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The Pelham Affair by Louis Tracy

(Continued from Yesterday.) CHAPTER XI. Setting a Thief to Catch a Thief. Sir Arthur Pelham seemed to be the least perturbed man in London when he received the detectives that night in the library of Cedar Lodge. "I sent for you because of today's peculiar developments in the quarrel between 'Vaquero,' 'Matador' and myself," he explained coolly, when Somers and Pridoux were seated and the door had closed on the butler. He pushed a box of cigars and another of cigarettes across the table. "Do you smoke?" he went on. "Not at this hour," said Somers. Pridoux merely shook his head, with a murmured "No, thanks." It was obvious that the baronet treated Somers as the one person present who demanded consideration. Pridoux he regarded as a mere subordinate, figuring somewhat in the capacity of a messenger. Somers, of course, enjoyed this insidious distinction immensely. So did Pridoux, in his own way. Sir Arthur was hardly to blame in the matter, as Pridoux had avoided him studiously since their first interview, and even then had markedly been taciturn, leaving nearly all the conversation to the chief. "Well," said the head of the Pelham family, on ascertaining that this queerly assorted pair would neither smoke nor drink, "a most annoying thing has happened. Miss Daunt, the lady who is about to become my wife, has allowed herself to be carried off by those two blackguards, and is now held for ransom, somewhere in London, I suppose. "Good gracious!" cried Somers. "When did this happen?" "A few hours ago," said Sir Arthur. "Have you any definite facts?" "Yes—and no. Mrs. Linforth, Miss Daunt's aunt, is vague and hysterical, but I gather that Miss Daunt kept an appointment made by a friend by telegram, and was hustled into a waiting-car. "Where?" "In front of the Hyde Park Hotel." "At what time?" "About five o'clock." "And when did you know of it?" "A few minutes later." "Five hours ago, Sir Arthur? And you did not communicate with Scotland Yard until 9:15?" "True. I do not imagine Miss Daunt is in any real danger. I took time to consider the matter in all its bearings. "But Mrs. Linforth? Why didn't we hear from her?" "I asked her to leave the affair in my hands. I am the vitally interested party, seeing that it is my promised wife who is the sufferer." "The marriage is actually arranged, I take it?" "Yes, but—" "I was only wondering why it should have been announced in this morning's papers, but denied in the evening issues." "Not exactly denied. The paragraph was absolutely unauthored—that is all. Still, the fact has no great bearing on Miss Daunt's disappearance." "Surely it has. Was she not kidnaped because she is about to marry you?" "Yes, in a sense. What I mean is that she or any other person would be seen used in this way so as to annoy or irritate me. This quarrel has now degenerated into the levying of blackmail." "How do you know for certain that 'Vaquero' and 'Matador' are the culprits?" "They have telephoned me, and boast of their success. At first, I was inclined to bargain, and actually consented to attend a rendezvous tomorrow. But another message postponed this appointment without any valid reason, so, unwillingly, I admit, I decided to inform the police." "I'm afraid that has been your attitude throughout, Sir Arthur." "Throughout what?" "The whole of this disreputable and tragic business. You begin by firing at an assumed burglar, though, in all probability, it was one of these mysterious associates of yours trying to force an interview. Then, when Lady Pelham was murdered, you did not help us at all, though it is difficult to believe that with your wide experience in M. I. & you failed to identify Raymond Carré as Steignitz." "Are you here as an accuser, Mr. Somers?" "Solely as the representative of the criminal investigation department." "But your tone is distinctly hostile." "Is it? I am merely stating hard facts, no matter how unpleasant they may sound." "You could not well sound worse. You have just charged me with withholding serious evidence as to my mother's murderer." "Pridoux and myself failed to recognize the photograph of a man who was extraordinarily well known to the war to all the principal officers in military intelligence." "Any stranger listening to this rapid-fire question and answer between us, might readily have imagined that they were on the verge of a quarrel which must lead to the gravest consequences. Yet each was in an amiable and self-satisfied mood. They paused for a few seconds, just as skilled duellists draw apart the first tentative blow in which each tries to mark the adversary's dexterity with the rapier." "The baronet poured out a small quantity of whisky, diluted it freely, and cut the end off a cigar which Somers noted with a pang as one of a rare and excellent brand. Pridoux saw it, too, and promptly exercised the implied propensity which mastered him at times. He might readily have pardoned the interruption," he said, "but may I ask what brand of cigar that is?" "I thought so," chirped Pridoux. "Though a nonsmoker myself, I have a friend who is a connoisseur of Havanas. I believe that particular leaf is grown on a small estate in Cuba, and there are never more than ten thousand cigars of that brand placed on the market in a year." "Quite correct. I am lucky enough to have a ten years' contract for half the annual supply." "Yet it is sad to think that any single one of them would poison Mr. Pridoux," said Somers bitterly. "As the hour is growing late, however, we must make some progress if Miss Daunt is to be restored to her friends speedily. The point now at issue, Sir Arthur, is this—are you prepared to give us the full and true history of the relations between you and the men who are holding Miss Daunt as a hostage—shall I put it?" "You can put it as you like. I'll tell you everything bearing on any likely branch of your inquiry." "Meaning that you will suppress a good deal of what has gone before?" "Yes. If you wish to probe into the workings of intelligence I must warn you that my lips are sealed." "In that case we may not discover Miss Daunt's whereabouts for some time." "Perhaps never," broke in Pridoux. Sir Arthur waved the little man aside with a languid impatience more offensive than a display of anger. "Inter-nonsense!" he said coldly. "For some hidden reason you seem to treat me as a hostile witness. When I say that I cannot go into the secret history of the war, that mere statement does not prevent you from applying to the heads of the various departments concerned. If they choose to place their records at your disposal, or authorize me in writing to go into these matters, my pledged word is thereby set aside. They can do this. I cannot. Really, Mr. Somers, you, of all men, ought to appreciate my difficult position." "Oh, I do," came the chief's suave assent. "But I must know exactly where my own department stands. We are not permitted to compromise a felony, and abduction, or kidnaping, comes under that category, I think. I have not had a case so long as you years that I really get whether the crime is a felony or a misdemeanor. However, I see your point. Waiving it for the moment, there are certain aspects of the affair which I am sure you will clear up. Do you know 'Vaquero' and 'Matador' personally?" "So you cannot describe them?" "No." "They seem to be well acquainted with you, do you make that out?" "They know your name, your residence, your associates, and a good deal of your years. They were able to telegraph to Miss Daunt in the name of a friend—by the way, who was it?" "Some girl. I have never met her." "Know her name?" "Let me see. Mrs. Linforth mentioned it. Gwen something. But Mrs. Linforth will tell you." "Which shows how they have blundered, because we are not very much alike." "But an English soldier made the same mistake." "The baronet puzzled me, but I am told he saw the name on a portmanteau, and imagination did the rest. Why do you credit 'Vaquero' with being at the gate. Why not 'Matador'?" "Miss Daunt's recollection of his voice and accent agrees with Captain Pelham's." "Ah, yes. Queer mixup, isn't it?" "You have spoken of 'ransom' and 'blackmail.' Which is it?" "Which shows how they have blundered, because we are not very much alike." "That would be blackmail of a sort." "Well, I suppose I thought of ransom in connection with brigands. Rather Sicilian, this grabbing a young lady in broad daylight and holding her in terror over my head." "When these fellows telephone or write you tomorrow, will you communicate with us, so that we may arrange to capture them?" "There is nothing else for it, now."

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