

Grandfather's Clock

Taken from the
Notebook of an Old Detective
by Charles Edmonds Walk

And With Names and Places Hidden Published as a Proof That
Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction



I.
At an agreed upon hour of the forenoon Felix Hazard and Helen Bertel foregathered at a certain loop restaurant, noted not alone for the excellence of its cuisine, but also for the fastidious class of its patronage; the one not always connoting the other, by any manner of means. After a hasty luncheon they went in a taxi to the Union station, where they boarded the Washington drawing-room sleeper attached to the Broadway limited. Their sections were directly opposite to each other.

Now it is worthy of note that all the time they were together this day, and until the event happened which startled them from their strained attitudes, their bearing toward each other was decidedly peculiar, to say the least. An observant onlooker even might have concluded that they struggled with seething volcanic emotions, all the more turbulent and repressed, were it not absurd to attribute a betrayal of feelings so strenuous to these two schooled and seasoned operatives of the Sutherland Detective agency.

However that may be, and whatever the object of this seemingly clandestine journey, both carefully refrained from discussing anything save the most ordinary everyday topics.

The two, having stowed their lighter luggage, sat in Helen's section. Time and the train sped on, and their strained, alert, watchful attitudes did not relax until the train was flying across Indiana and nearing Fort Wayne.

It was just as they were leaving this city that the bombshell exploded in their faces. The Pullman conductor entered the car with two telegrams.

"Telegram for Mr. Felix Hazard," he announced. And Hazard started to his feet as if propelled by a spring.

But the next announcement made him drop back beside Helen in a state that might well be described as bordering on collapse. The countenances of both betrayed the utmost consternation and chagrin.

"Telegram for Mrs. Felix Hazard," issued from the conductor.

Hazard snatched the two yellow envelopes from the outstretched hand. With nervous, shaking fingers, they were torn open simultaneously and their contents absorbed at a glance.

The effects, though, of the two messages were vastly dissimilar. Whereas the man first groaned and next gritted his teeth in speechless rage, the girl, after a moment of confused, disconcerted silence, burst into laughter.

The tenor of the two telegrams, when it is understood that both were from Billy Sutherland, Hazard's and Helen's chief, will sufficiently account for their extraordinary conduct and discomposure.

"You can't fool your Uncle Dudley," ran Hazard's telegram. "You are due to get yours when you arrive at Washington. Report immediately to Prentice."

Prentice was the Washington representative of the Sutherland agency.

Helen's message was couched differently, but its import was much the same. It read:

"Your elopement is foiled. Revenge is sweet. Report immediately on arrival at Washington to Jonas Hudnutt, Interstate National bank. Further instructions will await you."

After the two messages had been exchanged and considered—in grim silence on Hazard's part, and in a preoccupied, half shy, half sly way on Helen's, the former abruptly burst forth:

"Report to Prentice! I will like—like—like thunder!"

Mrs. Hazard gave him a sidewise look from beneath her long lashes.

"Go ahead and say it," she demurely invited; "don't mind me. I can't help myself now. . . . If we don't obey orders, what then?"

"Why, I—will resign. I'll wire both of our resignations in at the next stop. Then, somewhere between here and Pittsburgh or Washington, we'll quietly change our route and lose ourselves. I'll figure that out by and by."

"Who is Jonas Hudnutt, do you suppose?" Helen was sufficiently curious to wonder. But the response was not informing.

"Confound Jonas Hudnutt, Billy Sutherland and the whole pestiferous breed! Just imagine making a convenience of our honeymoon for some fool business the office happens to have in Washington just now! Or imagine trying to trap us into whatever celebration the chief and Lon Prentice may have framed up! Watch us sidestep it."

"How do you suppose they found it out?" mused Helen. She was herself vexed by the discovery, but had resolved to accept it philosophically.

Her husband made an inarticulate noise which unmistakably indicated that his indignation had not in the least cooled.

"He's a wise old head, is the chief," he replied bitterly. "When did you ever know anybody to get anything on him? We should have known better than to have tried."

Spoke Helen then, with abrupt, though quiet determination:

"You shall do no such silly thing as wire back our resignations. We'll do exactly as these telegrams command. I have an idea that we can get back at the chief much more effectively than by betraying his confidence in us at the eleventh hour."

However, very shortly something happened that put an entirely different complexion upon the matter. Something that cooled Hazard's ire and made him grow by degrees serious and thoughtful. Something that made Helen furtively slip her hand into his and murmur cryptically:

"Together—as we have always wanted it!"

II.
The event which determined the course of the elopers fell at Lafayette. Here a second, and this time a long telegram was handed them, and Hazard, with the aid of a little red leather-bound book, translated its phrases.

For it was composed in that one of the several Sutherland codes that was used only in cases of the most extraordinary gravity and importance. As finally rendered the code message read thus:

"Neither my former message nor this one is a command, but an appeal: first, to your sense of loyalty to us, and next, to your patriotism."

"For the matter on which you are so urgently wanted at Washington is of no less gravity than being one that vitally affects our government, our national honor."

"Prentice will advise you fully."

"It is the opportunity of your lifetime."

"I rely on you."

"Am not fully informed of all particulars of Mrs. Hazard's assignment. A woman operative is wanted, and neither the Washington nor Pittsburgh offices can meet the call just at this time. Understand the work is agreeable and will suffice to occupy her time pleasantly during the ordeal of an enforced separation."

"Will expect an immediate favorable reply. Congratulations and God bless you both."

When Helen perceived the lean, hawklike features of her consort harden, and the dark, intense eyes take on the old keen look of concentration and capability with which long association had made her familiar, she indulged in a covert, enigmatic little smile and for the second time surreptitiously squeezed his long, sinewy fingers.

It is enough to say that a favorable reply, albeit laconic to the point of curtness, was flashed to the anxiously waiting chief back in Chicago.

Arrived finally at Washington without further incident, Hazard first discovered that he was not obliged to look up Prentice; that gentleman was at the station awaiting him. And then if the bride and groom wanted anything further to emphasize the seriousness of the affair that had so unceremoniously obtruded itself into the midst of their newfound happiness, it was plainly manifest in the sober, absent, hurried fashion with which Prentice offered his congratulations and best wishes.

All during their brief colloquy he seemed worried and uneasy.

"Felix," he said abruptly at last, "I don't want to seem rude, but it won't do for us to be seen together too much."

"Take a taxi and ride round a half-hour, then come to the office. Meet you there. I'll start Mrs. Hazard toward the Interstate National. Her job's easy. Something like the Davent case, only there's no bloodthirsty dog to be afraid of. Old Jonas is waiting."

"And who, pray, is 'Old Jonas'?" Helen wanted to know.

Prentice stared.

"Why," he exclaimed, "don't you know? Lean closer so's I can whisper. . . . He's the army and navy expert that analyzes and passes on all explosives."

III.
Mr. Jonas Hudnutt Helen found to be an elderly though vigorous man, hard-eyed and hard-featured, and brusque both of speech and manner. Yet he did not appear very formidable.

His first words were a question, fired at her in a dry, hard voice.

"Young woman, do you know the difference between central and eastern time?"

Surprised by this form of catechism, for a moment Helen was at a loss to reply.

"Why, yes," she returned at length. "Eastern time is one hour faster than central."

A short jerk of Jonas Hudnutt's iron-gray bullet head signified his approval. Said he:

"Very good. You appear a capable young woman. I'll instruct you in your duties as we ride down to Blackwater. Country estate of a—er—of a friend of mine, across in Virginia."

"You won't have much to do, though, besides taking care of the old clock. Old family heirloom, you know. Much prized and revered."

Helen wondered whether she had to do with a lunatic; but the expensive, high-powered motor that was to speed

her on her short journey, together with the purposeful air of strength and efficiency that stamped the chauffeur and his companion, whose narrowed eyes flashed her a penetrating look of interest when she appeared, resolved her doubts and raised her curiously to the Nth degree.

She recognized in the companion one of the best-known operatives of the United States secret service.

IV.
Felix Hazard as yet had not the faintest inkling of the nature of the affair whose urgent gravity his chief had been at such pains to emphasize. He knew only that the emergency must have arisen within the last 36 hours, else he would have had some hint of it before leaving Chicago.

His thoughts were imbued with Helen; he was impatient of the separation, however brief it might prove to be, and he saw little enough of sights already familiar to him.

The building that housed the Sutherland offices was distinguished from all its newer neighbors by having entrances on three streets.

Hazard's taxi drew up at one of the main entrances, and at the appointed minute he sprang out and hurried in, to find Prentice impatiently waiting for him.

"Something's happened since you showed up," said he with an air of un-corking himself. "All our plans are changed; the man you are to see will come here—should be here now—instead of us—"

The almost breathless explanation was rudely broken in upon by the harsh rasp of a buzzer indicator.

Prentice stretched up his desk telephone. "Bet that's him now," said he.

He listened a moment, then a strange, awed expression overspread his features.

"Show them right in," he jerkily commanded, slamming up the receiver and running over to open the door.

A man presently entered, the dignity of whose position brought Hazard instantly to his feet.

It was the president. Close behind him followed two others in whom he recognized the secretary of war and Curtis, head of the United States secret service.

Before any sort of introduction could be made the secretary at once explained to Prentice:

"We decided it would be more advisable for us to come here than for you to come to us. Curtis and I arrived singly and waited for the president, whose deep concern would not allow him to wait for our report. Every entrance, hallway and elevator is closely guarded by Mr. Curtis' men, so there is little likelihood that we shall be unpleasantly intruded upon."

Then Hazard was presented and the party at once got down to business. The secretary took it upon himself to lay the case before Hazard.

"On the eighteenth of last March—nearly a year ago—an American inventor named Colewich came to General Harker, head of the Army bureau, with a new type of explosive. Colewich's claims were so extravagant that the ordnance department was very skeptical regarding them; but following their customary policy not to disregard any possibility of advancement in any branch of the service, Colewich was promised a thorough trial of his invention, and later he was notified that the first day had been set."

"It is enough to say of this explosive that it more than justified its inventor's claims. It proved so powerful, as a matter of fact, that if it is not lost to the world it will reduce the possibilities of future warfare almost to nothing. Its possibilities for destruction are simply beyond the power of words to describe. In shells of ordinary field-type artillery, the solidest and most modern of fortifications become as houses of straw."

"It is obvious that such a terrible instrument of destruction should not be allowed to fall into the possession of any other nation; but, alas, it seems as though it has."

"However, that's neither here nor there now. Very little time was wasted in coming to terms with Colewich, of whom I can confidently assert that he was quite patriotic in uniting with us to keep his formula secret. But during the course of the rigid tests he expressed a belief that he was being shadowed. He was—by Curtis' men. But he maintained that the espionage had begun before ever he had made himself known to us."

"We doubled our precautions. Colewich already had taken extra care to safeguard his precious formula, which was in the safe deposit vaults of one of New York's largest banks."

"Well, to sum up this phase of the matter in a nutshell: Despite our most resolute and energetic precautions, between the time Colewich obtained the formula from the bank and the time he was supposed to arrive with it here in Washington, both he and it vanished as effectively as if a

charge of his own explosive had wiped them both out of existence. We have never found the slightest clue that even remotely suggests what became of him. And as for the precious formula—well, unless one of the powers engaged in the present war was apprised of Colewich's—"

"However, that is too vague and impracticable to consider. The formula has been lost for months when an hour would suffice to transcribe it. The possibility of keeping it to ourselves was abandoned long ago."

"But here's the point. Whoever may have stolen it, we do not want to share in it; we don't want to lose the secret utterly, and we stand in a fair way of doing so unless a certain plot, which we have the best of reasons for suspecting the existence of, can be frustrated."

"And prompt, determined action alone will be of avail. It has reduced itself to a matter of minutes, and I am acquainting you with the facts with a brevity that must not be considered discourtesy—"

Hazard interrupted, brushing away the attempted apology with an impatient gesture. He could be as quick to act as governmental heads.

"One question before you go further," said he. "If the formula never came to you, how can you expect—"

He in turn was interrupted. The secretary continued:

"I was coming to that. For the purpose of the tests a considerable quantity of the explosive was manufactured. Several government chemists assisted in various steps of the process, though certain details Colewich would permit no one but himself to witness; and what they thus learned, together with the success of the analysis by the army and navy expert, we have reason to feel assured that soon we shall share the secret with at least one other great power—the one that stole it. Our success all depends upon one thing: if we lose

first time since entering the room the president spoke.

"Oh the estate of a close personal friend of mine, Mr. Hazard; at 'Blackwater,' belonging to Mr. Joseph Harmon. It is on the Virginia side of the Potomac, not many miles from here—a delightful automobile ride."

The secretary again addressed the detective:

"It is one of the blessed privileges of this great free and enlightened country that anybody's business is everybody's business. There were, unquestionably, leaks at every step of our negotiations and dealings with poor Colewich, else the plotters could not have acted with such unerring assurance. The loyalty of one or two men who may be absolutely trusted is more dependable, gives more and better assurances of security, than serried ranks and battlemented walls. Hence our reliance upon Mr. Harmon and a selected few of Mr. Curtis' operatives in this critical emergency."

"And who is the chemist making the analyses?"

"Our chief ordnance expert—Mr. Jonas Hudnutt."

V.
Night, and a violent spring storm raging along the Potomac. Now a stinging, powdery snow, that bit the flesh, was driving before a furious northeasterly gale.

To enter the old Harmon homestead was to step from pandemonium into a haven of tranquillity. Indeed, inside the house the only sounds one was conscious of were from the crackling logs in the wide hall's old-fashioned fireplace and the sedate ticking of the ancient grandfather's clock that stood against a wall of the living room.

Here, of all places in this house of many spacious chambers, a sick-room had been prepared; for the master of

mon's private secretary entitles her to be present.

"She has been trying all sorts of pretenses to get in, just as Schmidt has been trying to get into the cellar. She even threatened me; but I believe I have settled her for the time being. When she learns that it will be quite as difficult to leave the house tonight as it is to gain admission here—heaven alone knows what will happen."

At this juncture there sounded a light rap on one of the doors. The nurse, her eyes flashing with sudden fire, glided swiftly but noiselessly over to it and opened it. Then the nurse deliberately and violently pushed the intruder away, went into the hall and softly closed the door.

A subdued murmur of voices came to the man beside the bed. He was morbidly sensible of the slow tick-tock, tick-tock of the tall old clock. The sick man's regular breathing was plainly audible.

In a little while the nurse returned, unruffled, cool, capable.

"The Von Hellwig again"—in answer to the tall man's look of inquiry. "She insists now upon knowing the time—by this clock."

"And you told her?"

"I did. She nearly fainted. . . . You are sure, are you, Felix, that there can be no hitch?"

"Positive. Do you think I would let you be imperiled? The wires are disconnected at two points; at the contact behind the clock dial, and right at the coherer where it is jammed against the powder in a potato barrel in the cellar."

"You know, Helen, there was a theory advanced at the time that the French battleship *Republique's* magazines were exploded by means of some advanced wireless method. Doubtless it was only an imaginative story. But this apparatus works, beyond doubt. Four times it has failed. Four times Miss von Hellwig has stolen in here and set back the clock an hour so that Schmidt might have an opportunity to tinker with his coils and adjustments in an effort to find and correct its defects. It is my belief that some of the other servants have been bribed. . . . Well, we'll know who they are when the panic starts. . . . There!"

A woman's piercing scream shattered the silence and persisted with a hopeless note that froze the blood. There were men's muffled, strangled curses, sounds of desperate struggle and combat from various regions of the house.

And then the old clock began striking eleven.

VI.
Some weeks after the strenuous night at Blackwater Felix and Helen were once more back in the Sutherland's shabby, rambling old suite of Fifth avenue offices, where the elevated roars all day and all night. The noise was music in their ears. The burly chief's features were quite as illegible as usual; but Helen was eyeing him intently with a little puzzled wrinkle between her brows.

"I have it, chief," she explained, "though ordinarily it would require a clairvoyant to plumb the depths of your inner consciousness and fish up any trace of feeling that might be lying dormant there. But the fact is—I have just discovered it—that you are genuinely glad to see us back again and don't know how to say so."

The chief cocked a shaggy eyebrow at her and his dull eyes lingered on the happy, flushed face a moment.

"Yes," he admitted. "And I'm glad that we are not going to lose you, either. I'll tell you all about it after I've heard the balance of the details of your stirring honeymoon adventure. It is something, you know, that can never be embodied in a written report."

It was Hazard who replied.

"There is little more to tell than you know, chief. That very day Hudnutt discovered the process for making the 'hellpowder,' as he very appropriately calls it, so the plotters would have gained nothing by having succeeded."

"The only place Curtis' men fell down was in a lack of technical knowledge. Not that I'm an electrician myself; but when Helen told me about the Von Hellwig woman's meddling with the clock, why, I guessed pretty close to the truth. Her intimacy and heart to heart talks with Schmidt, the butler, implicated him, and, barring that they were uncannily shrewd to suspect our motives, the rest was easy. Mr. Harmon took desperate measures to blind them, and I'm glad to know that he will get well."

"There was a panel in the wall behind the clock from which Schmidt—who is really a finished electrical engineer—could work without much fear of discovery. The wires were so arranged that after an outside connection was closed, when the clock hands got to eleven a contact was made, the circuit completed, and the powder would have been exploded—of course completely wiping out every trace of the cause. . . . What became of the two? I've been miles away from thinking of them."

The chief shrugged his shoulders.

"I can say only that they will never be heard of again," said he, soberly. "Their memory is blotted out. The count was recalled from Washington rather suddenly, I understand. And thus that end of it closes."

"What do you mean?" asked Helen.

"That tomorrow morning Felix will move into the office of the first assistant superintendent. Curtis goes to London. Lord knows I wish you'd take my place—if it would be any inducement for you to stay."

"Don't worry," she cheered, with one of her rare smiles. "I'll be butting in every now and then—if only to take care of Felix."

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Joseph Harmon Had Expressed a Dying Man's Whim to Pass His Last Hours in a Room Where He Had Known So Many Pleasant Ones.

the small quantity of powder on hand our efforts are balked utterly.

"Now, some weeks ago information came to Mr. Curtis of another plot, one aimed to destroy the medium of powder—less than two pounds, but sufficient to wipe out a city block—all that we have remaining. It is vitally important that our chemist proceed with as much despatch as possible, for once we know the process the loss of our little supply of course will not matter. For that reason the supply at all times must be kept easily accessible. And in any event, even if no plot to destroy it were hatched, we could not force it into anybody's custody."

"It is the silence and invisibility with which the plotters are working that fills us with the gravest concern. We are morally certain respecting the identity of the conspirators' head and director: one of the capital's distinguished. . . . He learned forward and whispered the name in Hazard's ear."

"But we have been unable to connect him with it definitely enough to take proper action with the power he represents."

"The bald truth of the matter is: if our theory is correct, the nation concerned has committed an act of war that cannot be disregarded. That horrible possibility must be avoided if it is within the power of human endeavor so to do."

"There, Mr. Hazard—you see the task we have set for you. Foil this plot. Discover the plotters and fix their guilt upon them in such fashion that we may deal with them secretly, as they deserve. Preserve for us the secret which may, at a critical period, mean no less than my and your country's salvation."

Hazard was stirred by the speaker's undisguised show of feeling. He asked a question:

"Where are the experiments being made?"

The secretary of war and the president exchanged glances. Then for the

house was mortally ill—or so the celebrated specialist, arrived that day from Chicago, had pronounced. And Joseph Harmon had expressed a dying man's whim to pass his last hours in a room where he had known so many pleasant ones.

III he unmistakably was.

But the two tense figures who regarded each other across his bed seemed paying but scant heed to him. One was the specialist; the other a tall, strikingly handsome girl in a nurse's uniform.

Just now her fine, wide gray eyes are tragic with the emotions they mirror.

The clock ticks on purposefully with the dignity of age.

"I tell you," the girl whispers, "it is the most dreadful thing, the most splendid example of unselfish courage, that I ever heard of. He deliberately inoculated himself with the virus as the only way he could find to achieve two ends—that he might advance a reasonable, plausible excuse for being removed to this room and remaining here constantly, and that we might come here in roles that place our presence above suspicion, that make our presence natural and regular. . . . But, poor, poor man!"

The sick man ventured a feeble protest, which was firmly though gently hushed by the nurse.

"I can't help it, Mr. Harmon," she spoke earnestly. "The doctor is coming, and that's an end of it. Men may be as cold-blooded as they like, but it is not in any woman's nature to stand idly by and see anybody deliberate 'y make a martyr of himself, even if it is for his country's sake."

The man beside the bed, who bore a curious likeness to Felix Hazard, spoke.

"Again I must ask you," he queried, "are you sure Miss von Hellwig received the signal tonight?"

"Yes; I distinctly overheard her tell the German butler. And she is now nearly frantic because she has been denied admission to this room tonight—claims that her position as Mr. Har-