Sapper

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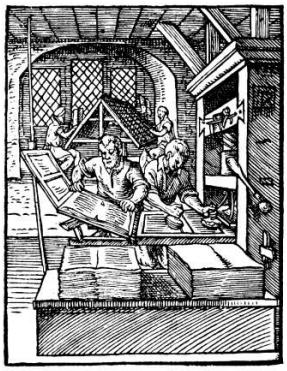

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I. — IN WHICH THE "MAID OF ORLEANS" LEAVES FOR BOULOGNE

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THE *Maid of Orleans* drew slowly away from the side. Leaning over the rail was the usual row of cross-Channel passengers calling out final good-byes to their friends on the quay. An odd Customs man or two drifted back to their respective offices: the R.A.C. representative raised protesting hands to High Heaven because one of his charges had departed without his triptyque. In fact, the usual scene on the departure of the Boulogne boat, and mentioned only because you must start a story somewhere, and Folkestone harbour is as good a locality as any.

Standing side by side on the quay were two men, who had been waving their hands in that shame-faced manner which immediately descends on the male sex when it indulges in that fatuous pursuit. The targets of their innocent pastime were two women, whose handkerchiefs had fluttered in response from the upper deck. And since these two charming ladies do not come into the matter again it might be as well to dispose of them forthwith. They were, in short, the wives of the two men, departing on their lawful occasions to Le Touquet, there to play a little golf and lose some money in the Casino. Which is really all that needs to be said about them, except possibly their last remark chanted in unison as the ship began to move:

"Now mind you're both good while we're away."

"Of course," answered the two men, also in unison.

And here and now let us be quite clear about this matter. Before ordering a dinner the average man consults the menu. If his mouth is set for underdone beef with horse-radish sauce it is as gall and wormwood to him to be given mutton and red-currant jelly. Similarly, before reading a book the average reader likes to have a pointer as to what it is about. Does it concern the Sheik of Fiction carrying off a beautiful white woman on his thoroughbred Arab; or does it concern the Sheik of Reality riding a donkey and picking fleas out of his burnous? Does it concern a Bolshevist plot to blow up the policeman on point duty at Dover Street; or does it concern the meditations of an evangelical Bishop on the revised Prayer-Book? And honesty compels me to state that it concerns none of these things, which is just as well for all concerned.

But it occurred to me that the parting admonition of those two charming ladies might possibly be construed to mean that they feared their husbands would not be good during their absence. Far from it: such a thought never even entered their heads. It was just a confirmatory statement of a fact as certain as the presence of Nelson in Trafalgar Square.

"Dear lambs," they remarked to one another as the boat cleared the harbour, "it will do them good to have a few days' golf all by themselves."

However, I still haven't given this pointer. And with it the last hopes of those who insist on a love story will be dashed to the ground. They must have received a pretty severe jolt when this matter of husband and wife was alluded to, though a few of the more optimistic ones may have had

visions of a divorce looming somewhere, or even a bit of slap and tickle. Sorry: nothing doing. So if this is the mutton of my restaurant analogy you know what to do. But don't forget this book weighs as much as "Pansy, or the Girl who Lost All for Love," and will do just as much damage to the aspidistra if you hit it. Another thing, too, which it does not concern is golf. On that fact, I must admit with shame and sorrow that these two miserable men had deceived their trusting wives. The larger and more nefarious of the two had actually addressed his partner in crime at breakfast that morning on the subjects of handicaps and niblicks and things, and what they were going to do during their few days at Rye. His eye had not twitched: his hand when he helped himself to marmalade had been steady. And yet he lied—the dirty dog—he lied.

And his companion in vice knew he had lied, though, to his everlasting shame, he said no word. Both of these scoundrels allowed their wives to leave them for a perilous sea voyage with a falsehood ringing in their ears. Which shows you the type of men you're dealing with. However—that's that: I'll get on with it. Still not given the pointer? Oh! read the darned book and find out for yourself.

I will take the larger one first. His height was a shade over six feet in his socks: his breadth and depth were in proportion. Which, in boxing parlance, entitles him to be placed among the big men. And big he was in every sense of the word. His face was nothing to write home about, and even his wife admitted that she only used it to amuse the baby. Anyway, looks don't matter in a man. What does matter is his condition, and, reverting once more to boxing

parlance, this man looked what he was—trained to the last ounce.

It has always been a bit of a marvel to me how Hugh Drummond kept as fit as he did, in view of his incredible capacity for lowering ale. Nevertheless, the bald fact remains that in the matter of fitness he had all of us beat to a frazzle. I particularly wish to emphasise that fact, because I believe that this is the first occasion that one of his really intimate friends has written about him. Take, for instance, the extraordinary adventure with that crazy woman, Irma, on Salisbury Plain. Joe Dixon wrote that, and Joe, good fellow though he is, hardly knew Hugh at all. But fourteen years have gone by since I first met him, in the front line near Arras, and in fourteen years one gets to know a man. From which it will be inferred that I was the other of the two nefarious scoundrels who had stood waving to their trusting wives from the quay.

Now, as will perhaps be remembered by those who have followed some of our adventures in the past, we got mixed up with a bunch of criminals shortly after the war. Their leader was a man named Carl Peterson, who was killed by Drummond in Wilmot's giant airship just before it crashed in flames. And that led up to the amazing happenings on Salisbury Plain that I have already alluded to, when Peterson's mistress kidnapped Drummond's wife and nearly got the lot of us. But she escaped, and the first thought that had sprung to my mind on getting Hugh's letter was that she had reappeared again. Up till now I had had no chance of speaking to him privately, but as the boat disappeared round the end of the jetty, I turned to him eagerly:

"What's the game, Hugh? Is it Irma on the scene again?"

He held up a protesting hand.

"My dear Peter," he remarked, "have you noticed that the sun is in the position technically known as over the yardarm?"

"And as the Governor of North Carolina said to his pal, let's get to it," I answered. "What about the Pavilion Hotel?"

"It is a wonderful thing being married, Peter," he said thoughtfully as we strolled along the platform.

"Marvellous," I agreed, and glanced at him sideways: there was a certain note in his voice that confirmed my suspicions.

"And," he continued, "it is good for all of us to sacrifice something in Lent."

"It is June," I answered, "but the principle holds good."

"Peter," he said, as we fell into two easy chairs in the lounge, "your brain has probably jumped to the fact that it was not entirely due to a desire to beat your head off on Rye golf links that I engineered this little affair at Le Touquet. Waiter—two large tankards of ale."

"Some such idea had dawned on me," I agreed. "It seemed so remarkably sudden."

"My dear old lad," he said with a grin, "you can't imagine the diplomacy I had to use. I first of all suggested that we all four should go to Le Touquet —a proposal which was jumped at by my devoted spouse. I then wrote you that masterpiece of duplicity."

"Masterpiece it may have been," I laughed, "but it gave me brain fever trying to think of an excuse that would hold water."

"What did you cough up finally?" he asked.

"I wrote to my lawyer," I said, "and told him to write to me and say he'd got some urgent business on my dear old grandmother's will. Sounded a bit thin to me, I confess, but, by the mercy of Allah, it went down. And Molly was deuced keen to go."

"So, bless her, was Phyllis," answered Hugh. "Thin or not, Peter, it worked. For a few days we are going to be bachelors. And much may happen in a few days."

"As you say," I agreed, "much may happen in a few days. At the same time, you haven't answered my first question. Is it Irma?"

"It is not, bless her. Maybe another time, for I should hate to lose her. But this time it's something quite, quite new."

He drained his tankard and pressed the bell.

"We will have the other half section, while I put you wise. Mark you, Peter, it may be the most hopeless mare's nest, and if it is we can always play golf. But somehow or other I don't think it is. In fact, in my own mind, I'm quite certain it isn't. You don't know this part of the world at all, do you?"

"Not a bit," I said.

"Well, the first thing to do is to give you a rough idea of the lie of the land. Once we leave Hythe we come to a large stretch of absolutely flat country which is known as Romney Marsh. The word 'marsh' is a misnomer, as the soil itself is quite hard and gives very good grazing. There are a few small villages dotted about, and an odd farmhouse or two, but the prevailing note is solitude. Motor charabancs cross it daily from Hastings and Folkestone, and the roads are good

but a bit narrow. But it is a solitary sort of place for all that; you feel that anything might happen on it.

"A few centuries ago it was covered by the sea, which came right up to the foothills, so that all of Romney Marsh is reclaimed land. And from those hills you get the most marvellous view away towards Dungeness and Lydd—if you like that type of view, that's to say. Open, free, with the tang of the sea in the wind. I love it; which was one of the deciding factors that led me to take our present house. It has a clear sweep for miles right out to sea, and I've installed a powerful telescope on the terrace—a telescope, Peter, which has been and is going to be of assistance. However, to return to our muttons. As I've told you, the Marsh itself is sparsely populated. The only considerable towns are Rye and Winchelsea—which can hardly be said to be on Romney Marsh at all. Rye is set on a sort of conical hill, and must in the olden days have been almost completely surrounded by water. But except for them, and Lydd, where the artillery range is, and New Romney, there's not much in the house line, and those that are there belong principally to small farmers.

"About a week ago—to be exact, the day before I wrote to you—I was undressing to go to bed. It was fairly early—not more than eleven or a quarter past—and after I had got into pyjamas I sat by the open window having a final cigarette. My dressing-room faces over the Marsh, and I could see the lights of a passing steamer going West. Suddenly, from the very middle of the Marsh itself, there came a red flash lasting about a second; then a pause, and a moment afterwards it was blue. They were repeated half a

dozen times—red, blue, red, blue—then they ceased altogether.

"For a while I sat there staring out, wondering what on earth they could mean. By putting a couple of matches on my dressing-table I got the rough alignment so that I could get the direction in the morning—but I was sorely tempted to go out and investigate then and there. However, I decided not to; Phyllis was in bed, and I was undressed. And if the truth be told, Peter, even at that early hour the possibility of a little fun had struck me, and I didn't want to run the risk of cramping our style. So I didn't mention anything about it to the dear soul. That it was a signal of some sort seemed fairly obvious, but for what and to whom? The first thought that flitted across my mind was that smugglers were at work. For if rumour speaks the truth there is the devil of a lot of smuggling going on since these new silk duties were put on. There are stories told of fast motor-boats, and mysterious motor-cars that go careering about in the middle of the night. However, when I began to think things over a bit, I dismissed the smuggling theory. To put it mildly, it seemed unlikely that men engaged in such an extremely secret and risky business would take the trouble to advertise themselves by flashing red and blue lights all over the place. Besides, one would have expected the signal—if such it was—to be given towards the sea, and this was given towards the land. So I washed out smugglers.

The next solution that presented itself was that it wasn't a genuine signal at all, but the work of some boy with a developed film sense. A joke inspired by 'Dandy Dick—the

Cowboy's Terror,' or something of that sort. And leaving it at that, I fell asleep.

"The next morning I was up early. A mist was lying over the Marsh which lifted after a while, and I took a squint over my two matches. They, of course, gave me the right direction, but not elevation. That I had to guess. As I've told you, there are very few houses about, and there was only one through which the line of my matches passed. Moreover, as far as I could judge, though things look very different by day to what they do at night, that house gave me approximately the right elevation. So I went downstairs and focussed my telescope on it.

"It was, as I expected, an ordinary farm-house. There seemed to be a couple of out-houses and four or five biggish trees. Moreover, the whole property stood isolated by itself, like a little island rising out of a lake. As far as I could judge, it stood about a quarter of a mile from the main road between Rye and New Romney, and was connected to it by a rough track. I could see no sign of life, until the front door opened and a woman with a pail in her hand came out and went into one of the outhouses. In every respect a peaceful country scene.

"However, I waylaid the postman that morning and got some more information from him. It appeared that the place was known as Spragge's Farm. It belonged to a man of that name, and had belonged to his father and grandfather before him. The present man lived there with his wife, and, I gathered, was not a popular individual. He was surly and morose, and had the reputation of being a miser. Apparently he was quite well off, but he refused to keep a servant,

making his wife do all the menial work. He had a ferocious temper, and on two or three occasions had been run in before the local Bench for actual physical violence to one of his farm hands, the result being that now he could get no one to work for him. Following up my second theory I asked if he had any children, and was told that he hadn't. But, I gathered, he occasionally took in a lodger who wanted quiet and rest. I further gathered that the usual duration of the said lodger's stay was not extensive, as he got neither rest nor quiet for his money. I asked if he had one now, but that the postman couldn't tell me. He hadn't heard of one, but then, Spragge's Farm wasn't on his beat. So having found out mighty little, I thanked him and he went off. And then, after he'd gone a few yards he turned round and came back. It appeared that he had suddenly remembered that the cards which Spragge had put in one or two of the shops in Rye, advertising that he took in boarders, had been removed recently, the assumption being that possibly he had given up that side line. And that comprised all the information I got.

"Off and on through the morning I had a look at the place, but nothing of the slightest interest did I see. Once a man came out who I assumed was Spragge himself, and I saw the woman two or three times, but except for that there was no sign of life about the farm. And after a while I began to wonder if the whole thing wasn't capable of some perfectly ordinary explanation; or possibly that the farm itself was not the origin of the lights.

"And then, Peter, there occurred the thing which caused my letter to you and the departure of our womenkind to-

day."

Hugh lit a cigarette, and I followed suit. Up to date it struck me that the doings had been hardly such as to awake feverish excitement in the breasts of the troops, but I knew my man. Domesticity might have dulled him a little, but he could still spot the genuine article like a terrier spots a rat.

"We will now leave the Marsh," he continued, "and come to the higher ground where my house is. I've got no one near me—my next neighbour being about half a mile away. He, too, commands a view right out to sea, but there all similarity ends between us, I trust. His name is Granger, and he's a gentleman I've got remarkably little use for. In appearance, he is small and measly-looking: you see smaller editions in a bit of ripe Stilton. As far as I know he lives alone, save for two servants—one a great bullock of a man who looks like a prize-fighter, the other an elderly female who cooks. I got those details from my own staff, because I've never been inside his house myself. In fact, the only time I've met the blighter is occasionally out walking, when he is invariably accompanied by this professional pug. And it was on one such occasion that he stopped and spoke to me.

"'Captain Drummond, I believe,' he said.

"I admitted the soft impeachment, and wondered what was coming.

"'You and your wife must forgive my not calling on you,' he went on jerkily. 'I am a recluse, Captain Drummond, and my health is not of the best.'

"He rambled on, and when he'd finished I assured him that it did not matter in the least, and that we quite

understood. I didn't add that the only thing we wouldn't forgive him for was if he did call, and we parted, leaving me with two very distinct impressions.

"The first was that, in spite of his name, the man was not pure English. There was a distinct trace of an accent in his voice, though I couldn't decide what. The second was that he was afraid of something. The whole time he was talking to me his eyes had been darting this way and that, as if he was perpetually on the lookout for some unexpected danger. Of course, it might have been only a mannerism, but that was the impression he gave me, and subsequent gossip confirmed my idea. The man was frightened, though whether of a specific individual or of people at large I didn't know.

"It appeared he had taken the house very soon after the war, and had immediately proceeded to fortify the place like a prison. There was already a high wall all round the house, and his first act was to have the top of it covered with a double row of long crossed steel spikes. His next performance was to have the existing open gates for the drive replaced by two heavy wooden ones whose tops were also covered with the same contraption of spikes. These were kept permanently locked, and the only way of getting in was through a small wicket let into one of them. But this was also kept locked, and before it could be opened a tremendous ceremony had to be gone through. My informant on all this once again was the postman. When the time came for the various errand boys to bring the provisions for the day, the prize-fighter took up his position by the wicket gate. When the bell rang he opened it and

took the meat, or whatever it was, from the boy. Then everything was shut up again as before. The same with the postman, too. On the rare occasions when Mr. Granger got a letter he handed it to the bodyguard through the gate; he was never allowed to go up to the front door.

"But that wasn't all; I've only mentioned the outer line of defences up to date. The inner was just as thorough. Every window in the house was protected on the outside by iron bars, exactly like a prison cell. Even the attics had them; not only the ground floor rooms. That work was done by a local man, so the countryside got full information—but a London firm was employed for other things, of which only vague rumours got round. Burglar alarms of the most modern type were installed, and trip wires in the grounds which rang gongs, and the Lord knows what else.

"However, there is no good elaborating the details. I've told you enough already to show you that my neighbour not only resented intrusion, but was determined to stop it. Naturally, in a country place like this the inhabitants buzzed like a hive of bees with curiosity, though when I took my place three years after, the excitement had died down. They had become used to him, and the generally accepted theory was that he was an eccentric who lived in terror of burglars. Colour was added to that idea by the doctor who, on one occasion, was called in to see him. It appeared that everything short of blindfolding the medico was done to prevent him seeing anything. He was rushed from the wicket gate to the front door, through the hall and up to the bedroom. And when he got there the prize-fighter remained

in the room. Mark you, Peter, the doctor man told me this himself.

"He waited for the servant to go, and when he showed every intention of staying, he stuck in his toes. He told Granger, who was in bed, that he was not in the habit of having a third person in the room when he was examining a patient unless that person was a qualified nurse. Granger answered very querulously that the man was his confidential valet and that he wished him to stay. The doctor replied to the effect that he didn't care a damn what he was, but that if he didn't clear out of the room Mr. Granger would have to obtain another doctor. Well, the long and the short of it was, that, after a while, and very reluctantly, the servant left the room, and the doctor got on with his job. As he said to me, he didn't really mind in the slightest if the man remained or if he didn't, but he was determined to see what would happen if he insisted.

"After he had made his examination, and prescribed something or other, he glanced round the room.

"'Lovely things you've got here, Mr. Granger,' he remarked casually.

"The invalid struck a little bell beside the bed, and the servant entered so quickly that he must have been just outside the door.

"'Show the doctor out,' said the sick man irritably. 'And I'll let you know. Doctor Sinclair, if I want you again.'

"Now the doctor, though one of the best, has the devil of a temper. And he let drive at that.

"'Your case is not one that I care to continue treating,' he said coldly. 'It is not your bodily health that requires

attention, but your manners. My fee is half a guinea.'

"For a moment or two, so he told me, he thought the prize-fighter was going to strike him, but Granger pulled himself together.

"'Forgive me, doctor,' he said. 'I'm not feeling my best to-day. Yes, there are some lovely things in this room, and, in fact, all over the house. That is why I have taken these somewhat elaborate precautions against unauthorised people gaining an entrance. A burglar's paradise, my dear sir; a burglar's paradise. I trust you will forgive my momentary irritability, and continue as my medical attendant.'

"By that time Sinclair's anger had evaporated, and he said no more. And when he did go back next day the valet made no attempt to remain in the room. Even the precautions of the first day were relaxed a little, and he didn't have the impression that he was being marched along under an armed guard. But no time was wasted lingering about the house, and no further mention was made of what was in it.

"This yarn of the doctor's, as I say, was taken by most people to confirm the theory that Granger was frightened of burglars. And one has certainly heard of cases where miserly eccentrics have lived for years surrounded by their treasures, and protected by every sort of mechanical device. But though I said nothing about it at the time the solution didn't quite satisfy me. Even the most suspicious recluse would hardly suspect a respectable medical man of any desire to steal the spoons. So, why these elaborate precautions on the occasion of his visit? Was it eccentricity

on Granger's part which was almost akin to insanity: the result of a fear so great that he suspected any and everyone without exception?

"Or was it something deeper than that; and if so, what?

"Well, I set to work to puzzle it out. The first idea that occurred to me was that he was afraid for his life. That, again, was open to the same objection. You don't expect a doctor to pinch your spoons, but even less do you anticipate that he will murder you. So I dismissed that theory, and tried another. Was there something to conceal in the house which he didn't wish the doctor to see? Remember, the doctor is the only human being, as far as I know, who has ever been in the house from the outside world. I worked along that line for a bit, saying nothing to anybody, and the more I thought of it the more did I become convinced that I was on the right track. Of course, it was possible that he was afraid that the doctor might spot some of the inner secrets of his defences, but again the same darned old objection. If he did he was hardly likely to run round revealing his discovery to bands of burglars. So what was the mystery? If I was right, what was hidden inside? Was it a human being? Possibly, but the idea presented difficulties. Remember, Granger has been there for six years, and, in spite of all his safeguards, it would have been difficult to keep a fourth person in the house for all that time without someone spotting it. And if it wasn't a human being it must be some object. But surely it would have been perfectly simple to hide it away so that the doctor couldn't see it during his quick walk through the house. So there I was up against a blank wall once more. And after a while I gave up

worrying over the blamed thing; it wasn't worth it. Perhaps someday the mystery, if any, would come out, and in the meantime I, outwardly, at any rate, subscribed to the theory that Mr. Granger was an eccentric old man who did not want to be disturbed, and had taken damned good care that he shouldn't be. Sorry for all this hot air, Peter, but I had to make it clear to you. We will now get on a bit quicker. The morning after I had seen the lights on the Marsh I went out for a stroll to the village. And that meant I had to go past Granger's house. Now don't forget that all my cogitations on his menage had taken place months ago: I had long given up worrying my head about it. So that what happened cannot be fancy or imagination due to my suspicions. About a quarter of a mile before I got to his gates who should I see coming along the road but the man himself and his tame bruiser. Now on the rare occasions when I had met him we had always stopped and had a few words—generally platitudes about the weather. And as usual I halted as I came abreast of him and passed the time of day. He was a bit more affable than usual for some reason: in fact, he even managed to crack a smile over something that I said. And then, for some unknown reason, I mentioned the lights I'd seen on the Marsh. It was just a sudden impulse said without thought.

"Good Lord! Peter, I thought the man had gone mad. He stared at me with dilated eyes, and his lower jaw was shaking like a man with ague. And the pug wasn't much better.

"'Red and blue lights,' he stammered foolishly. 'Red and blue lights.'

"He was croaking in his agitation, and clutching the valet's arm with two trembling hands.

"'Where did you see them, Captain Drummond—these lights?'

"But by that time I'd taken a pull at myself: evidently there was a mystery in the offing, and I wasn't going to be too specific.

"'Somewhere on Romney Marsh,' I said vaguely. 'Why? What's all the excitement about?'

"'Red and blue,' he almost screamed to the valet. 'Santa Maria! Gaspard—it is he.'

"'Shut up,' growled the pug, though his own forehead was wet with sweat.

"But the other was beyond hope: he was in a state of gibbering terror.

"'Back to the house,' he kept on muttering. 'Hurry—for the love of the Virgin.'

"And away the pair of them went down the road with Granger clawing at the valet, and the valet glancing this way and that over his shoulder, as if he expected someone to materialise out of the hedge. For a while I stood staring after them foolishly: the whole thing was so totally unexpected. Then I followed them at a discreet distance, feeling a strong desire to laugh. They looked so damned ridiculous. Granger, as I think I've mentioned, is a little man, and to see him hopping along beside that vast bullock of a valet who every now and then broke into a shambling run had its humorous aspect. They reached their front gate, and while the pug was fumbling with his key to open the wicket Granger kept dancing about in his agitation. Then they

disappeared, and I heard an iron bar clang home. The fortress had been reached in safety."

Hugh paused and looked at me with a grin.

"Getting a bit nearer the meat juice, ain't we, Peter? Why should the fact that a red and blue light had been flashed on Romney Marsh inspire terror in the breasts of our Mr. Granger and his pugilistic companion? And no mild form of terror either. For if I'm a judge that man was sick with fear for his life."

"It would seem," I murmured mildly, "that the problem is one which can hardly be solved on paper. And since our wives are at Le Touquet, it might help to pass the agonising time till they rejoin us, if we--"

"Good lad," he laughed. "I knew you would."

"But, look here, Hugh," I said, "has nothing more happened? Have you seen the lights again?"

"Only once—three nights ago."

"And you haven't been down to this place—Spragge's Farm?"

He shook his head. "I thought I'd wait for you, Peter. It seemed a crime to keep a thing like this to oneself."

"Just one small point, old man," I put in.

"What about the police? If your surmise is right: if this man Granger is in fear of his life why hasn't he told the police about it? Or has he? Because if so "

"He hasn't, Peter," he interrupted. " That I know. The local inspector is a great pal of mine. And since that very objection occurred to me, I made a point of meeting him. I brought the conversation round to Granger—never a difficult thing to do. And I'm convinced that if he had asked for

police protection I should have heard of it. Therefore he hasn't. Why not? Because, laddie, he dare not. That's my answer to it. It's what I have thought all along. There is something that man has got to conceal, and he dare not run the risk of bringing the police in."

"It sounds feasible," I agreed. "Anyway what's the next move?"

"A couple of short ones. Then lunch. And after that we'll lay out a plan of campaign."

He led the way and I followed: thus it had always been in the past.

II. — IN WHICH WE MEET TWO NEW ALLIES

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I DON'T pretend for a moment, of course, that there was the slightest excuse to be offered for us. Manifestly the matter was no business of ours. If Mr. Granger chose to barricade his house with iron spikes it was his affair, and no one else's. Still I regret to say that there are people in this world who are as irresistibly drawn to a thick-ear atmosphere as a cat is to a saucer of milk. And Hugh Drummond was one of them, having been born that way.

In that way he differed from me: I only acquired the liking by force of his example. And I am bound to admit that had I been the one to see a red and blue light flashing on Romney Marsh, and realised that such a harmless, even peculiar phenomenon produced terror in the breast of my next-door neighbour, I should not have proceeded farther with the matter.

Wherefore the difference of our mental attitudes during lunch is easily understandable. Mine was principally concerned with our official position in the matter: his was entirely occupied with whether the thing was likely to produce some sport.

"My dear Peter," he said, as the waiter brought the coffee, "we haven't got any official position in the matter. So that's that, and there's no use worrying about it. But it is manifestly the duty of every law-abiding citizen to investigate such a strange pastime as flashing coloured lights on the Marsh. Maybe it is some new method of

catching moths: maybe not. Anyway we're darned well going to see."

"And the first move?" I asked.

"Is to call at Spragge's Farm," he answered.

We are not to know that his notice about rooms to let has been withdrawn. We will therefore, on the way back, present ourselves at the door, and you will ask if he can put you up. Say that you're suffering from nervous breakdown due to backing three winners in succession, and demand to see what accommodation he has to offer. Then say you'll let him know. We'll both keep our eyes skinned and perhaps we'll see something."

"Right ho!" I said resignedly. "As long as I'm not expected to stop at the bally place, I'll put up the palaver."

We paid the bill, and left the dining-room. Hugh's car was outside the hotel, a Bentley Sports model: and ten minutes later we had dropped down the hill to Sandgate and were running along by the sea towards Hythe.

"From now on, Peter," he said, "until we get actually to Rye itself the ground is dead flat. When we get out a bit further you'll see the range of hills away to the right where my house stands."

It was a hot, lazy afternoon, and the heat haze shimmered over the country which stretched dry and parched on each side of the road. Even the usual breeze which one gets in the locality had died away, and the few cattle we saw were standing listlessly in what shade they could find. The disused red water cistern on Littlestone golf links dropped away behind us, and the Martello Towers ceased as we turned away from the sea after New Romney.

"Dungeness away there to the left," said Hugh briefly. "And Lydd. Now we're on the Marsh proper."

The road was good but narrow, with a deep ditch on each side, and he pointed out the spot to me where a motor charabanc had skidded and overturned one night, pinning the occupants underneath it till they were drowned in six inches of water.

"These grass sides to the road get slippery at times," he explained. "And then you want to watch it."

At length he stopped the car and lit a cigarette.

"Now, Peter," he said, "we approach our destination. That place there in front of us is Rye. Cast your eyes two fingers right and you will see on the hill an imposing red brick edifice. That is the house of Drummond. Straight in front of us you will see a smallish house in a clump of trees: that is Spragge's Farm. One finger to the right of my house, also on the hill, you perceive another house. That is our friend Granger's prison. Now you get the geography of the part that concerns us. And the great point, as you will notice, is that if, as I am tolerably certain, those lights were a warning of some sort, Spragge's Farm is as good a place as any on the Marsh for Granger to see them from."

"Correct," I agreed. "Now what am I really to say to Spragge?"

"Any darned thing you like," he laughed as we started once more. " It's only a preliminary reconnaissance, and we can't expect much luck."

It was fortunate we didn't, because we had none at all. The farm stood about a quarter of a mile from the road, and a rough drive—little more than a stony lane—led up to it. A

gate barred the entrance, and leaning over it was a morose looking individual smoking a pipe. He stared at us with scarcely veiled hostility as we pulled up, and made no effort to move.

"This is Spragge's Farm, isn't it?" said Hugh politely.

"It is," grunted the man without removing his pipe from his mouth.

"Do you know if Mr. Spragge is anywhere about?"

"I'm Mr. Spragge. What might you be wanting?"

Hugh's fingers began to drum on the steering wheel, and it wasn't difficult to tell exactly what he was wanting. But to clip a man over the jaw is not conducive to further conversation, and his voice remained studiously mild.

"I was told, Mr. Spragge," he said quietly, "that you had a room to let at your farm. My friend here is anxious for a place where he can finish—er—a book undisturbed. If your room is free he would like to see it."

The man removed his pipe, only apparently to enable him to spit with greater ease. Then he stared insolently from one to the other of us.

"You were told wrong," he grunted. "I've no room to let, and if I had I choose who I put--"

"Your choice must be fairly limited I should imagine," remarked Hugh, "if this is a fair sample of your manners. Nice chatty little fellow, aren't you, Mr. Spragge?"

The man straightened himself up, and the veins on his forehead began to stand out like whipcord.

"Look here, you damned dude," he said thickly, "you get out of this before I lose my temper. I speaks how I like, and to whom I like. But unless you're out of this pretty quick, I'll

pull you out of your car and little Pansy-face beside you as well."

Hugh laughed pleasantly.

"And why should I get out of this, Mr. Spragge? This road is as much mine as yours, and you've no idea what a pretty picture you make leaning against that gate. True, your face leaves much to be desired, and your clothes are deplorable, but the general picture—the *tout ensemble*—of the Englishman guarding his home is quite wonderful. Don't you agree, Peter?"

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, and saw the old well-remembered look on his face. He was deliberately goading the man on, though for what purpose I couldn't quite make out. This man Spragge was a powerful looking brute, and I failed to see any object in starting a rough house. And that was exactly what seemed imminent. With a flood of blasphemy the farmer flung open the gate, and slouched over to the car; and as he came Hugh opened the door and stepped into the road.

"You " snarled Spragge. "I've warned you once: now you can have it."

I almost laughed: how many men had said words to that effect in days gone by? And with the same result. Spragge shot out a fist like a leg of mutton, which encountered air, and the next instant he was lying flat on his back in the middle of the road, completely knocked out.

"Quick, Peter," said Hugh urgently. " Sling the blighter into the back of the car, and we'll take him to the farm. Heaven forbid, old man," he chuckled as the Bentley spun up the track, "that we should be so grossly inhuman as to