Edgar Wallace

The Clue of the Twisted Candle

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CHAPTER I

The 4.15 from Victoria to Lewes had been held up at Three Bridges in consequence of a derailment and, though John Lexman was fortunate enough to catch a belated connection to Beston Tracey, the wagonette which was the sole communication between the village and the outside world had gone.

“If you can wait half an hour, Mr. Lexman,” said the station-master, “I will telephone up to the village and get Briggs to come down for you.”

John Lexman looked out upon the dripping landscape and shrugged his shoulders.

“I'll walk,” he said shortly and, leaving his bag in the station-master's care and buttoning his mackintosh to his chin, he stepped forth resolutely into the rain to negotiate the two miles which separated the tiny railway station from Little Tracey.

The downpour was incessant and likely to last through the night. The high hedges on either side of the narrow road were so many leafy cascades; the road itself was in places ankle deep in mud. He stopped under the protecting cover of a big tree to fill and light his pipe and with its bowl turned downwards continued his walk. But for the driving rain which searched every crevice and found every chink in his waterproof armor, he preferred, indeed welcomed, the walk.

The road from Beston Tracey to Little Beston was associated in his mind with some of the finest situations in his novels. It was on this road that he

had conceived "The Tilbury Mystery." Between the station and the house he had woven the plot which had made "Gregory Standish" the most popular detective story of the year. For John Lexman was a maker of cunning plots.

If, in the literary world, he was regarded by superior persons as a writer of "shockers," he had a large and increasing public who were fascinated by the wholesome and thrilling stories he wrote, and who held on breathlessly to the skein of mystery until they came to the denouement he had planned.

But no thought of books, or plots, or stories filled his troubled mind as he strode along the deserted road to Little Beston. He had had two interviews in London, one of which under ordinary circumstances would have filled him with joy: He had seen T. X. and "T. X." was T. X. Meredith, who would one day be Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department and was now an Assistant Commissioner of Police, engaged in the more delicate work of that department.

In his erratic, tempestuous way, T. X. had suggested the greatest idea for a plot that any author could desire. But it was not of T. X. that John Lexman thought as he breasted the hill, on the slope of which was the tiny habitation known by the somewhat magnificent title of Beston Priory.

It was the interview he had had with the Greek on the previous day which filled his mind, and he frowned as he recalled it. He opened the little wicket gate and went through the plantation to the house, doing his best to shake off the recollection of the remarkable and unedifying discussion he had had with the moneylender.

Beston Priory was little more than a cottage, though one of its walls was an indubitable relic of that establishment which a pious Howard had erected in the thirteenth century. A small and unpretentious building, built in the Elizabethan style with quaint gables and high chimneys, its latticed

windows and sunken gardens, its rosary and its tiny meadow, gave it a certain manorial completeness which was a source of great pride to its owner.

He passed under the thatched porch, and stood for a moment in the broad hallway as he stripped his drenching mackintosh.

The hall was in darkness. Grace would probably be changing for dinner, and he decided that in his present mood he would not disturb her. He passed through the long passage which led to the big study at the back of the house. A fire burnt redly in the old-fashioned grate and the snug comfort of the room brought a sense of ease and relief. He changed his shoes, and lit the table lamp.

The room was obviously a man's den. The leather-covered chairs, the big and well-filled bookcase which covered one wall of the room, the huge, solid-oak writing-desk, covered with books and half-finished manuscripts, spoke unmistakably of its owner's occupation.

After he had changed his shoes, he refilled his pipe, walked over to the fire, and stood looking down into its glowing heart.

He was a man a little above medium height, slimly built, with a breadth of shoulder which was suggestive of the athlete. He had indeed rowed 4 in his boat, and had fought his way into the semi-finals of the amateur boxing championship of England. His face was strong, lean, yet well-moulded. His eyes were grey and deep, his eyebrows straight and a little forbidding. The clean-shaven mouth was big and generous, and the healthy tan of his cheek told of a life lived in the open air.

There was nothing of the recluse or the student in his appearance. He was in fact a typical, healthy-looking Britisher, very much like any other man of

his class whom one would meet in the mess-room of the British army, in the wardrooms of the fleet, or in the far-off posts of the Empire, where the administrative cogs of the great machine are to be seen at work.

There was a little tap at the door, and before he could say “Come in” it was pushed open and Grace Lexman entered.

If you described her as brave and sweet you might secure from that brief description both her manner and her charm. He half crossed the room to meet her, and kissed her tenderly.

“I didn't know you were back until—” she said; linking her arm in his.

“Until you saw the horrible mess my mackintosh has made,” he smiled. “I know your methods, Watson!”

She laughed, but became serious again.

“I am very glad you've come back. We have a visitor,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows.

“A visitor? Whoever came down on a day like this?”

She looked at him a little strangely.

“Mr. Kara,” she said.

“Kara? How long has he been here?”

“He came at four.”

There was nothing enthusiastic in her tone.

“I can't understand why you don't like old Kara,” rallied her husband.

“There are very many reasons,” she replied, a little curtly for her.

“Anyway,” said John Lexman, after a moment's thought, “his arrival is rather opportune. Where is he?”

“He is in the drawing-room.”

The Priory drawing-room was a low-ceilinged, rambling apartment, “all old print and chrysanthemums,” to use Lexman's description. Cosy armchairs, a grand piano, an almost medieval open grate, faced with dull-green tiles, a well-worn but cheerful carpet and two big silver candelabras were the principal features which attracted the newcomer.

There was in this room a harmony, a quiet order and a soothing quality which made it a haven of rest to a literary man with jagged nerves. Two big bronze bowls were filled with early violets, another blazed like a pale sun with primroses, and the early woodland flowers filled the room with a faint fragrance.

A man rose to his feet, as John Lexman entered and crossed the room with an easy carriage. He was a man possessed of singular beauty of face and of figure. Half a head taller than the author, he carried himself with such a grace as to conceal his height.

“I missed you in town,” he said, “so I thought I'd run down on the off chance of seeing you.”

He spoke in the well-modulated tone of one who had had a long acquaintance with the public schools and universities of England. There was no trace of any foreign accent, yet Remington Kara was a Greek and had been born and partly educated in the more turbulent area of Albania.

The two men shook hands warmly.

“You'll stay to dinner?”

Kara glanced round with a smile at Grace Lexman. She sat uncomfortably upright, her hands loosely folded on her lap, her face devoid of encouragement.

“If Mrs. Lexman doesn't object,” said the Greek.

“I should be pleased, if you would,” she said, almost mechanically; “it is a horrid night and you won't get anything worth eating this side of London and I doubt very much,” she smiled a little, “if the meal I can give you will be worthy of that description.”

“What you can give me will be more than sufficient,” he said, with a little bow, and turned to her husband.

In a few minutes they were deep in a discussion of books and places, and Grace seized the opportunity to make her escape. From books in general to Lexman's books in particular the conversation flowed.

“I've read every one of them, you know,” said Kara.

John made a little face. “Poor devil,” he said sardonically.

“On the contrary,” said Kara, “I am not to be pitied. There is a great criminal lost in you, Lexman.”

“Thank you,” said John.

“I am not being uncomplimentary, am I?” smiled the Greek. “I am merely referring to the ingenuity of your plots. Sometimes your books baffle and annoy me. If I cannot see the solution of your mysteries before the book is

half through, it angers me a little. Of course in the majority of cases I know the solution before I have reached the fifth chapter."

John looked at him in surprise and was somewhat piqued.

"I flatter myself it is impossible to tell how my stories will end until the last chapter," he said.

Kara nodded.

"That would be so in the case of the average reader, but you forget that I am a student. I follow every little thread of the clue which you leave exposed."

"You should meet T. X.," said John, with a laugh, as he rose from his chair to poke the fire.

"T. X.?"

"T. X. Meredith. He is the most ingenious beggar you could meet. We were at Caius together, and he is by way of being a great pal of mine. He is in the Criminal Investigation Department."

Kara nodded. There was the light of interest in his eyes and he would have pursued the discussion further, but at the moment dinner was announced.

It was not a particularly cheerful meal because Grace did not as usual join in the conversation, and it was left to Kara and to her husband to supply the deficiencies. She was experiencing a curious sense of depression, a premonition of evil which she could not define. Again and again in the course of the dinner she took her mind back to the events of the day to discover the reason for her unease.

Usually when she adopted this method she came upon the trivial causes in which apprehension was born, but now she was puzzled to find that a solution was denied her. Her letters of the morning had been pleasant, neither the house nor the servants had given her any trouble. She was well herself, and though she knew John had a little money trouble, since his unfortunate speculation in Roumanian gold shares, and she half suspected that he had had to borrow money to make good his losses, yet his prospects were so excellent and the success of his last book so promising that she, probably seeing with a clearer vision the unimportance of those money worries, was less concerned about the problem than he.

“You will have your coffee in the study, I suppose,” said Grace, “and I know you'll excuse me; I have to see Mrs. Chandler on the mundane subject of laundry.”

She favoured Kara with a little nod as she left the room and touched John's shoulder lightly with her hand in passing.

Kara's eyes followed her graceful figure until she was out of view, then:

“I want to see you, Kara,” said John Lexman, “if you will give me five minutes.”

“You can have five hours, if you like,” said the other, easily.

They went into the study together; the maid brought the coffee and liqueur, and placed them on a little table near the fire and disappeared.

For a time the conversation was general. Kara, who was a frank admirer of the comfort of the room and who lamented his own inability to secure with money the cosiness which John had obtained at little cost, went on a

foraging expedition whilst his host applied himself to a proof which needed correcting.

“I suppose it is impossible for you to have electric light here,” Kara asked.

“Quite,” replied the other.

“Why?”

“I rather like the light of this lamp.”

“It isn't the lamp,” drawled the Greek and made a little grimace; “I hate these candles.”

He waved his hand to the mantle-shelf where the six tall, white, waxen candles stood out from two wall sconces.

“Why on earth do you hate candles?” asked the other in surprise.

Kara made no reply for the moment, but shrugged his shoulders. Presently he spoke.

“If you were ever tied down to a chair and by the side of that chair was a small keg of black powder and stuck in that powder was a small candle that burnt lower and lower every minute—my God!”

John was amazed to see the perspiration stand upon the forehead of his guest.

“That sounds thrilling,” he said.

The Greek wiped his forehead with a silk handkerchief and his hand shook a little.

“It was something more than thrilling,” he said.

“And when did this occur?” asked the author curiously.

“In Albania,” replied the other; “it was many years ago, but the devils are always sending me reminders of the fact.”

He did not attempt to explain who the devils were or under what circumstances he was brought to this unhappy pass, but changed the subject definitely.

Sauntering round the cosy room he followed the bookshelf which filled one wall and stopped now and again to examine some title. Presently he drew forth a stout volume.

“'Wild Brazil',” he read, “by George Gathercole-do you know Gathercole?”

John was filling his pipe from a big blue jar on his desk and nodded.

“Met him once—a taciturn devil. Very short of speech and, like all men who have seen and done things, less inclined to talk about himself than any man I know.”

Kara looked at the book with a thoughtful pucker of brow and turned the leaves idly.

“I've never seen him,” he said as he replaced the book, “yet, in a sense, his new journey is on my behalf.”

The other man looked up.

“On your behalf?”

“Yes—you know he has gone to Patagonia for me. He believes there is gold there—you will learn as much from his book on the mountain systems of South America. I was interested in his theories and corresponded with him. As a result of that correspondence he undertook to make a geological survey for me. I sent him money for his expenses, and he went off.”

“You never saw him?” asked John Lexman, surprised.

Kara shook his head.

“That was not—?” began his host.

“Not like me, you were going to say. Frankly, it was not, but then I realized that he was an unusual kind of man. I invited him to dine with me before he left London, and in reply received a wire from Southampton intimating that he was already on his way.”

Lexman nodded.

“It must be an awfully interesting kind of life,” he said. “I suppose he will be away for quite a long time?”

“Three years,” said Kara, continuing his examination of the bookshelf.

“I envy those fellows who run round the world writing books,” said John, puffing reflectively at his pipe. “They have all the best of it.”

Kara turned. He stood immediately behind the author and the other could not see his face. There was, however, in his voice an unusual earnestness and an unusual quiet vehemence.

“What have you to complain about!” he asked, with that little drawl of his. “You have your own creative work—the most fascinating branch of labour

that comes to a man. He, poor beggar, is bound to actualities. You have the full range of all the worlds which your imagination gives to you. You can create men and destroy them, call into existence fascinating problems, mystify and baffle ten or twenty thousand people, and then, at a word, elucidate your mystery."

John laughed.

"There is something in that," he said.

"As for the rest of your life," Kara went on in a lower voice, "I think you have that which makes life worth living—an incomparable wife."

Lexman swung round in his chair, and met the other's gaze, and there was something in the set of the other's handsome face which took his breath away.

"I do not see—" he began.

Kara smiled.

"That was an impertinence, wasn't it!" he said, banteringly. "But then you mustn't forget, my dear man, that I was very anxious to marry your wife. I don't suppose it is secret. And when I lost her, I had ideas about you which are not pleasant to recall."

He had recovered his self-possession and had continued his aimless stroll about the room.

"You must remember I am a Greek, and the modern Greek is no philosopher. You must remember, too, that I am a petted child of fortune, and have had everything I wanted since I was a baby."

“You are a fortunate devil,” said the other, turning back to his desk, and taking up his pen.

For a moment Kara did not speak, then he made as though he would say something, checked himself, and laughed.

“I wonder if I am,” he said.

And now he spoke with a sudden energy.

“What is this trouble you are having with Vassalaro?”

John rose from his chair and walked over to the fire, stood gazing down into its depths, his legs wide apart, his hands clasped behind him, and Kara took his attitude to supply an answer to the question.

“I warned you against Vassalaro,” he said, stooping by the other's side to light his cigar with a spill of paper. “My dear Lexman, my fellow countrymen are unpleasant people to deal with in certain moods.”

“He was so obliging at first,” said Lexman, half to himself.

“And now he is so disobliging,” drawled Kara. “That is a way which moneylenders have, my dear man; you were very foolish to go to him at all. I could have lent you the money.”

“There were reasons why I should not borrow money from you,”, said John, quietly, “and I think you yourself have supplied the principal reason when you told me just now, what I already knew, that you wanted to marry Grace.”

“How much is the amount?” asked Kara, examining his well-manicured finger-nails.

“Two thousand five hundred pounds,” replied John, with a short laugh, “and I haven't two thousand five hundred shillings at this moment.”

“Will he wait?”

John Lexman shrugged his shoulders.

“Look here, Kara,” he said, suddenly, “don't think I want to reproach you, but it was through you that I met Vassalaro so that you know the kind of man he is.”

Kara nodded.

“Well, I can tell you he has been very unpleasant indeed,” said John, with a frown, “I had an interview with him yesterday in London and it is clear that he is going to make a lot of trouble. I depended upon the success of my play in town giving me enough to pay him off, and I very foolishly made a lot of promises of repayment which I have been unable to keep.”

“I see,” said Kara, and then, “does Mrs. Lexman know about this matter?”

“A little,” said the other.

He paced restlessly up and down the room, his hands behind him and his chin upon his chest.

“Naturally I have not told her the worst, or how beastly unpleasant the man has been.”

He stopped and turned.

“Do you know he threatened to kill me?” he asked.

Kara smiled.

“I can tell you it was no laughing matter,” said the other, angrily, “I nearly took the little whippersnapper by the scruff of the neck and kicked him.”

Kara dropped his hand on the other's arm.

“I am not laughing at you,” he said; “I am laughing at the thought of Vassalaro threatening to kill anybody. He is the biggest coward in the world. What on earth induced him to take this drastic step?”

“He said he is being hard pushed for money,” said the other, moodily, “and it is possibly true. He was beside himself with anger and anxiety, otherwise I might have given the little blackguard the thrashing he deserved.”

Kara who had continued his stroll came down the room and halted in front of the fireplace looking at the young author with a paternal smile.

“You don't understand Vassalaro,” he said; “I repeat he is the greatest coward in the world. You will probably discover he is full of firearms and threats of slaughter, but you have only to click a revolver to see him collapse. Have you a revolver, by the way?”

“Oh, nonsense,” said the other, roughly, “I cannot engage myself in that kind of melodrama.”

“It is not nonsense,” insisted the other, “when you are in Rome, et cetera, and when you have to deal with a low-class Greek you must use methods which will at least impress him. If you thrash him, he will never forgive you and will probably stick a knife into you or your wife. If you meet his melodrama with melodrama and at the psychological moment produce your revolver; you will secure the effect you require. Have you a revolver?”

John went to his desk and, pulling open a drawer, took out a small Browning.

“That is the extent of my armory,” he said, “it has never been fired and was sent to me by an unknown admirer last Christmas.”

“A curious Christmas present,” said the other, examining the weapon.

“I suppose the mistaken donor imagined from my books that I lived in a veritable museum of revolvers, sword sticks and noxious drugs,” said Lexman, recovering some of his good humour; “it was accompanied by a card.”

“Do you know how it works?” asked the other.

“I have never troubled very much about it,” replied Lexman, “I know that it is loaded by slipping back the cover, but as my admirer did not send ammunition, I never even practised with it.”

There was a knock at the door.

“That is the post,” explained John.

The maid had one letter on the salver and the author took it up with a frown.

“From Vassalaro,” he said, when the girl had left the room.

The Greek took the letter in his hand and examined it.

“He writes a vile fist,” was his only comment as he handed it back to John.

He slit open the thin, buff envelope and took out half a dozen sheets of yellow paper, only a single sheet of which was written upon. The letter was brief:

"I must see you to-night without fail," ran the scrawl; "meet me at the crossroads between Beston Tracey and the Eastbourne Road. I shall be there at eleven o'clock, and, if you want to preserve your life, you had better bring me a substantial instalment."

It was signed "Vassalaro."

John read the letter aloud. "He must be mad to write a letter like that," he said; "I'll meet the little devil and teach him such a lesson in politeness as he is never likely to forget."

He handed the letter to the other and Kara read it in silence.

"Better take your revolver," he said as he handed it back.

John Lexman looked at his watch.

"I have an hour yet, but it will take me the best part of twenty minutes to reach the Eastbourne Road."

"Will you see him?" asked Kara, in a tone of surprise.

"Certainly," Lexman replied emphatically: "I cannot have him coming up to the house and making a scene and that is certainly what the little beast will do."

"Will you pay him?" asked Kara softly.

John made no answer. There was probably 10 pounds in the house and a cheque which was due on the morrow would bring him another 30 pounds. He looked at the letter again. It was written on paper of an unusual texture. The surface was rough almost like blotting paper and in some places the ink absorbed by the porous surface had run. The blank sheets had evidently been inserted by a man in so violent a hurry that he had not noticed the extravagance.

“I shall keep this letter,” said John.

“I think you are well advised. Vassalaro probably does not know that he transgresses a law in writing threatening letters and that should be a very strong weapon in your hand in certain eventualities.”

There was a tiny safe in one corner of the study and this John opened with a key which he took from his pocket. He pulled open one of the steel drawers, took out the papers which were in it and put in their place the letter, pushed the drawer to, and locked it.

All the time Kara was watching him intently as one who found more than an ordinary amount of interest in the novelty of the procedure.

He took his leave soon afterwards.

“I would like to come with you to your interesting meeting,” he said, “but unfortunately I have business elsewhere. Let me enjoin you to take your revolver and at the first sign of any bloodthirsty intention on the part of my admirable compatriot, produce it and click it once or twice, you won't have to do more.”

Grace rose from the piano as Kara entered the little drawing-room and murmured a few conventional expressions of regret that the visitor's stay

had been so short. That there was no sincerity in that regret Kara, for one, had no doubt. He was a man singularly free from illusions.

They stayed talking a little while.

“I will see if your chauffeur is asleep,” said John, and went out of the room.

There was a little silence after he had gone.

“I don't think you are very glad to see me,” said Kara. His frankness was a little embarrassing to the girl and she flushed slightly.

“I am always glad to see you, Mr. Kara, or any other of my husband's friends,” she said steadily.

He inclined his head.

“To be a friend of your husband is something,” he said, and then as if remembering something, “I wanted to take a book away with me—I wonder if your husband would mind my getting it?”

“I will find it for you.”

“Don't let me bother you,” he protested, “I know my way.”

Without waiting for her permission he left the girl with the unpleasant feeling that he was taking rather much for granted. He was gone less than a minute and returned with a book under his arm.

“I have not asked Lexman's permission to take it,” he said, “but I am rather interested in the author. Oh, here you are,” he turned to John who came in at that moment. “Might I take this book on Mexico?” he asked. “I will return it in the morning.”

They stood at the door, watching the tail light of the motor disappear down the drive; and returned in silence to the drawing room.

“You look worried, dear,” she said, laying her hand on his shoulder.

He smiled faintly.

“Is it the money?” she asked anxiously.

For a moment he was tempted to tell her of the letter. He stifled the temptation realizing that she would not consent to his going out if she knew the truth.

“It is nothing very much,” he said. “I have to go down to Beston Tracey to meet the last train. I am expecting some proofs down.”

He hated lying to her, and even an innocuous lie of this character was repugnant to him.

“I'm afraid you have had a dull evening,” he said, “Kara was not very amusing.”

She looked at him thoughtfully.

“He has not changed very much,” she said slowly.

“He's a wonderfully handsome chap, isn't he?” he asked in a tone of admiration. “I can't understand what you ever saw in a fellow like me, when you had a man who was not only rich, but possibly the best-looking man in the world.”

She shivered a little.

“I have seen a side of Mr. Kara that is not particularly beautiful,” she said. “Oh, John, I am afraid of that man!”

He looked at her in astonishment.

“Afraid?” he asked. “Good heavens, Grace, what a thing to say! Why I believe he'd do anything for you.”

“That is exactly what I am afraid of,” she said in a low voice.

She had a reason which she did not reveal. She had first met Remington Kara in Salonika two years before. She had been doing a tour through the Balkans with her father—it was the last tour the famous archeologist made—and had met the man who was fated to have such an influence upon her life at a dinner given by the American Consul.

Many were the stories which were told about this Greek with his Jove-like face, his handsome carriage and his limitless wealth. It was said that his mother was an American lady who had been captured by Albanian brigands and was sold to one of the Albanian chiefs who fell in love with her, and for her sake became a Protestant. He had been educated at Yale and at Oxford, and was known to be the possessor of vast wealth, and was virtually king of a hill district forty miles out of Durazzo. Here he reigned supreme, occupying a beautiful house which he had built by an Italian architect, and the fittings and appointments of which had been imported from the luxurious centres of the world.

In Albania they called him “Kara Rumo,” which meant “The Black Roman,” for no particular reason so far as any one could judge, for his skin was as fair as a Saxon's, and his close-cropped curls were almost golden.