

INSPECTOR FRENCH

and the
CHEYNE
MYSTERY



Freeman
Wills Crofts



Freeman Wills Crofts Inspector French and the Cheyne Mystery

Аннотация

From the Collins Crime Club archive, the second Inspector French novel by Freeman Wills Crofts, once dubbed ‘The King of Detective Story Writers’. THE RETURN OF INSPECTOR FRENCH When young Maxwell Cheyne discovers that a series of mishaps are the result of unwelcome attention from a dangerous gang of criminals, he teams up with a young woman who is determined to help him outwit them. But when she disappears, he finally decides to go to Scotland Yard for help. Concerned by the developing situation, Inspector Joseph French takes charge of the investigation and applies his trademark methods to track down the kidnappers and thwart their intentions . . .

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FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

*Inspector French
and the Cheyne Mystery*



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1

The Episode in the Plymouth Hotel

When the White Rabbit in *Alice* asked where he should begin to read the verses at the Knave's trial the King replied: 'Begin at the beginning; go on till you come to the end; then stop.'

This would seem to be the last word on the subject of narration in general. For the novelist no dictum more entirely complete and satisfactory can be imagined—in theory. But in practice it is hard to live up to.

Where is the beginning of a story? Where is the beginning of anything? No one knows.

When I set myself to consider the actual beginning of Maxwell Cheyne's Adventure, I saw at once I should have to go back to Noah. Indeed I was not at all sure whether the thing could be adequately explained unless I carried back the narrative to Adam, or even further. For Cheyne's adventure hinged not only on his own character and environment, brought about by goodness knows how many thousands of generations of ancestors, but also upon the contemporaneous history of the world, crystallised in the happening of, the Great War and all that appertained thereto.

So then, in default of the true beginning, let us commence with the character and environment of Maxwell Cheyne, following on with the strange episode which took place in the Edgecombe

Hotel in Plymouth, and from which started that extraordinary series of events which I have called his Adventure.

Maxwell Cheyne was born in 1891, so that when his Adventure began in the month of March, 1920, he was just twenty-nine. His father was a navy man, commander of one of His Majesty's smaller cruisers, and from him the boy presumably inherited his intense love of the sea and of adventure. Captain Cheyne had Irish blood in his veins and exhibited some of the characteristics of that irritating though lovable race. He was a man of brilliant attainments, resourceful, dashing, spirited and, moreover, a fine seaman, but a certain impetuosity, amounting at times to recklessness, just prevented his attaining the highest rank in his profession. In character he was as straight as a die, and kindly, generous and openhanded to a fault, but he was improvident and inclined to live too much in the present. And these characteristics were destined to affect his son's life, not only directly through heredity, but indirectly through environment also.

When Maxwell was nine his father died suddenly, and then it was found that the commander had been living up to his income and had made but scant provision for his widow and son and daughter. Dreams of Harrow and Cambridge had to be abandoned, and instead the boy was educated at the local grammar school, and then entered the office of a Fenchurch Street shipping firm as junior clerk.

In his twentieth year the family fortunes were again reversed.

His mother came in for a legacy from an uncle, a sheep farmer in Australia. It was not a fortune, but it meant a fairly substantial competence. Mrs Cheyne bought back Warren Lodge, their old home, a small Georgian house standing in pleasant grounds on the estuary of the Dart. Maxwell thereupon threw up his job at the shipping office, followed his mother to Devonshire, and settled down to the leisurely life of a country gentleman. Among other hobbies he dabbled spasmodically in literature, producing a couple of novels, one of which was published and sold with fair success.

But the sea was in his blood. He bought a yacht, and with the help of the gardener's son, Dan, sailed her in fair weather and foul, gaining thereby skill and judgment in things nautical, as well as a first-hand knowledge of the shores and tides and currents of the western portion of the English Channel.

Thus it came to pass that when, three years after the return to Devon, the war broke out, he volunteered for the navy and was at once accepted. There he served with enthusiasm if not with distinction, gaining very much the reputation which his father had held before him. During the intensive submarine campaign he was wounded in an action with a U-boat, which resulted in his being invalided out of the service. On demobilisation he returned home and took up his former pursuits of yachting, literature, and generally having as slack and easy a time as his energetic nature would allow. Some eighteen months passed, and then occurred the incident which might be said definitely to begin his

Adventure.

One damp and bleak March day Cheyne set out for Plymouth from Warren Lodge, his home on the estuary of the Dart. He wished to make a number of small purchases, and his mother and sister had entrusted him with commissions. Also he desired to consult his banker as to some question of investments. With a full programme before him he pulled on his oilskins, and having assured his mother he would be back in time for dinner, he mounted his motor bicycle and rode off.

In due course he reached Plymouth, left his machine at a garage, and set about his business. About one o'clock he gravitated towards the Edgcombe Hotel, where after a cocktail he sat down in the lounge to rest for a few minutes before lunch.

He was looking idly over the *Times* when the voice of a page broke in on his thoughts.

'Gentleman to see you, sir.'

The card which the boy held out bore in fine script the legend: 'Mr Hubert Parkes, Oakleigh, Cleeve Hill, Cheltenham.' Cheyne pondered, but he could not recall anyone of the name, and it passed through his mind that the page had probably made a mistake.

'Where is he?' he asked.

'Here, sir,' the boy answered, and a short, stoutly built man of middle age with fair hair and a toothbrush moustache stepped forward. A glance assured Cheyne that he was a stranger.

'Mr Maxwell Cheyne?' the newcomer inquired politely.

‘My name, sir. Won’t you sit down?’ Cheyne pulled an easy chair over towards his own.

‘I’ve not had the pleasure of meeting you before, Mr Cheyne,’ the other went on as he seated himself, ‘though I knew your father fairly intimately. I lived for many years at Valetta, running the Maltese end of a produce company with which I was then connected, and I met him when his ship was stationed there. A great favourite, Captain Cheyne was! The dull old club used to brighten up when he came in, and it seemed a national loss when his ship was withdrawn to another station.’

‘I remember his being in Malta,’ Cheyne returned, ‘though I was quite a small boy at the time. My mother has a photograph of Valetta, showing his ship lying in the Grand Harbour.’

They chatted about Malta and produce company work therein for some minutes and then Mr Parkes said:

‘Now, Mr Cheyne, though it is a pleasure to make the acquaintance of the son of my old friend, it was not merely with that object that I introduced myself. I have, as a matter of fact, a definite piece of business which I should like to discuss with you. It takes the form of a certain proposition of which I would invite your acceptance, I hope, to our mutual advantage.’

Cheyne, somewhat surprised, murmured polite expressions of anxiety to hear details and the other went on:

‘I think before I explain the thing fully another small matter wants to be attended to. What about a little lunch? I’m just going to have mine and I shall take it as a favour if you will join me.’

After that we could talk business.’

Cheyne readily agreed and the other called over a waiter and gave him an order. ‘Let us have a cocktail,’ he went on, ‘and by that time lunch will be ready.’

They strolled to the bar and there partook of a wonderful American concoction recommended by the young lady in charge. Presently the waiter reappeared and led the way, somewhat to Cheyne’s surprise, to a private room. There an excellent repast was served, to which both men did full justice. Parkes proved an agreeable and well informed companion and Cheyne enjoyed his conversation. The newcomer had, it appeared, seen a good deal of war service, having held the rank of major in the department of supply, serving first at Gallipoli and then at Salonica. Cheyne knew the latter port, his ship having called there on three or four occasions, and the two men found they had various experiences in common. Time passed pleasantly until at last Parkes drew a couple of arm-chairs up to the fire, ordered coffee, and held out his cigar case.

‘With your permission I’ll put my little proposition now. It is in connection with your literary work and I’m afraid it’s bound to sound a trifle impertinent. But I can assure you it’s not meant to be so.’

Cheyne smiled.

‘You needn’t be afraid of hurting my feelings,’ he declared. ‘I have a notion of the real value of my work. Get along anyway and let’s hear.’

Parkes resumed with some hesitation.

‘I have to say first that I have read everything that you have published and I am immensely impressed by your style. I think you do your descriptions extraordinarily well. Your scenes are vivid and one feels that one is living through them. There’s money in that, Mr Cheyne, in that gift of vivid and interest-compelling presentation. You should make a good thing out of short stories. I’ve worked at them for years and I know.’

‘Huh. I haven’t found much money in it.’

Parkes nodded.

‘I know you haven’t, or rather I guessed so. And if you don’t mind, I’ll tell you why.’ He sat up and a keener interest crept into his manner. ‘There’s a fault in those stories of yours, a bad fault, and it’s in the construction. But let’s leave that for the moment and you’ll see where all this is leading.’

He broke off as a waiter arrived with the coffee, resuming:

‘Now I have a strong dramatic sense and a good working knowledge of literary construction. As I said I’ve also tried short stories, and though they’ve not been an absolute failure, I couldn’t say they’ve been really successful. On the whole, I should think, yours have done better. And I know why. It’s my style. I try to produce a tale, say, of a shipwreck. It is intended to be full of human feeling, to grip the reader’s emotion. But it doesn’t. It reads like a Board of Trade report. Dry, you understand; not interesting. Now, Mr Cheyne,’ he sat up in his chair once more, this time almost in excitement, ‘you see what I’m coming to. Why

should we not collaborate? Let me do the plots and you clothe them. Between us we have all the essentials for success.'

He sat back and then saw the coffee.

'I say,' he exclaimed, 'I'm sorry, but I didn't notice this had come. I hope it's not cold.' He felt the coffee pot. 'What about a liqueur? I'll ring for one. Or rather,' he paused suddenly. 'I think I've got something perhaps even better here.' He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a small flask. 'Old Cognac,' he said. 'You'll try a little?'

He poured some of the golden brown liquid into Cheyne's cup and was about to do the same into his own when he was seized with a sudden fit of choking coughing. He had to put down the flask while he quivered and shook with the paroxysm. Presently he recovered, breathless.

'Since I was wounded,' he gasped apologetically, 'I've been taken like that. The doctors say it's purely nervous—that my throat and lungs and so on are perfectly sound. Strange the different ways this war leaves its mark!'

He picked up the flask, poured a liberal measure of its contents into his own cup, drank off the contents with evident relish and continued:

'What I had in my mind, if you'll consider it, was a series of short stories—say a dozen—on the merchant marine in the war. This is the spring of 1920. Soon no one will read anything connected with the war, but I think that time has scarcely come yet. I have fair knowledge of the subject and yours of course

is first hand. What do you say? I will supply twelve plots or incidents and you will clothe them with, say, five thousand words each. We shall sell them to *The Strand* or some of those monthlies, and afterwards publish them as a collection in book form.'

'By Jove!' Cheyne said as he slowly sipped his coffee. 'The idea's rather tempting. But I wish I could feel as sure as you seem to do about my own style. I'm afraid I don't believe that it is as good as you pretend.'

'Mr Cheyne,' Parkes answered deliberately, 'you may take my word for it that I know what I am talking about. I shouldn't have come to you if I weren't sure. Very few people are satisfied with their own work. No matter how good it is it falls short of the standard they have set in their minds. It is another case in which the outsider sees most of the game.'

Cheyne felt attracted by the proposal. He had written in all seventeen short stories, and of these only three had been accepted and those by inferior magazines. If it would lead to success he would be only too delighted to collaborate with this pleasant stranger. It wasn't so much the money—though he was not such a fool as to make light of that part of it. It was success he wanted, acceptance of his stuff by good periodicals, a name and a standing among his fellow craftsmen.

'Let's see what it would mean,' he heard Parkes's voice, and it seemed strangely faint and distant. 'I suppose, given the synopses, you could finish a couple of tales per week—say, six weeks for

the lot. And with luck we should sell for £50 to £100 each—say £500 for your six weeks work, or nearly £100 per week. And there might be any amount more for the book rights, filming and so on. Does the idea appeal to you, Mr Cheyne?

Cheyne did not reply. He was feeling sleepy. Did the idea appeal to him? Yes. No. Did it? Did the idea ... the idea ... Drat this sleepiness! What was he thinking of? Did the idea ... What idea? ... He gave up the struggle and, leaning back in his chair, sank into a profound and dreamless slumber.

Ages of time passed and Cheyne slowly struggled back into consciousness. As soon as he was sufficiently awake to analyse his sensations he realised that his brain was dull and clouded and his limbs heavy as lead. He was, however, physically comfortable, and he was content to allow his body to remain relaxed and motionless and his mind to dream idly on without conscious thought. But his energy gradually returned and at last he opened his eyes.

He was lying, dressed, on a bed in a strange room. Apparently it was night, for the room was dark save for the light on the window blind which seemed to come from a street lamp without. Vaguely interested, he closed his eyes again, and when he reopened them the room was lighted, up and a man was standing beside the bed.

‘Ah,’ the man said, ‘you’re awake. Better, I hope?’

‘I don’t know,’ Cheyne answered, and it seemed to him as if someone else was speaking. ‘Have I been ill?’

‘No,’ the man returned, ‘Not that I know of. But you’ve slept like a log for nearly six hours.’

This was confusing. Cheyne paused to take in the idea, but it eluded him, then giving up the effort, he asked another question.

‘Where am I?’

‘In the Edgecombe: the Edgecombe Hotel, you know, in Plymouth. I am the manager.’

Ah, yes! It was coming back to him. He had gone there for lunch—was it today or a century ago?—and he had met that literary man—what was his name? He couldn’t remember. And they had had lunch and the man had made some suggestion about his writing. Yes, of course! It was all coming back now. The man had wanted to collaborate with him. And during the conversation he had suddenly felt sleepy. He supposed he must have fallen asleep then, for he remembered nothing more. But why had he felt sleepy like that? Suddenly his brain cleared and he sat up sharply.

‘What’s happened, Mr Jesse? I never did anything like this before?’

‘No?’ the manager answered. ‘I dare say not. I’ll tell you what has happened to you, Mr Cheyne, though I’m sorry to have to admit it could have taken place in my hotel. You’ve been drugged. That’s what has happened.’

Cheyne stared incredulously.

‘Good Lord!’ he ejaculated. ‘Drugged! By—not by that literary man, surely?’ He paused, in amazed consternation and

then his hand flew to his pocket. 'My money,' he gasped. 'I had over £100 in my pocket. Just got it at the bank.' He drew out a pocket-book and examined it hurriedly. 'No,' he went on more quietly. 'It's all right.' He took from it a bundle of notes and with care counted them. 'A hundred and eight pounds. That's quite correct. My watch? No, it's here.' He got up unsteadily, and rapidly went through his pockets. 'Nothing missing anyway. Are you sure I was drugged? I don't understand the thing a little bit.'

'I am afraid there is no doubt about it. You seemed so ill that I sent for a doctor. He said you were suffering from the effects of a drug, but were in no danger and would be all right in a few hours. He advised that you be left quietly to sleep it off.'

Cheyne rubbed his hand over his eyes.

'I can't understand it,' he repeated. 'Tell me exactly what happened.'

'About three o'clock or shortly before it Mr Parkes appeared at the office and asked for his bill. He paid it, complimented the clerk on the excellent lunch he had had, and left the hotel. He was perfectly calm and collected and quite unhurried. Shortly after the waiter went up to clear away the things and he found you lying back in your chair, apparently asleep, but breathing so heavily that he was uneasy and he came and told me. I went up at once and was also rather alarmed at your condition, so I sent at once for the doctor.'

'But,' Cheyne objected, 'that's all right, only I *wasn't* drugged. I know exactly what I ate and drank and Parkes had. precisely

the same. If I was drugged, he must have been also, and you say he wasn't.'

'He certainly was not. But think' again, Mr Cheyne. Are you really quite certain that he had no opportunity of putting powder over your food or liquid into your drink? Did he divert your attention at any time from the table?'

Cheyne was silent. He had remembered the flask of old brandy.

'He put cognac in my coffee from his own flask,' he admitted at length, 'but it couldn't have been that.'

'Ah,' the manager answered in a satisfied tone, 'it *was* that, I should swear. Why don't you think so?'

'I'll tell you why I don't think so; why, in fact, I know it wasn't. He put an even larger dose out of the same flask into his own cup and he drank his coffee before I drank mine. So that if there was anything in the flask he would have got knocked over first.'

The manager looked puzzled.

'Don't think me discourteous, Mr Cheyne, but I confess I have my doubts about that. That episode of the flask looks too suspicious. Are you sure it was the same flask in each case? Did he pour straight into one cup after the other or was there an interval in between? You realise of course that a clever conjurer could substitute a second flask for the first without attracting your notice?'

'I realise that right enough, but I am positive he didn't do so in this case. Though,' he paused for a moment, 'that reminds me

that there was an interval between pouring into each cup. He got a fit of coughing after giving me mine and had to put down the flask. But when the paroxysm was over he lifted it again and helped himself.'

'There you are,' the manager declared. 'During his fit of coughing he substituted a different flask.'

'I'll swear he didn't. But can't we settle the thing beyond doubt? Have the cups been washed? If not, can't we get the dregs analysed?'

'I have already asked the doctor to have it done. He said he would get Mr Pringle to do it at once: that's the city analyst. They're close friends, and Mr Pringle would do it to oblige him. We should have his report quite soon. I am also having him analyse the remains on the plates which were used. Fortunately, owing to lunch being served in a private room, these had been stacked together and none had been washed. So we should be able to settle the matter quite definitely.'

Cheyne nodded as he glanced at his watch. 'Good Lord!' he cried, 'it's eight o'clock and I said I should be home by seven! I must ring up my mother or she'll think something is wrong.'

The Cheynes had not themselves a telephone, but their nearest neighbours, people called Hazelton, were good-natured about receiving an occasional message through theirs and transmitting it to Warren Lodge. Cheyne went down to the lounge and put through his call, explaining to Mrs Hazelton that unforeseen circumstances had necessitated his remaining overnight in

Plymouth. The lady promised to have the message conveyed to Mrs Cheyne and Maxwell rang off. Then as he turned to the dining-room, a page told him that the manager would like to see him in his office.

‘I’ve just got a report from the doctor about that coffee, Mr Cheyne,’ the other greeted him, ‘and I must say it confirms what you say though it by no means clears up the mystery. There was brandy in those cups, but no drug: no trace of a drug in either.’

‘I knew that,’ Cheyne rejoined. ‘Everything that I had. for lunch Parkes had also. I was there and I ought to know. But it’s a bit unsettling, isn’t it? Looks as if my heart or something had gone wrong.’

The manager looked at him more seriously. ‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ he dissented. ‘I don’t think you can assume that. The doctor seemed quite satisfied. But if it would ease your mind, why not slip across now and see him? He lives just round the corner.’

Cheyne reflected.

‘I’ll do so,’ he answered presently. ‘If there’s nothing wrong it will prevent me fancying things, and if there is I should know of it. I’ll have some-dinner and then go across. By the way, have you said anything to the police?’

The manager hesitated.

‘No, I have not. I don’t know that we’ve evidence enough. But in any case, Mr Cheyne, I trust you do not wish to call in the police.’ The manager seemed quite upset by the idea and spoke earnestly. ‘It would not do the hotel any good if it became known

that a visitor had been drugged. I sincerely trust, sir, that you can see your way to keep the matter quiet.'

Cheyne stared.

'But you surely don't suggest that I should take the thing lying down? If I have been drugged, as you say, I must know who has done it, and why. That would seem to me obvious.'

'I agree,' the manager admitted, 'and I should feel precisely the same in your place. But it is not necessary to apply to the police. A private detective would get you the information quite as well. See here, Mr Cheyne, I will make you an offer. If you will agree to the affair being hushed up, I will employ the detective on behalf of the hotel. He will work under your direction and keep you advised of every step he takes. Come now, sir, is it a bargain?'

Cheyne did not hesitate.

'Why, yes,' he said promptly, 'that will suit me all right. I don't specially want to advertise the fact that I have been made a fool of. But I'd like to know what has really happened.'

'You shall, Mr Cheyne. No stone shall be left unturned to get at the truth. I'll see about a detective at once. You'll have some dinner, sir?'

Cheyne was not hungry, but he was very thirsty, and he had a light meal with a number of long drinks. Then he went round to see the doctor, to whom the manager had telephoned, making an appointment.

After a thorough examination he received the verdict. It was

a relief to his mind, but it did not tend to clear up the mystery. He was physically perfectly sound, and his sleep of the afternoon was not the result of disease or weakness. He had been drugged. That was the beginning and the end of the affair. The doctor was quite emphatic and ridiculed the idea of any other explanation.

Cheyne returned to the Edgecombe, and sitting down in a deserted corner of the lounge, tried to puzzle the thing out. But the more he thought of it, the more mysterious it became. His mind up till then had been concentrated on the actual administration of the drug, and this point alone still seemed to constitute an insoluble problem. But now he saw that it was but a small part of the mystery. *Why* had he been drugged? It was not robbery. Though he had over £100 in his pocket, the money was intact. He had no other valuables about him, and in any case nothing had been removed from his pockets. It was not to prevent his going to any place. He had not intended to do anything that afternoon that could possibly interest a stranger. No, he could form no conception of the motive.

But even more puzzling than this was the question: How did Parkes, if that was really his name, know that he, Cheyne, was coming to Plymouth that day? It was true that he had mentioned it to his mother and sister a couple of days previously, but he had told no one else and he felt sure that neither had they. But the man had almost certainly been expecting him. At least it was hard to believe that the whole episode had been merely the fruits of a chance encounter. On the other hand there was the difficulty that

any other suggestion seemed even more unlikely. Parkes simply *couldn't* have known that he, Cheyne, was coming. It was just inconceivable.

He lay back in his deep arm-chair, the smoke of his pipe curling lazily up, as he racked his brains for some theory which would at least partially meet the facts. But without success. He could think of nothing which threw a gleam of light on the situation.

And then he made a discovery which still further befogged him and made him swear with exasperation. He had taken out his pocket book and was once more going through its contents to make absolutely sure nothing was missing, when he came to a piece of folded paper bearing memoranda about the money matters which he had discussed with his banker. He had not opened this when he had looked through the book after regaining consciousness, but now half absent-mindedly he unfolded it. As he did so he stared. Near the crease was a slight tear, unquestionably made by someone unfolding it hurriedly or carelessly. But that tear had not been there when he had folded it up. He could swear to it. Someone therefore had been through his pockets while he was asleep.

2

Burglary!

The discovery that his pockets had been gone through while he was under the influence of the drug reduced Cheyne to a state of even more complete mystification than ever. What *had* the unknown been looking for? He, Cheyne, had nothing with him that, so far as he could imagine, could possibly have interested any other person. Indeed, money being ruled out, he did not know that he possessed anywhere any paper or small object which it would be worth a stranger's while to steal.

Novels he had read recurred to him in which desperate enterprises were undertaken to obtain some document of importance. Plans of naval or military inventions which would give world supremacy to the power possessing them were perhaps the favourite instruments in these romances, but treaties which would mean war if disclosed to the wrong power, maps of desert islands on which treasure was buried, wills of which the existence was generally unknown and letters compromising the good name of wealthy personages had all been used time and again. But Cheyne had no plans or treaties or compromising letters from which an astute thief might make capital. Think as he would, he could frame no theory to account for Parkes's proceedings.

He yawned, and getting up, began to pace the deserted lounge.

The effects of the drug had not entirely worn off, for though he had slept all the afternoon he still felt slack and drowsy. In spite of its being scarcely ten o'clock, he thought he would have a whisky and go up to bed, in the hope that a good night's rest would drive the poison out of his system and restore his usual feeling of mental and physical well being.

But Fate, once more in the guise of an approaching page, decreed otherwise. As he turned lazily towards the bar a voice sounded in his ear.

'Wanted on the telephone, sir.'

Cheyne crossed the hall and entered the booth.

'Well?' he said shortly. 'Cheyne speaking.'

A woman's voice replied, a voice he recognised. It belonged to Ethel Hazelton, the grown up daughter of that Mrs Hazelton whom he had asked to inform Mrs Cheyne of his change of plans. She spoke hurriedly and he could sense perturbation in her tones.

'Oh, Mr Cheyne, I'm afraid I have rather disturbing news for you. When you rang up we sent James over to Warren Lodge. He found Mrs Cheyne and Agatha on the doorstep trying to get in. They had been ringing for some time, but could not attract attention. He rang also, and then eventually found a ladder and got in through one of the upper windows. He opened the door for Mrs Cheyne and Agatha. Can you hear me all right?'

'Yes, clearly. Go on, please, Miss Hazelton.'

'They searched the house and they discovered cook and Susan in their bedrooms, both tied up and gagged, but otherwise none

the worse. They released them, of course, and then they found that the house had been burgled.'

'Burgled!' Cheyne ejaculated sharply. 'Great Scott!' He was considerably startled and paused in some consternation, asking then if much stuff was missing.

'They don't know,' the distant voice answered. 'Your safe had been opened, but they hadn't had time to make an examination when James left. The silver seems to be all there, so that's something. James came back here with a message from Mrs Cheyne asking us to let you know, and I have been ringing up hotels in Plymouth for the last half hour. You know, you only said you were staying the night in your message; you didn't say where. Mrs Cheyne would like you to come back if you can manage it.'

There was no hesitation about Cheyne's reply.

'Of course I shall,' he said quickly. 'I'll start at once on my bicycle. What about telling the police?'

'I rang them up immediately. They said they would go out at once. James has gone back also. He will stay and lend a hand until you arrive.'

'Splendid! It's more than good of you both, Miss Hazelton. I can't thank you enough. I'll be there in less than an hour.'

He delayed only to tell the news to the manager.

'There's the explanation of this afternoon's affair at all events,' he declared. 'I was evidently fixed up so that I couldn't butt in and spoil sport. But it's good-bye to your keeping it quiet. The police have been called in already and the whole thing is bound

to come out.'

The manager made a gesture of concern.

'I'm sorry to hear your news,' he said gravely. 'Are you properly insured?'

'Partially. I don't know if it will cover the loss because I don't know what's gone. But I must be getting away.'

He was moving off, but the manager laid a detaining hand on his arm.

'Well, I'm extremely sorry about it. But see here, Mr Cheyne, it may not prove to be necessary to bring in about the drugging. It would injure the hotel. I sincerely trust you'll do what you can in the matter, and if you find the private detective sufficient, you'll let our arrangement stand.'

'I'll decide when I hear just what has happened. You'll let me have a copy of the analyst's report?'

'Of course. Directly I get it I shall send it on.'

Fifteen minutes later Cheyne was passing through the outskirts of Plymouth on his way east. The night was fine, the mists of the day having cleared away, and a three-quarter moon shone brilliantly out of a blue-black sky. Keenly anxious to reach home and learn the details of the burglary and the extent of his loss, Cheyne crammed on every ounce of power, and his machine snored along the deserted road at well over forty miles an hour. In spite of slacks for villages and curves he made a record run, turning into the gate of Warren Lodge at just ten minutes before eleven.

As he approached the house everything looked normal. But when he let himself in this impression was dispelled, for a constable stood in the hall, who, saluting, informed him that Sergeant Kirby was within and in charge.

But Cheyne's first concern was with his mother and sister. An inquiry produced the information that the two ladies were waiting for him in the drawing-room, and thither he at once betook himself.

Mrs Cheyne was a frail little woman who looked ten years older than her age of something under sixty. She welcomed her son with a little cry of pleasure.

'Oh, I am relieved to see you, Maxwell,' she cried. 'I'm so glad you were able to come. Isn't this a terrible business?'

'I don't know, mother,' Cheyne answered cheerily, 'that depends. I hear no one is any the worse. Has much stuff been stolen?'

'Nothing!' Mrs Cheyne's tone conveyed the wonder she evidently felt. 'Nothing whatever! Or at least we can't find that anything is missing.'

'Unless something may have been taken from your safe,' Agatha interposed. 'Was there much in it?'

'No, only a few pounds and some papers, none valuable to an outsider.' He glanced at his sister. She was a pretty girl, tall and dark and in features not unlike himself. Both the young people had favoured the late commander's side of the house. He turned towards the door, continuing: 'I'll go and have a look, and then

you can tell me what has happened.’

The safe was built into the wall in his own sanctum, ‘the study,’ as his mother persisted in calling it. It had been taken over with the house when Mrs Cheyne bought the little estate. As Cheyne now entered he saw that its doors were standing open. A tall man in the uniform of a sergeant of police was stooping over it. He turned as he heard the newcomer’s step.

‘Good-evening, sir,’ he said in an impressive tone. ‘This is a bad business.’

‘Oh, well, I don’t know, Sergeant,’ Cheyne answered easily. ‘If no one has been hurt and nothing has been stolen, it might have been worse.’

The sergeant stared at him with some disfavour. ‘There’s not much but what might have been worse,’ he observed oracularly. ‘But we’re not sure yet that nothing’s been stolen. Nobody knows what was in this here safe, except maybe yourself. I’d be glad if you’d have a look and see if anything is gone.’

There was very little in the safe and it did not take Cheyne many seconds to go through it. The papers were tossed about—he could swear someone had turned them over—but none seemed to have been removed. The small packet of Treasury notes was intact and a number of gold and silver medals, won in athletic contests, were all in evidence.

‘Nothing missing there, Sergeant,’ he declared when he had finished.

His eye wandered round the room. There was not much of

value in it; one or two silver bowls—athletic trophies also, a small gold clock of Indian workmanship, a pair of high-power prism binoculars and a few ornaments were about all that could be turned into money. But all these were there, undisturbed. It was true that the glass door of a locked bookcase had been broken to enable the bolt to be unfastened and the doors opened, but none of the books seemed to have been touched.

‘What do you think they were after, sir?’ the sergeant queried. ‘Was there any jewellery in the house that they might have heard of?’

‘My mother has a few trinkets, but I scarcely think you could dignify them by the name of jewellery. I suppose these precious burglars have left no kind of clue?’

‘No, sir, nothing. Except maybe the girls’ descriptions. I’ve telephoned that in to headquarters and the men will be on the lookout.’

‘Good. Well, if you can wait here a few minutes I’ll go and send my mother to bed and then I’ll come back and we can settle what’s to be done.’

Cheyne returned to the drawing-room and told his news. ‘Nothing’s been taken,’ he declared. ‘I’ve been through the safe and everything’s there. And nothing seems to be missing from the room either. The sergeant was asking about your jewels, mother. Have you looked if they’re all right?’

‘It was the first thing I thought of, but they are all in their places. The cabinet I keep them in was certainly examined, for

everything was left topsy-turvy, but nothing is missing.'

'Very extraordinary,' Cheyne commented. It seemed to him more than ever clear that these mysterious thieves were after some document which they believed he had, though why they should have supposed he held a valuable document he could not imagine. But the searching first of his pockets and then of his safe and house unmistakably suggested such a conclusion. He wondered if he should advance this theory, then decided he would first hear what the others had to say.

'Now, mother,' he went on, 'it's past your bedtime, but before you go I wish you would tell me what happened to you. Remember I have heard no details other than what Miss Hazelton mentioned on the telephone.'

Mrs Cheyne answered with some eagerness, evidently anxious to relieve her mind by relating her experiences.

'The first thing was the telegram,' she began. 'Agatha and I were sitting here this afternoon. I was sewing and Agatha was reading the paper—or was it the *Spectator*, Agatha?'

'The paper, mother, though that does not really matter.'

'No, of course it doesn't matter,' Mrs Cheyne repeated. It was evident the old lady had had a shock and found it difficult to concentrate her attention. 'Well, at all events we were sitting here as I have said, sewing and reading, when your telegram was brought in.'

'My telegram?' Cheyne queried sharply. 'What telegram do you mean?'

‘Why, your telegram about Mr Ackfield, of course,’ his mother answered with some petulance. ‘What other telegram could it be? It did not give us much time, but—’

‘But, mother dear, I don’t know what you are talking about. I sent no telegram.’

Agatha made a sudden gesture.

‘There!’ she exclaimed eagerly. ‘What did I say? When we came home and learned what had happened, and thought of your not turning up,’ she glanced at her brother, ‘I said it was only a blind. It was sent to get us away from the house!’

Cheyne shrugged his shoulders good humouredly. What he had half expected had evidently taken place.

‘Dear people,’ he protested, ‘this is worse than getting money from a Scotchman. Do tell me what has happened. You were sitting here this afternoon when you received a telegram. Very well now, what time was that?’

‘What time? Oh, about—what time did the telegram come, Agatha?’

‘Just as the clock was striking four. I heard it strike immediately after the ring.’

‘Good,’ said Cheyne in what he imagined was the manner of a cross-examining K.C. ‘And what was in the telegram?’

The girl was evidently too much upset by her experience to resent his superior tone. She crossed the room, and taking a flimsy pink form from a table, handed it over to him.

The telegram had been sent out from the General Post Office

in Plymouth at 3-17 that afternoon, and read:

‘You and Agatha please come without fail to Newton Abbott by 5-15 train to meet self and Ackfield about unexpected financial development. Urgent that you sign papers today. Ackfield will return Plymouth after meeting. You and I shall catch 7-10 home from Newton Abbott.—MAXWELL.’

Three-seventeen; and Parkes left the Edgecombe about three! It seemed pretty certain that he had sent the telegram. But if so, what an amazing amount the man knew about them all! Not only had he known of Cheyne’s war experiences and literary efforts and of his visit that day to the Edgecombe, but now it seemed that he had also known his address, of his mother and sister, and, most amazing thing of all, of the fact that Mr Ackfield of Plymouth was their lawyer and confidential adviser! Moreover, he had evidently known that the ladies were at home as well as that they alone comprised the family. Surely, Cheyne thought, comparatively few people possessed all this knowledge, and the finding of Parkes should therefore be a correspondingly easy task.

‘Extraordinary!’ he said aloud. ‘And what did you do?’

‘We got a taxi,’ Mrs Cheyne answered. ‘Agatha arranged it by telephone from Mrs Hazelton’s. You tell him, Agatha. I’m rather tired.’

The old lady indeed looked worn out and Cheyne interposed a suggestion that she should go at once to bed, leaving Agatha to finish the story. But she refused and her daughter took up the

tale.

‘We caught the 5-15 ferry and went on to Newton Abbott. But when the Plymouth train came in there was no sign of you or Mr Ackfield, so we sat in the waiting-room until the 7-10. I telephoned for a taxi to meet the ferry. It brought us to the door about half-past eight, but unfortunately it went away before we found we couldn’t get in.’

‘You rang?’

‘We rang and knocked, but could get no answer. The house was in darkness and we began to fear something was wrong. Then just as I was about to leave mother in the summer-house and run up to the Hazelton’s to see if James was there, he appeared to say that you were staying in Plymouth overnight. He rang and knocked again. But still no one came. Then he tried the windows on the ground floor, but they were all fastened, and at last he got the ladder from the yard and managed to get in through the window of your dressing-room. He came down and opened the door and we got in.’

‘And what did you find?’

‘Nothing at first. We wondered where the maids could possibly have got to, or what could have happened. I found your electric torch and we began to search the rooms. Then we saw that your safe had been broken open and we knew it was burglary. That terrified us on account of the maids and we wondered if they had been decoyed away also. I don’t mind admitting now that I was just shaking with fear lest we should find that they had

been injured or even murdered. But it wasn't so bad as that.'

'They were tied up?'

'Yes, we found them in cook's bedroom, lying on the floor with their hands and feet tied, and gagged. They were both very weak and could scarcely stand when we released them. They told us—but you'd better see them and hear what they have to say. They're not gone to bed yet.'

'Yes, I'll see them directly. What did you do then?'

'As soon as we were satisfied the burglars had gone James went home to call up the police. Then he came back and we began a second search to see what had been stolen. But the more we looked, the more surprised we became. We couldn't find that anything had been taken.'

'Extraordinary!' Cheyne commented again. 'And then?'

'After a time the police came out, and then James went home again to see whether they had been able to get in touch with you. He came back and told us you would be here by eleven. He had only just gone when you arrived. I really can't say how kind and helpful he has been.'

'Yes, James is a good fellow. Now you and mother get to bed and I'll fix things up with the police.'

He turned his steps to the kitchen, where he found the two maids shivering over a roaring fire and drinking tea. They stood up as he entered, but he told them to sit down again, asked for a cup for himself, and seating himself on the table chatted pleasantly before obtaining their statements. They had evidently

had a bad fright and cook still seemed hysterical. As he sat he looked at them curiously.

Cook was an elderly woman, small and plain and stout. She had been with them since they had bought the house, and though he had not seen much of her, she had always seemed good-tempered and obliging. He had heard his mother speak well of her and he was sorry she should have had so distressing an experience. But he didn't fancy she would be one to give burglars much trouble.

Susan, the parlourmaid, was of a different quality. She was tall with rather heavy features, and good-looking after a somewhat coarse type. If a trifle sullen in manner, she was competent and by no means a fool, and he felt that nefarious marauders would find her a force to be reckoned with.

By dint of patient questioning he presently knew all they had to tell. It appeared that shortly after the ladies had left a ring had come to the door. Susan had opened it to find two men standing without. One was tall and powerfully built, with dark hair and clean-shaven face, the other small and pale—pale face, pale hair and tiny pale moustache. They had inquired for Mr Maxwell Cheyne, and when she had said he was out the small man had asked if he could write a note. She had brought them into the hall and was turning to go for some paper when the big man had sprung on her and before she could cry out had pressed a handkerchief over her mouth. The small man had shut the door and begun to tie her wrists and ankles. Susan had struggled

and in spite of them had succeeded in getting her mouth free and shouting a warning to cook, but she had been immediately overpowered and securely gagged. The men had laid her on the floor of the hall and had seemed about to go upstairs when cook, attracted by Susan's cry, had appeared at the door leading to the back premises. The two men had instantly rushed over, and in a few seconds cook also lay bound and gagged on the floor. They had then disappeared, apparently to search the house, for in a few minutes they had come back and carried first Susan and then cook to the latter's room at the far end of the back return. The intruders had then withdrawn, closing the door, and the two women had neither heard nor seen anything further of them.

The whole episode had a curious effect on Cheyne. It seemed, as he considered it, to lose its character of an ordinary breach of the law, punishable by the authorised forces of the Crown, and to take on instead that of a personal struggle between himself and these unknown men. The more he thought of it the more inclined he became to accept the challenge and to pit his own brain and powers against theirs. The mysterious nature of the affair appealed to his sporting instincts, and by the time he rejoined the sergeant in the study, he had made up his mind to keep his own counsel as to the Plymouth incident. He would call up the manager of the Edgecombe, tell him to carry on with his private detective, and have the latter down to Warren Lodge to go into the matter of the burglary.

He found the sergeant attempting ineffectively to discover

fingerprints on the smooth walls of the safe, sympathised with him in the difficulty of his task, and asked a number of deliberately futile questions. On the grounds that nothing had been stolen he minimised the gravity of the affair, questioned his power to prosecute should the offenders be forthcoming, and instilled doubts into the other's mind as to the need for special efforts to run them to earth. Finally, the man explaining that he had finished for the time being, he bade him good-night, locked up the house and went to bed. There he lay for several hours tossing and turning as he puzzled over the affair, before sleep descended to blot out his worries and soothe his eager desire to be on the track of his enemies.

3

The Launch 'Enid'

For several days after the attempted burglary events in the Cheyne household pursued the even tenor of their way. Cheyne went back to Plymouth on the following morning and interviewed the manager of the Edgecombe, and the day after a quiet, despondent looking man with the air of a small shopkeeper arrived at Warren Lodge and was closeted with Cheyne for a couple of hours. Mr Speedwell, of Horton and Lavender's Private Detective Agency, listened with attention to the tales of the drugging and the burglary, thenceforward appearing at intervals and making mysterious inquiries on his own account.

On one of these visits he brought with him the report of the analyst relative to the dishes of which Cheyne had partaken at lunch, but this document only increased the mystification the affair had caused. No trace of drugs was discernable in any of the food or drink in question, and as the soiled plates or glasses or cups of *all* the courses were available for examination, the question of how the drug had been administered—or alternatively whether it really had been administered—began to seem almost insoluble. The cocktail taken with Parkes before lunch was the only item of which a portion could not be analysed, but the evidence of the barmaid proved conclusively

that Parkes could not have tampered with it.

But in spite of the analysis, the coffee still seemed the doubtful item. Cheyne's sleepy feeling had come one very rapidly immediately after drinking the coffee, before which he had not felt the slightest abnormal symptoms. Mr Speedwell laid stress on this point, though he was pessimistic about the whole affair.

'They know what they're about, does this gang,' he admitted ruefully as he and Cheyne were discussing matters. 'That man in the hotel that called himself Parkes—if we found him tomorrow we should have precious little against him. However he managed it, we can't prove he drugged you. In fact it's the other way round. He can prove on our evidence that he didn't.'

'It looks like it. You haven't been able to find out anything about him?'

'Not a thing, sir; that is, not what would be any use. I can prove that he sent your telegram all right; the girl in the Post Office recognised his description. But I couldn't get on to his trail after that. I've tried the stations and the docks and the posting establishments and the hotels and I can't get a trace. But of course I'll maybe get it yet.'

'What about the address given on his card?'

'Tried that first thing. No good. No one of the name known in the district.'

'When did the man arrive at the hotel?'

'Just after you did, Mr Cheyne. He probably picked you up somewhere else and was following you to see where you'd get

lunch.’

‘Oh, well, that explains something. I was wondering how he knew I was going to the Edgecombe.’

‘It doesn’t explain so very much, sir. Question still is, how did he get all that other information about you; the name of your lawyer and so on?’

Cheyne had to admit that the prospects of clearing up the affair were not rosy. ‘But what about the burglary?’ he went on more hopefully. ‘That should be an easier nut to crack.’

Speedwell was still pessimistic.

‘I don’t know about that, sir,’ he answered gloomily. ‘There’s not much to go on there either. The only chance is to trace the men’s arrival or departure. Now individually the private detective is every bit as good as the police; better, in fact, because he’s not so tied up with red tape. But he hasn’t their organisation. In a case like this, when the police with their enormous organisation have failed, the private detective hasn’t a big chance. However, of course I’ve not given up.’

He paused, and then drawing a little closer to Cheyne and lowering his voice, he went on impressively: ‘You know, sir, I hope you’ll not consider me out of place in saying it, but I had hoped to get my best clue from yourself. There can be no doubt that these men are after some paper that you have, or that they think you have. If you could tell me what it was, it might make all the difference.’

Cheyne made a gesture of impatience.

‘Don’t I know that,’ he cried. ‘Haven’t I been racking my brains over that question since ever the thing happened! I can’t think of anything. In fact, I can tell you there *was* nothing—nothing that I know of any way,’ he added helplessly.

Speedwell nodded and a sly look came into his eyes.

‘Well, sir, if you can’t tell, you can’t, and that’s all there is to it.’ He paused as if to refer to some other matter, then apparently thinking better of it, concluded: ‘You have my address, and if anything should occur to you I hope you’ll let me know without delay.’

When Speedwell had taken his departure Cheyne sat on in the study, thinking over the problem the other had presented, but as he did so he had no idea that before that very day was out he should himself have received information which would clear up the point at issue, as well as a good many of the other puzzling features of the strange events in which he had become involved.

Shortly after lunch, then, on this day, the eighth after the burglary and drugging, Cheyne on re-entering the house after a stroll round the garden, was handed a card and told that the owner was waiting to see him in his study. Mr Arthur Lamson, of 17 Acacia Terrace, Bland Road, Devonport, proved to be a youngish man of middle height and build, with the ruggedly chiselled features usually termed hard-bitten, a thick black toothbrush moustache and glasses. Cheyne was not particularly prepossessed by his appearance, but he spoke in an educated way and had the easy polish of a man of the world.

'I have to apologise for this intrusion, Mr Cheyne,' he began in a pleasant tone, 'but the fact is I wondered whether I could interest you in a small invention of mine. I got your name from Messrs Holt & Stavenage, the Plymouth ship chandlers. They told me you dealt with them and how keen you were on yachting, and as my invention relates to the navigation of coasting craft, I hoped you might allow me to show it to you.'

Cheyne, who had had some experience of inventors during six weeks special naval war service after his convalescence, made a non-committal reply.

'I may tell you at once, sir,' Mr Lamson went on, 'that I am looking for a keen amateur who would be willing to allow me to fit the device to his boat, and who would be sufficiently interested to test it under all kinds of varying conditions. You see, though the thing works all right on a motor launch I have borrowed, I have exhausted my leave from my business, and am therefore unable to give it a sufficiently lengthy and varying test to find out whether it will work continuously under ordinary everyday sea-going conditions. If it proves satisfactory I believe it would sell, and if so I should of course be willing to take into partnership to a certain extent anyone who had helped me to develop it.'

In spite of himself Cheyne was impressed. This man was different from those with whom he had hitherto come in contact. He was not asking for money, or at least he hadn't so far.

'Have you patented the device?' he asked, reckoning willingness to spend money on patent fees a test of good faith.

‘No, not yet,’ the visitor answered. ‘I have taken out provisional protection, which will cover the thing for four months more. If it promises well after a couple of months’ test it will be time enough to apply for the full patent.’

Cheyne nodded. This was a reasonable and proper course.

‘What is the nature of the device?’ he asked.

The young man’s manner grew more alert. He leaned forward in his chair and spoke eagerly. Cheyne frowned involuntarily as he recognised the symptoms.

‘It’s a position indicator. It would, I think, be useful at all times, but during fog it would be simply invaluable: that is, for coasting work, you know. It would be no good for protection against collision with another ship. But for clearing a headland or making a harbour in a fog it would be worth its weight in gold. The principle is, I believe, old, but I have been lucky enough to hit on improvements in detail which get over the defects of previous instruments. Speaking broadly, a fixed pointer, which may if desired carry a pen, rests on a moving chart. The chart is connected to a compass and to rollers operated by devices for recording the various components of motion one is driven off the propeller, others are set, automatically mostly, for such things as wind, run of tide, wave motion and so on. The pointer always indicates the position of the ship, and as the ship moves, the chart moves to correspond. Steering then resolves itself into keeping the pointer on the correct line on the chart, and this can be done by night without guide lamps, or in a fog, as well as

in daytime. The apparatus would also assist navigation through unbuoyed channels over covered mud flats, or in time of war through charted mine fields. I don't want to be a nuisance to you, Mr Cheyne, but I do wish you would at least let me show you the device. You could then decide whether you would allow me to fix it to your yacht for experimental purposes.'

'I should like to see it,' Cheyne admitted. 'If you can do all you claim, I certainly think you have a good thing. Where is it to be seen?'

'On my launch, or rather, the launch I have borrowed.' The young man's eagerness now almost approached excitement. His eyes sparkled and he fidgeted in his chair. 'She is lying off Johnson's boat slip at Dartmouth. I left the dinghy there.'

'And you want me to go now?'

'If you really will be so kind. I should propose a short run down the estuary and along the coast towards Exmouth, say for two or three hours. Could you spare so much time?'

'Why, yes, I should enjoy it. I shall be back, say, between six and seven.'

'I'll have you back at Johnson's slip at six o'clock. I have a taxi waiting now, and I'll arrange with Johnson to call another for you as soon as he sees us coming up the estuary.'

'I'll go,' said Cheyne. 'Just a moment until I tell my people and get a coat.'

The day was ideal for the run. Spring was in the air. The brilliant April sun poured down from an almost cloudless sky,

against which the sea horizon showed a hard, sharp line of intensest blue. Within the estuary it was calm, but multitudinous white flecks in the distance showed a stiff breeze was blowing out at sea. Cheyne's spirits rose. It was a glorious sport, this of battling with the foaming, tumbling waves in the open. How he loved their blue-black depth with its suggestion of utter and absolute cleanness, the creamy purity of their seething crests, their steady, irresistible onward movement, the restless dancing and swirling of the wavelets on their flanks! To him it was life to feel the buoyant spring of the craft beneath him, to hear the crash of the bows into the troughs and the smack of the spindrift striking aft. He was glad this Lamson had called. Even if the matter of the invention was a washout, as he more than half expected, he felt he was going to enjoy his afternoon.

Three or four minutes brought them to Johnson's boat slip on the outskirts of Dartmouth. There Lamson drew the proprietor aside.

'See here,' he directed, 'we're going out for a run. I want you to keep a lookout for us coming back. We shall be in about six. As soon as you see us send for a taxi and have it here when we get ashore. Now Mr Cheyne, if you're ready.'

They climbed down into a small dinghy and Lamson, taking the oars, pulled out towards a fair-sized motor launch which lay at anchor some couple of hundred yards from the shore. She was not a graceful boat, but looked strongly built, showing a high bluff bow, a square stern and lines suggestive of speed.

‘A sea boat,’ said Cheyne approvingly. ‘You surely don’t run her by yourself?’

‘No, a motoring friend has been giving me a hand. I am skipper and he engineer. We hug the coast, you know, and don’t go out if it is blowing.’

As he spoke he pulled round the stern of the launch upon which Cheyne observed the words ‘Enid, Devonport.’ At the same time a tall, well-built figure appeared and waved his hand. Lamson brought up to the tiny steps and a moment later they were on deck.

‘Mr Cheyne has come out to see the great invention, Tom. I almost hope that he is interested. My friend, Tom Lewesham, Mr Cheyne.’

The two men shook hands.

‘Lamson thinks he is going to make his fortune with this thing, Mr Cheyne,’ the big man remarked, smiling. ‘We must see that there is no mistake about our percentages.’

‘If you want a percentage you must work for it, my son,’ Lamson declared. ‘Mr Cheyne must be back by six, so get your old rattle-trap going and we’ll run down to the sea. If you don’t mind, Mr Cheyne, we’ll get under way before I show you the machine, as it takes both of us to get started.’

‘Right-o,’ said Cheyne. ‘I’ll bear a hand if there’s anything I can do.’

‘Well, that’s good of you. It would be a help if you would take the tiller while I’m making all snug. There’s a bit of a tumble on

outside.'

The boat was certainly a flier. The charmingly situated old town dropped rapidly astern while Lamson 'made snug.' Then he came aft, shouted down through the engine-room skylight for his friend, and when the latter appeared told him to take the tiller.

'Now, Mr Cheyne,' he went on, 'now comes the great moment! I have not fixed the apparatus up here in front of the tiller, partly to keep it secret and partly to save the trouble of making it weatherproof. It's down in the cabin. But you understand it should be up here. Will you come down?'

He led the way down a companion to a diminutive saloon. 'It's in the sleeping part, still forward,' he pointed, and the two men squeezed through a door in the bulkhead into a tiny cabin, lit by electric light and with a table in the centre and two berths on either side. On the table was a frame on the top of which was stretched a chart, and a light rod ran out from one side to a pointer fixed over the middle of the chart.

'You can see that it's very roughly made,' Lamson went on, 'but if you look closely I think you'll find that it works all right.'

Cheyne bent forward and examined the machine, and as he did so mystification grew in his mind. The chart was not of the estuary of the Dart, nor, stranger still, was it connected to rollers. It was simply tacked on what he now saw was merely the lid of a box. How it was moved he couldn't see.

'I don't follow this,' he said. 'How do you get your chart to move if it's nailed down?'

There was no answer, but as he swung round with a sudden misgiving there was a sharp click. Lamson had disappeared and the door was shut!

Cheyne seized the handle and turned it violently, only to find that the bolt of the lock had been shot, but before he could attempt further researches the light went off, leaving him in almost pitch darkness. At the same moment a significant lurch showed that they were passing from the shelter of the estuary into the open sea.

He twisted and tugged at the handle. 'Here you, Lamson!' he shouted angrily. 'What do you mean by this? Open the door at once. Confound you! Will you open the door!' He began to kick savagely at the woodwork.

A small panel in the partition between the cabins shot aside and a beam of light flowed into Cheyne's. Lamson's face appeared at the opening. He spoke in an old-fashioned, stilted way, aping extreme politeness, but his mocking smile gave the lie to his protestations.

'I'm sorry, Mr Cheyne, for this incivility,' he declared, 'and hope that when you have heard my explanation you will pardon me. I must admit I have played a trick on you for which I offer the fullest apologies. The story of my invention was a fabrication. So far as I am aware no apparatus such as I have described exists: certainly I have not made one. The truth is that you can do me a service, and I took the liberty of inveigling you here in the hope of securing your good offices in the matter.'

‘You’ve taken a’ bad way of getting my help,’ Cheyne shouted wrathfully. ‘Open the door at once, damn you, or I’ll smash it to splinters!’

The other made a deprecatory gesture.

‘Really I beg of you, Mr Cheyne,’ he said in mock horror at the other’s violence. ‘Not so fast, if you please, sir. I have an answer to both your observations. With regard to the door you will—’

Cheyne interrupted him with a savage oath and a fierce onslaught of kicks on the lower panels of the door. But he could make no impression on them, and when in a few moments he paused breathless, Lamson went on quietly.

‘With regard to the door, as I was about to observe, it would be a waste of energy to attempt to smash it to splinters, because I have taken the precaution to have it covered with steel plates. They are bolted through and the nuts are on the outside. I mention this to save you—’

Cheyne was by this time almost beside himself with rage. He expressed his convictions and desires as to Lamson and his future in terms which from the point of view of force left little to be desired, and persistently reiterated his demand that the door be opened as a prelude to further negotiation. In reply Lamson shook his head, and remarking that as the present seemed an inopportune moment for discussing the situation, he could postpone the conversation, he closed the panel and left the inner cabin once more in darkness.

For an hour Cheyne stormed and fumed, and with pieces

which he managed to knock off the table tried to break through the door, the bulkheads and the deadlighted porthole, all with such a complete absence of success that when at last Lamson appeared once more at the panel he was constrained to listen, though with suppressed fury, to what he had to say.

‘You see, it’s this way, Mr Cheyne,’ the erstwhile inventor began. ‘You are completely in our power and the sooner you realise it and let us come to business, the sooner you’ll be at liberty again. We don’t wish you any harm; please accept my assurances on that. All we want is a slight service at your hands, and when you perform it you will be free to return home; in fact we shall take you back as I said, with profuse apologies for your inconvenience and loss of time. But it is only fair to point out that we are determined to get what we want, and if you are not prepared to come to terms now we can wait until you are.’

Cheyne, still at a white heat, cursed the other savagely. Lamson waited until he had finished, then went on in a smooth, almost coaxing tone:

‘Now do be reasonable, Mr Cheyne. You must see that your present attitude is only wasting time for us both. Not to put too fine a point on it the situation is this: You are there, and you can’t get out, and you can’t attract attention to your predicament—that is why the deadlights are shipped. It grieves me to say it,’ Lamson smiled sardonically, ‘but I must tell you that you will stay there until you do what we want. In order to prevent Mrs Cheyne becoming uneasy we shall wire her in your name that

you have left for an extended trip and won't be back for some days. "To Cheyne, Warren Lodge, Dartmouth. Gone for yachting cruise down French coast. Address Poste Restante, St Nazaire. All well. Maxwell." You see, we know exactly how to word it. All suspicion would be lulled for some days and then,' he paused and something sinister and revolting came into his face, 'then it wouldn't matter, for it would be too late. For you see there is neither food nor drink in the cabin and we don't propose to pass any in. You won't get any, Mr Cheyne, no matter how many days you remain aboard: that is,' his manner changed, 'unless you are reasonable, which of course you will be. In that case no harm is done. Now won't you hear our little proposition?'

'I'll see you in hell first,' Cheyne shouted, his rage once again overwhelming him. 'You'll pay for this, I can tell you. It'll be the dearest trip you ever had in your life,' and he proceeded with threats and curses to demand the immediate opening of the door. Lamson, a whimsical smile curling his lips, shrugged his shoulders at the outburst, and replied by withdrawing his head from the opening and sliding the panel to.

Cheyne, left once more in almost complete darkness, sat silent, his mind full of wrath against his captors. But as time passed and they made no sign his fury somewhat evaporated and he began to wonder what it was they wanted with him. His rage had made him thirsty, and the mere fact that Lamson had stated that nothing would be given him to drink, made his thirst more insistent. It was impossible, he said to himself, that the

scoundrels could carry out so diabolical a threat, but in spite of his assurance, little misgivings began to creep into his mind. At all events the vision of his usual cup of afternoon tea grew increasingly alluring. When therefore after what seemed to him several hours, but what was in reality about forty minutes only, the panel suddenly opened, he admitted sullenly that he was prepared to listen to what Lamson had to say.

‘That’s good,’ the young man answered heartily. ‘If you could just see your way to humour us in this little matter there is no reason why we should not part friends.’

‘There’s no question of friends about it,’ Cheyne declared sharply. ‘Cut your chatter and get on to business. What do you want?’

A smile suffused Mr Lamson’s rough-hewn countenance.

‘Now that’s talking,’ he cried. ‘That’s what I’ve been hoping to hear. I’ll tell you the whole thing and you’ll see it’s only a mere trifle that we’re asking. I can put it in five words: We want Arnold Price’s letter.’

Cheyne stared.

‘Arnold Price’s letter?’ he repeated in amazement. ‘What on earth do you know about Arnold Price’s letter?’

‘We know all about it, Mr Cheyne—a jolly sight more than you do. We know about his giving it to you and the conditions under which he asked you to keep it. But you don’t know why he did so or what is in it. We do, and we can justify our request for it.’

The demand was so unexpected that Cheyne sat for a moment in silence, thinking how the letter in question had come into his possession. Arnold Price was a junior officer in one of the ships belonging to the Fenchurch Street firm in whose office Cheyne had spent five years as clerk. Business had brought the two young men in contact during the visits of Price's ship, and they had become rather friendly. On Cheyne's leaving for Devonshire they had drifted apart, indeed they had only met on one occasion since. That was in 1917, shortly before Cheyne received the wound which invalidated him out of the service. Then he found that his former companion had volunteered for the navy on the outbreak of hostilities. He had done well, and after a varied service he had been appointed third officer of the *Maurania*, an eight-thousand ton liner carrying passengers, as well as stores from overseas to the troops in France. The two had spent an evening together in Dunkirk renewing their friendship and talking over, old times. Then, two months later, had come the letter. In it Price asked his friend to do him a favour. Some private papers, of interest only to himself, had come into his possession and he wished these to be safely preserved until after the war. Knowing that Cheyne was permanently invalidated out, he was venturing to send these papers, sealed in the enclosed envelope, with the request that Cheyne would keep them for him until he reclaimed them or until news of his death was received. In the latter case Cheyne was to open the envelope and act as he thought fit on the information therein contained.

The sealed envelope was of a size which would hold a foolscap sheet folded in four, and was fairly bulky. It was inscribed: 'To Maxwell Cheyne, of Warren Lodge, Dartmouth, Devonshire, from Arnold Price, third officer, S.S. *Maurania*,' and on the top was written: 'Please retain this envelope unopened until I claim it or until you have received authentic news of my death. Arnold Price.' Cheyne had acknowledged it, promising to carry out the instructions, and had then sent the envelope to his bank, where it had since remained.

The insinuating voice of Lamson broke through his thoughts. 'I think, Mr Cheyne, when you hear the reasons for our request, you will give it all due consideration. For one—'

What? Break faith with Price? Go back on his friend? Rage again choked Cheyne's utterance. Stutteringly he cursed the other, once again demanding under blood-curdling threats of future vengeance his immediate liberty. Through his passion he heard the voice of the other saying he was sorry but he really could not help it, the panel slid shut, and darkness and silence, save for the sounds of the sea, reigned in the *Enid's* cabin.

4

Concerning A Peerage

When Maxwell Cheyne's paroxysm of fury diminished and he began once more to think collectedly about the unpleasant situation in which he found himself, a startling idea occurred to him. Here at last, surely, was the explanation of his previous adventures! The drugging in the hotel in Plymouth, the burglary at Warren Lodge, and now his kidnapping on the *Enid* were all part and parcel of the same scheme. It was for Price's letter that his pocket-book was investigated while he lay asleep in the private room at the Edgecombe; it was for Price's letter that his safe was broken open and his house searched by other members of the conspiracy, and it was for Price's letter that he now lay, a prisoner aboard this infernal launch.

A valuable document, this of Price's must surely be, if it was worth such pains to acquire! Cheyne wondered how it had never occurred to him that it might represent the motive of the earlier crimes, but he soon realised that he had never thought of it as being of interest to anyone other than Price. Indeed, Price himself referred to his enclosure as 'some private papers, of interest to myself only.' In that last phrase Price had evidently been wrong, and Cheyne wondered whether he had been genuinely mistaken, or whether he had from distrust of

himself deliberately misstated the case in order to minimise the value of the document. Price had certainly not shown himself anxious to regain it at the earliest possible moment. On the conclusion of peace he had not accepted demobilisation. He had applied for and obtained a transfer to the middle East, where he had commanded one of the transports plying between Basrah and Bombay in connection with the Mesopotamian campaign. So far as Cheyne knew, he was still there. He hadn't heard of him for many months, not, indeed, since he went out.

While Cheyne had been turning over these matters in his mind the launch had evidently been approaching land, as its rather wild rolling and pitching had gradually ceased and it was now floating on an even keel. Cheyne had been conscious of the fact despite his preoccupation, but now his musings were interrupted by the stopping of the motor and a few seconds later by the plunge of the anchor and the rattle of the running chain. In the comparative silence he shouted himself hoarse, but no one paid him the least attention. He heard, however, the dinghy being drawn up to the side and presently the sound of oars retreating, but whether one or both of his captors had left he could not tell. In an hour or two the boat returned, but though he again shouted and beat the door of his cabin, no notice was taken of his calls.

Then began for Cheyne a period which he could never afterwards look back on without a shudder. Never could he have believed that a night could be so long, that time could drag so slowly. He made himself as comfortable as he could in one of

the bunks, but as the clothes and the mattress had been removed, his efforts were not crowned with much success. In spite of his weariness and of the growing exhaustion due to hunger, he could not sleep. He wanted something to drink. He was surprised to find that thirst was not localised in a parched throat or dry mouth. His whole being cried out for water. He could not have realised nor described the sensation, but it was very intense, and with every hour that passed it grew stronger. He turned and tossed in the narrow bunk, his restlessness and discomfort continually increasing. At last he dozed, but only to fall into horrible dreams from which he awaked unrefreshed and thirstier than ever.

Cheyne had plenty of spirit and dash, but he lacked in staying power, and when the inevitable period of reaction to his excitement and rage came he became plunged in a deep depression. These fellows had him in their power. If this went on and they really carried out their threat he would have to give way sooner or later. He hated to think he might betray a trust; he hated still more to be coerced into doing anything against his own will, but when, as it seemed to him, weeks later, the panel shot back and Lamson's face appeared, his first decision was shaken and he waited sullenly to hear what the other had to say.

The man was polite and deprecating rather than blustering, and seemed anxious to make it as easy as possible for Cheyne to capitulate.

'I hope, Mr Cheyne,' he began, 'you will allow me to explain this matter more fully, as I cannot but think you have at least to

some extent misunderstood our proposal. I did not tell you the whole of the facts, but I should like to do so now if you will listen.'

He paused expectantly. Cheyne glowered at him, but did not reply and Lamson resumed:

'The matter is somewhat complicated, but I will do my best to explain it as briefly as I can. In a word, then, it relates to a claim for a peerage. I must admit to you that Lamson is not my name—it is Price, and the Arnold Price whom you knew during the war is my second cousin. Arnold's uncle and my father's cousin, St John Price, is, or rather was, in the diplomatic service, and it is through his discoveries that the present situation has arisen.

'It happened that this St John Price had occasion to visit South Africa on diplomatic business during the war, and as luck would have it he took his return passage on the *Maurania*, the ship on which his nephew Arnold was third officer. But he never reached England. He met his death on the journey under circumstances which involved a coincidence too remarkable to have happened otherwise than in real life.'

In spite of himself Cheyne was interested. Price glanced at him and went on:

'One night at the end of the voyage when they were running without lights up the Channel, a large steamer going in the same direction as themselves suddenly loomed up out of the darkness and struck them heavily on the starboard quarter ... My cousin was on deck, though not in charge. He saw the outlines of the vessel as she was closing in, and he also saw that a passenger

was standing at the rail just where the contact was about to take place. At the risk of his own life he sprang forward and dragged the man back. Unfortunately he was not in time to save him, for a falling spar broke his back and only just missed killing Arnold. Then, as you may have guessed from what I said, it turned out that the passenger was none other than St John Price. My cousin had tried to save his own uncle.'

Once more Price paused, but Cheyne still remaining silent he continued:

'St John lingered for some hours, during most of which time he was conscious, and it was then that he told Arnold about his belief that he, Arnold, was heir to the barony of Hull. I don't know, Mr Cheyne, if you are aware that the present Lord Hull is a man well on to eighty and is in failing health. He has no known heir, and unless some claimant comes forward speedily, the title will in the course of nature become extinct. As you probably know also, Lord Hull is a man of enormous wealth. St John Price believed that he, Arnold and myself were all descended from the eldest son of Francis, the fifth Baron Hull. This man had lived an evil, dissolute life, and England having become too hot to hold him, he had sailed for South Africa in the early part of the last century. On his father's death search was made for him, but without result, and the second son, Alwyn, inherited. St John had after many years' labour traced what he believed was a lineal descent from the scapegrace, and he had utilised his visit to South Africa to make further inquiries. There he had unearthed the

record of a marriage, which, he believed, completed the proofs he sought. As he knew he was dying, he handed over the attested copy of the marriage register to Arnold, at the same time making a new will leaving all the other documents in the case to Arnold also.

‘When Arnold received his next leave he went fully into the matter with his solicitor, only to find that one document, the register of a birth, was missing. Without this he could scarcely hope to win his case. The evidence of the other papers tended to show that the birth had taken place in India, probably at Bombay, and Arnold therefore applied for a transfer into a service which brought him to that country, in the hope that he would have an opportunity to pursue his researches at first hand. It was there that I met him—I am junior partner in Swanson, Reid & Price’s of that city—and he told me all that I have told you.

‘Before going to the East he sealed up the papers referring to the matter and sent them to you. If you will pardon my saying so, I think that there he made a mistake. But he explained that he knew too much about lawyers to leave anything in their hands, that they would fight the case for their own fees whether there was any chance of winning it or not, and that he wanted the papers to be in the hands of an honest man in case of his death.

‘I pointed out that I was interested in the matter also, but he said No, that he was the heir and that during his life the affair concerned him alone. Needless to say, we parted on bad terms.

‘Now, Mr Cheyne, you can see why I want those papers.

Though Arnold is my cousin I doubt his honesty. I want to see exactly how we both stand. I want nothing but what is fair—as a matter of fact I can get nothing but what is fair—the law wouldn't allow it. But I don't want to be done. If I had the papers I would show them to a first-rate lawyer. If Arnold is entitled to succeed he will do so, if I am the heir I shall, if neither of us no harm is done. We can only get what the law allows us. But in any case I give my word of honour that, if I succeed, Arnold shall never want for anything in reason.'

Price was speaking earnestly and his manner carried conviction to Cheyne. Without waiting for a reply he proceeded.

'You, Mr Cheyne, if you will excuse my saying it, are an outsider in the matter. Whether Arnold or I or neither of us succeeds is nothing to you. You want to do only what is fair to Arnold, and you have my most solemn promise that that is all I propose. If you enable me to test our respective positions by handing over the papers to me you will not be letting Arnold down.'

When Price ceased speaking there was silence between the two men as Cheyne thought over what he had heard. Price's manner was convincing, and as far as Cheyne could form an opinion, the story might be true. It certainly explained the facts adequately, and Cheyne believed that the statements about Lord Hull were correct. All the same he did not believe this man was out for a square deal. If he could only get what the law allowed, would not the same apply whether he or Arnold conducted the

affair? Cheyne, moreover, was still sore from his treatment, and he determined he would not discuss the matter until he had received satisfactory replies to one or two personal questions.

‘Did you drug me in the Edgecombe hotel in Plymouth a week ago and then go through my pockets, and did you the same evening burgle my house, break open my safe and mishandle my servants?’

It was not exactly a tactful question, but Price answered it cheerfully and without hesitation.

‘Not in person, but I admit my agents did these things. For these also I am anxious to apologise.’

‘Your apologies won’t prevent your having a lengthened acquaintance with the inside of a prison,’ Cheyne snarled, his rage flickering up at the recollection of his injuries. ‘How do your confederates come to be interested?’

‘Bought,’ the other admitted sweetly. ‘I had no other way of getting help. I have paid them twenty pounds on account and they will get a thousand guineas each if my claim is upheld.’

‘A self-confessed thief and crook as well as a liar! And you expect me to believe in your good intentions towards Arnold Price!’

An unpleasant look passed across the other’s face, but he spoke calmly.

‘That may be all very well and very true if you like, but it doesn’t advance the situation. The question now is: Are you prepared to hand over the letter? Nothing else seems to me to

matter.’

‘Why did you not come to me like an ordinary honest man and tell me your story? What induced you to launch out into all this complicated network of crime?’

Price smiled whimsically.

‘Well, you might surely guess that,’ he answered. ‘Suppose you had refused to give me the letter, how was I to know that you would not have put it beyond my reach? I couldn’t take the risk.’

‘Suppose I refuse to give it to you now?’

‘You won’t, Mr Cheyne. No one in your position could. Circumstances are too strong for you, and you can hand it over and retain your honour absolutely untarnished. I do not wish to urge you to a decision. If you would prefer to take today to think over it, by all means do so. I sent the wire to Mrs Cheyne shortly before six last night, so she will not be uneasy about you.’

Though the words were politely spoken, the threat behind them was unmistakable and fell with sinister intent on the listener’s ears. Rapidly Cheyne considered the situation. This ruffian was right. No one in such a situation could resist indefinitely. It was true he could refuse his consent at the moment, but the question would come up again that evening and the next morning and again and again until at last he would have to give way. He knew it, and he felt that unless there was a strong chance of victory, he could not stand the hours of suffering which a further refusal would entail. No, bitter as the conclusion was, he felt he must for the moment admit defeat, trusting later to getting

his own back. He turned back to Price.

‘I haven’t got the letter here. I can only get it for you if you put me ashore.’

That this was a victory for Price was evident, but the young man showed no elation. He carefully avoided anything in the nature of a taunt, and spoke in a quiet, businesslike way.

‘We might be able to arrange that. Where is the letter?’

‘At my bank in Dartmouth.’

‘Then the matter is quite simple. All you have to do is to write to the manager to send the letter to an address I shall give you. Directly you do so you shall have the best food and drink on the launch, and directly the letter is in our hands you will be put ashore close to your home.’

Cheyne still hesitated.

‘I’ll do it provided you can prove to me your statements. How am I to know that you will keep your word? How am I to know that you won’t get the letter and then murder me?’

‘I’m afraid you can’t know that. I would gladly prove it to you, but you must see that it’s just not possible. I give you my solemn word of honour and you’ll have to accept it because there is nothing else you can do.’

Cheyne demurred further, but as Price showed signs of retreating and leaving him to think it over until the evening, he hastily agreed to write the letter. Immediately the electric light came on in his cabin and Price passed in a couple of sheets of notepaper and envelopes. Cheyne gazed at them in surprise.

They were of a familiar silurian gray and the sheets bore in tiny blue embossed letters the words 'Warren Lodge, Dartmouth, S. Devon.'

'Why, it's my own paper,' he exclaimed, and Price with a smile admitted that in view of some development like the present, his agents had taken the precaution to annex a few sheets when paying their call to Cheyne's

'If you will ask your manager to send the letter to Herbert Taverner, Esq., Royal Hotel, Weymouth, it will meet the case. Taverner is my agent, and as soon as it is in his hands I will set you ashore at Johnson's wharf.'

Seeing there was no help for it, Cheyne wrote the letter. Price read it carefully, then sealed it in its envelope. Immediately after he handed through the panel a tumbler of whisky and water, then hurried off, saying he was going to despatch the letter and bring Cheyne his breakfast.

Oh, the unspeakable delight of that drink! Cheyne thought he had never before experienced any sensation approaching it in satisfaction. He swallowed it in great gulps, and when in a few moments Price returned, he demanded more, and again more.

His thirst assuaged, hunger asserted itself, and for the next half-hour Cheyne had the time of his life as Price handed in through the panel a plate of smoking ham and eggs, fragrant coffee, toast, butter, marmalade and the like. At last with a sigh of relief Cheyne lit his pipe, while Price passed in blankets and rugs to make up a bed in one of the bunks. Some books and

magazines followed and a hand-bell, which Price told him to ring if he wanted anything.

Comfortable in body and fairly easy in mind, Cheyne made up his bed and promptly fell asleep. It was afternoon when he awoke, and on ringing the bell, Price appeared with a well-cooked lunch. The evening passed comfortably if tediously and that night Cheyne slept well.

Next day and next night dragged slowly away. Cheyne was well looked after and supplied with everything he required, but the confinement grew more and more irksome. However, he could not help himself and he had to admit he might have fared worse, as he lay smoking in his bunk and brooding over schemes to get even with the men who had tricked him.

About half-past ten on the second morning he suddenly heard oars approaching, followed by the sounds of a boat coming alongside and someone climbing on board. A few moments later Price appeared at the panel.

‘You will be pleased to hear, Mr Cheyne, that we have received the letter safely. We are getting under way at once and you will be home in less than three hours.’

Presently the motor started, and soon the slow, easy roll showed they were out in the open breasting the Channel ground swell. After a couple of hours Price appeared with his customary tray.

‘We are just coming into the estuary of the Dart.’ he said. ‘I thought perhaps you would have a bit of lunch before going

ashore.’

The meal, like its fellows, was surprisingly well cooked and served, and Cheyne did full justice to it. By the time he had finished the motion of the boat had subsided and it was evident they were in sheltered waters. Some minutes later the motor stopped, the anchor was dropped and someone got into a boat and rowed off. A quarter of an hour passed and then the boat returned, and to Cheyne’s misgivings and growing concern, the motor started again. But after a very few minutes it once more stopped and Price appeared at the panel.

‘Now, Mr Cheyne, the time has come for us to say good-bye. For obvious reasons I am afraid we shall have to ask you to row yourself ashore, but the tide is flowing and you will have no difficulty in that. But before parting I wish to warn you very earnestly for your own sake and your own safety not to attempt to follow us or to set the police on our track. Believe me, I am not speaking idly when I assure you that we cannot brook interference with our plans. We wish to avoid “removals,”’ he lingered over the word and a sinister gleam came into his eyes, ‘but please understand we shall not hesitate if there is no other way. And if you try to give trouble there will be in your case no other way. Take my advice and be wise enough to forget this little episode.’ He took a small automatic pistol from his pocket and balanced it before the panel. ‘I warn you most earnestly that if you attempt to make trouble it will mean your death. And with regard to trying to follow us, please remember that this launch

has the heels of any craft in the district and that we have a safe hiding-place not far away.'

As Price finished speaking he unlocked and threw open the cabin door, motioning his prisoner to follow him on deck. There Cheyne saw that they were far down the estuary, in fact, nearly opposite Warren Lodge and a mile or more from the town.

'I thought you were going to take me to Johnson's jetty,' he remarked.

'An obvious precaution,' the other returned smoothly. 'I trust you won't mind.'

The freshness and the freedom of the deck were inexpressibly delightful to Cheyne after his long confinement in the stuffy cabin. He stood drawing deep draughts of the keen invigorating air into his lungs, as he gazed at the familiar shores of the estuary, lighted up in the brilliant April sunlight. Nature seemed in an optimistic mood and Cheyne, in spite of his experiences and Price's gruesome remarks, felt optimistic also. He still felt he would devote all his energies to getting even with the scoundrels who had robbed him, but he no longer regarded them with a sullen hatred. Rather the view of the affair as a game in which he was pitting his wits against theirs gained force in his mind, and he looked forward with zest to turning the tables upon them in the not too distant future.

In the launch's dinghy, which was made fast astern, was Lewisham, engaged in untying the painter of a second dinghy which bore on its stern board the words 'S. Johnson, Dartmouth.'

The explanation of the starting and stopping of the motor now became clear. The conspirators had evidently gone in to pick up this boat and had towed it down the estuary so as to ensure their escape before Cheyne could reach the shore to lodge any information against them.

The painter untied, Lewisham passed it aboard the launch and Price, drawing the boat up to the gunwale, motioned Cheyne into it.

‘As I said, I’m sorry we shall have to ask you to row yourself ashore, but the run of the tide will help you. Good-bye, Mr Cheyne. I deeply regret all the inconvenience you have suffered, and most earnestly I urge you to regard the warning which I have given you.’

As he spoke he threw the end of the painter into the dinghy and the launch’s motor starting, she drew quickly ahead, leaving Cheyne seated in the small boat.

Full of an idea which had just flashed into his mind, the latter seized the oars and began pulling with all his might not for Johnson’s jetty, but for the shore immediately opposite. But try as he would, he did not reach it before the launch *Enid* had become a mere dot on the seaward horizon.

An Amateur Sleuth

Cheyne's great idea was that instead of proceeding directly to the police station and lodging an information against his captors, as he had at first intended, he should himself attempt to follow them to their lair. To enter upon a battle of wits with such men would be a sport more thrilling than big game hunting, more exciting than war, and if by his own unaided efforts he could bring about their undoing he would not only restore his self-respect, which had suffered a nasty jar, but might even recover for Arnold Price the documents which he required for his claim to the barony of Hull.

Whether he was wise in this decision was another matter, but with Maxwell Cheyne impulse ruled rather than colder reason, the desire of the moment rather than adherence to calculated plan. Therefore directly a way in which he could begin the struggle occurred to him, he was all eagerness to set about carrying it out.

The essence of his plan was haste, and he therefore bent lustily to his oars, sending the tiny craft bounding over the wavelets of the estuary and leaving a wake of bubbles from its foaming stem. In a few minutes he had reached the shore immediately beneath Warren Lodge, tied the painter round a convenient boulder, and

raging over the rocky beach, had set off running towards the house.

It was a short though stiff climb, but he did not spare himself, and he reached the garden wall within three minutes of leaving the boat. As he turned in through the gate he looked back over the panorama of sea, the whole expanse of which was visible from this point, measuring with his eye the distance to Inner Froward Point, the headland at the opposite side of the bay, around which the *Enid* had just disappeared. She was going east, up channel, but he did not think she was travelling fast enough to defeat his plans.

Another minute brought him to the house, and there, in less time than it takes to tell, he had seen his sister, explained that he might not be back that night, obtained some money, donned his leggings and waterproof, and starting up his bicycle, had set off to ride into Dartmouth.

Pausing for a moment at the boat slip to tell Johnson of the whereabouts of his dinghy, he reached the ferry and got across the river to Kingswear with the minimum of delay possible. Then once more mounting, his machine, he rode rapidly off towards the east.

The land lying eastward of Dartmouth forms a peninsula shaped roughly like an inverted cone, truncated, and connected to the mainland by a broad isthmus at the north-west corner. The west side is bounded by the river Dart, with Dartmouth and Kingswear to the south-west, while on the other three sides is

the sea. Brixham is a small town at the north-east corner, while further north beyond the isthmus are the larger towns of Paignton and, across Tor Bay, Torquay.

Most of the ground on the peninsula is high, and the road from Kingswear in the south-west corner to Brixham in the north-east, crosses a range of hills from which a good view of Tor Bay and the sea to the north and east is obtainable. Should the *Enid* have been bound for Torquay, Teignmouth, Exmouth or any of the seaports close by, she would pass within view of this road, whereas if she was going right up Channel past Portland Bill she would go nearly due east from the Froward Points. Cheyne's hope was that he should reach this view-point before she would have had time to get out of sight had she been on the former course, so that her presence or absence would indicate the route she was pursuing.

But when, having reached the place, he found that no trace of the *Enid* was to be seen, he realised that he had made a mistake. From Inner Froward Point to Brixham was only about seven miles, to Paignton about ten, and to Torquay eleven or twelve. The longest of these distances the launch should do in about twenty-five minutes, and as in spite of all his haste no less than forty-seven minutes had elapsed since he stepped into the dinghy, the test was evidently useless.

But having come so far, he was not going to turn back without making some further effort. The afternoon was still young, the day was fine, he had had his lunch and cycling was pleasant. He

would ride along the coast and make some inquiries.

He dropped down the hill into Brixham, and turning to the left, pulled up at the little harbour. A glance showed him that the *Enid* was not there. He therefore turned his machine, and starting once more, ran the five miles odd to Paignton at something well above the legal limit.

Inquiries at the pier produced no result, but as he turned away he had a stroke of unexpected luck. Meeting a coastguard, he stopped and questioned him, and was overjoyed when the man told him that though no launch had come into Paignton that morning, he had about three-quarters of an hour earlier seen one crossing the bay from the south and evidently making for Torquay.

Quivering with eagerness, Cheyne once more started up his bicycle. He took the three miles to Torquay at a reckless speed and there received his reward. Lying at moorings in the inner harbour was the *Enid*.

Leaving the bicycle in charge of a boy, Cheyne stepped up to a group of longshoremen and made his inquiries. Yes, the launch there had just come in, half an hour or more back. Two men had come off her and had handed her over to Hugh Leigh, the boatman. Leigh was a tall stout man with a black beard: in fact, there he was himself behind that yellow and white boat.

Impetuous though he was, Cheyne's knowledge of human nature told him that in dealing with his fellows the more haste frequently meant the less speed. He therefore curbed his

impatience and took a leisurely tone with the boatman.

‘Good-day to you,’ he began. ‘I see you have the *Enid* there. Is she long in?’

‘Bout ’arf an hour, sir,’ the man returned.

‘I was to have met her,’ Cheyne went on, ‘but I’m afraid I have missed my friends. You don’t happen to know which direction they went in?’

‘Took a keb, sir: taxi. Went towards the station.’

The station! That was an idea at least worth investigating. He slipped the man a couple of shillings lest his good offices should be required in the future, and hurrying back to his bicycle was soon at the place in question. Here, though he could find no trace of his quarry, he learned that a train had left for Newton Abbot at 3-33—five minutes earlier. It looked very much as if his friends had travelled by it.

For those who are not clear as to the geography of South Devon, it may be explained that Newton Abbot lies on the main line of the Great Western Railway between Paddington and Cornwall, with Exeter twenty miles to the north-east and Plymouth some thirty odd to the south-west. At Newton Abbot the line throws off a spur, which, passing through Torquay and Paignton, has its terminus at Kingswear, from which there is a ferry connection to Dartmouth on the opposite side of the river. From Torquay to Newton Abbot is only about six miles, and there is a good road between the two. Cheyne, therefore, hearing that the train had left only five minutes earlier and knowing that there

would be a delay at the junction waiting for the main line train, at once saw that he had a good chance of overtaking it.

He did not stop to ask questions, but leaping once more on his machine, did the six miles at the highest speed he dared. At precisely 4-0 p.m. he pushed the bicycle into Newton Abbot station, and handing half a crown to a porter, told him to look after it until his return.

Hasty inquiries informed him that the train with which that from Torquay connected was a slow local from Plymouth to Exeter. It had not yet arrived, but was due directly. It stopped for seven minutes, being scheduled out at 4-10 p.m. On chance Cheyne bought a third single to Exeter, and putting up his collar, pulling down his hat over his eyes and affecting a stoop, he passed on to the platform. A few people were waiting, but a glance told him that neither Price nor Lewisham was among them.

As, however, they might be watching from the shelter of one of the waiting-rooms, he strolled away towards the Exeter end of the platform. As he did so the train came in from Plymouth, the engine stopping just opposite where he was standing. He began to move back, so as to keep a sharp eye on those getting in. But at once a familiar figure caught his eye and he stood for a moment motionless.

The coach next the engine was a third, and in the corner of its fourth compartment sat Lewisham!

Fortunately he was sitting with his back to the engine and he did not see Cheyne approaching from behind. Fortunately, also,

the opposite corner was occupied by a lady, as, had Price been there, Cheyne would unquestionably have been discovered.

Retreating quickly, but with triumph in his heart, Cheyne got into the end compartment of the coach. It was already occupied by three other men, two sitting in the corner seats next the platform, the third with his back to the engine at the opposite end. Cheyne dropped into the remaining corner seat—facing the engine and next the corridor. He did not then realise the important issues that hung on his having taken up this position, but later he marvelled at the lucky chance which had placed him there.

As the train proceeded he had an opportunity, for the first time since embarking on this wild chase, of calmly considering the position, and he at once saw that the fugitives' moves up to the present had been dictated by their circumstances and were almost obligatory.

First, he now understood that they *must* have landed at Brixham, Paignton or Torquay, and of these Torquay was obviously most suitable to their purpose, being larger than the others and their arrival therefore attracting correspondingly less attention. But they must have landed at one of the three places, as they were the only ports which they could reach before he, Cheyne, would have had time to give the alarm. Suppose he had lodged information with the police immediately on getting ashore, it would have been simply impossible for the others to have entered any other port without fear of arrest. But at

Paignton or Torquay they were safe. By no possible chance could the machinery of the law have been set in motion in time to apprehend them.

He saw also how the men came to be seated in the train from Plymouth when it reached Newton Abbot, and here again he was lost in admiration at the way in which the pair had laid their plans. The first station on the Plymouth side of Newton Abbot was Totnes, and from Torquay to Totnes by road was a matter of only some ten miles. They would just have had time to do the distance, and there was no doubt that Totnes was the place to which their taxi had taken them. In the event, therefore, of an immediate chase, there was every chance of the scent being temporarily lost to Torquay.

These thoughts had scarcely passed through Cheyne's mind when the event happened which caused him to congratulate himself on the seat he was occupying. At the extreme end of the coach, immediately in advance of his compartment, was the lavatory, and at this moment, just as they were stopping at Teignmouth, a man carrying a small kitbag passed along the corridor and entered. Approaching from behind Cheyne, he did not see the latter's face, but Cheyne saw him. It was Price!

Cheyne took an engagement book from his pocket and bent low over it, lest the other should recognise him on his return. But Price remained in the lavatory until they reached Dawlish, and here another stroke of luck was in store for Cheyne. At Dawlish, at which they stopped a few moments later, his vis-à-

vis alighted, and Cheyne immediately changed his seat. When, therefore, just before the train started, Price left the lavatory, he again approached Cheyne from behind and again failed to see his face.

As he passed down the corridor Cheyne stared at him. While in the lavatory he had effected a wondrous change in his appearance. Gone was now the small dark moustache and the glasses, his hat was of a different type and his overcoat of a different colour. Cheyne watched him pause hesitatingly at the door of the next compartment and finally enter.

For some moments as the train rattled along towards Exeter, Cheyne failed to grasp the significance of this last move. Then he saw that it was, as usual, part of a well-thought-out scheme. Approaching Teignmouth, Price had evidently left his compartment—almost certainly the fourth, where Lewisham sat—as if he were about to alight at the station. Instead of doing so, he had entered the lavatory. Disguised, or, more probably, with a previous disguise removed, he had left it before the train started from Dawlish, and appearing at the door of the second compartment, had attempted to convey the idea, almost certainly with success, that he had just joined the train.

A further thought made Cheyne swing across again to the seat facing the engine. They were approaching Starcross. Would Lewisham adopt the same subterfuge at this station? But he did not, and they reached Exeter without further adventure.

The train going no further, all passengers had to alight.

Cheyne was in no hurry to move, and by the time he left the carriage Price and Lewisham were already far down the platform. He wished that he in his turn could find a false moustache and glasses, but he realised that if he kept his face hidden, his clothes were already a satisfactory disguise. He watched the two men begin to pace the platform, and soon felt satisfied that they were proceeding by a later train.

They had reached Exeter at 5-02 p.m. Two expresses left the station shortly after, the 5-25 for Liverpool, Manchester and the north, and the 5-42 for London. Cheyne sat down on a deserted seat near the end of the platform and bent his head over his notebook while he watched the others.

The 5-25 for the north arrived and left, and still the two men continued pacing up and down. 'For London,' thought Cheyne, and slipping off to the booking hall he bought a first single for Paddington. If the men were travelling third, he would be better in a different class.

When the London express rolled majestically in, Price and Lewisham entered a third near the front of the train. Satisfied that he was still unobserved, Cheyne got into the first-class diner farther back. He had not been very close to the men, but he noticed that Lewisham had also made some alteration in his appearance, which explained his not having changed in the lavatory on the local train.

The express was very fast, stopping only once—at Taunton. Here Cheyne, having satisfied himself that his quarry had not

alighted, settled himself with an easy mind to await the arrival at Paddington. He dined luxuriously, and when at nine precisely they drew up in the terminus, he felt extremely fit and ready for any adventure that might offer itself.

From the pages of the many works of detective fiction which he had at one time or another digested, he knew exactly what to do. Jumping out as the train came to rest, he hurried along the platform until he had a view of the carriage in which the others had travelled. Then, keeping carefully in the background, he awaited developments.

Soon he saw the men alight, cross the platform and engage a taxi. This move also he was prepared for. Taking a taxi in his turn, he bent forward and said to the driver what the sleuths of his novels had so often said to their drivers in similar circumstances: 'Follow that taxi. Ten bob extra if you keep it in sight.'

The driver looked at him curiously, but all he said was: 'Right y'are, guv'nor,' and they slipped out at the heels of the other vehicle into the crowded streets.

Cheyne's driver was a skilful man and they kept steadily behind the quarry, not close enough to excite suspicion, but too near to run any risk of being shaken off. Cheyne was chuckling excitedly and hugging himself at the success of his efforts thus far when, with the extraordinary capriciousness that Fate so often shows, his luck turned.

They had passed down Praed Street and turned up the Edgware Road, and it was just where the latter merges into Maida

Vale that the blow fell. Here the street was up and the traffic was congested. Both vehicles slackened down, but whereas the leader got through without a stop, Cheyne's was held up to give the road to cross traffic. In vain Cheyne chafed and fretted; the raised arm of the law could not be disregarded, and when at last they were free to go forward, all trace of the other taxi had vanished.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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