied this room was murdered in the night,” said Duff, tersely, studying her face as he spoke. The face paled.

“Murdered?” she cried. She swayed slightly. Hayley was quick with a chair. “Thank you,” she nodded mechanically. “You mean poor old Mr. Drake? Such a charming man. Why —that’s—that’s terrible.”

“It seems rather unfortunate,” Duff admitted. “There is only a thin door between your room and this. It was locked at all times, of course?”

“Naturally.”

“On both sides?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I know nothing of this side. It was always locked on mine.” Duff’s little stratagem had failed.

“Did you hear any noise in the night? A struggle—a cry, perhaps?”

“I heard nothing.”

“That’s rather odd.”

“Why should it be? I am a sound sleeper.”

“Then you were probably asleep at the hour the murder took place?”