CAB No. 44

BY R. F. FOSTER

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CHAPTER VI—Continued.

"A call to the telephone, or a momentary absence from the room for any purpose, would give the desired opportunity for the abstraction of the pocket book. Some twenty minutes later, when the guest discovered that the pocket book was not in his coat, he would rush to his overcoat. The next thing would be the alarm, and after that, the thirty days' hunt would be on."

Hartley had listened up to this point with the greatest attention; but he could not help interposing a question.

"But if the man who is robbed could call witnesses to prove that he had the money on his person when he entered the hotel, how could he claim it was all a mistake if the thief was caught with the pocket book on him?"

"The thief is not to keep the pocket book. The mistake would be explained by the discovery that the victim had put it in his overcoat pocket before leaving home, thinking it was in his inside coat. In the haste of leaving home he had put on another coat at the last minute, leaving the pocket book hanging in the other coat."

"And how do you propose getting the pocket book back into the other coat at home?"

"The man that does the robbery is to bring the pocketbook here, as evidence that the crime has been committed. It is to be handed to Dr. Ramie, who will see that it finds its way back to the coat that has been left behind. The man is to have twenty minutes clear start after he gives up the pocketbook."

"I should not fancy leaving a pocketbook full of money hanging up in the hall for a month," remarked Hartley, with a laugh.

"It will be in a clothes-closet in an apartment, and the closet will be locked. This time of year it is not unusual for a man to fancy he will need a warmer overcoat before going out."

"They might say he dropped the pocketbook between the house and the hotel."

"He is to take a cab from place to place. And he will tell the cabman to wait for him, as he is going out again as soon as he gets his valuables in the safe. The cab will still be waiting in front of the hotel when the alarm is given, so that it may be searched for the money."

"Scheme's all right but for one thing," remarked Douglas. "Where are you going to get a man to be robbed and a man to rob him?"

"That has also been provided for," declared Fletcher quietly.

"You bet it has," put in the doctor, with a laugh. "That's the principal part of it."

"And who is your man? Or is that a secret?"

"I understand," said Fletcher quietly, "that Mr. Douglas is willing to pay handsomely for his share of the expense, in case the man succeeds in eluding the police for a month. I suppose that if he is caught, and Mr. Hartley wins, he will stand the expense?" Mr. Hartley nodded. "Suppose we say that if the man succeeds he shall get half the money. That will be $5,000."

"He can have the whole ten, as far as I am concerned," said Douglas promptly.

"Same here," said Hartley, not to be outdone in generosity. "I don't want the money. But it's a cinch. The police would ferret that out in thirty hours."

"Then, gentlemen," continued Fletcher, the curious look that Helen Ohlstrom did not like coming into his face, "if it is agreeable to Mr. Hartley to give the doctor his check to cover the one already deposited by Mr. Douglas, the robbery will take place Thursday night, at the Earlswood hotel. We selected that because it has two entrances, or rather two exits."

"And the actors in this little comedy?" asked Hartley, taking out his note book and jotting down the name of the hotel. "I suppose that is a secret."

Fletcher shrugged his shoulders and glanced at the doctor. Maynard smiled and nodded as if consenting to something. Fletcher looked Hartley full in the face and said slowly:

"Mr. Maynard has kindly consented to be robbed, and I will do the trick myself."

George Hartley's face was a study. Douglas laughed. Dr. Ramie, quite unmoved, relieved the strain by reminding Hartley to send down that check in the morning.

"Nice exhibition you will make of yourself if you are caught!" was the first thing Hartley said, his tone being quite serious.

"Not at all, sir. I am a foreigner," Fletcher replied. "Practically no one here knows me. I shall go to another hotel and change my name before Thursday, probably tomorrow or next day. If they catch me, it will be James Walton's name that will go on the blotter until such time as Mr. Maynard gets home and finds the pocketbook in his overcoat. But I assure you I cannot imagine what clue the police will begin upon. They will not even have a chance to inquire about men who have more money to spend than usual, because the pocketbook will be given up at once. I have so little fear of being caught that if I had the money I should put a pony on myself."

"I have a hundred with you, you know, Hartley," put in the doctor. Mr. Hartley nodded. Then turning to Fletcher, Hartley said:

"I think you have enough on now. Those if you succeed. Don't be greedy. But let me understand this clearly now," taking out his notebook again. "Thirty days is the limit. If you succeed you get $5,000. Mighty good pay that. If you fail you get nothing, therefore I shall get the whole stakes if I win. Is that right?"

"Perfectly," said Fletcher quietly, with a smile.

"Not a bit of it," interrupted Douglas. "You said you would give up your end of it if you won, Hartley."

"No. You misunderstood me. I said that if I were taking your end I would. It may be all right to pay a man for succeeding, but not for failure."

Douglas pursed his lips with an expression of contempt, but Fletcher did not object. Hartley went on, still scribbling in his notebook.

"And it is next Thursday night you are going to tee up?"

"That is the day we fixed on," said Fletcher, "and we made the hour late enough to prevent its getting into the morning papers. I shall expect you gentlemen to be here at 1 o'clock in the morning. That will interfere with no other engagements. I shall present myself with the pocketbook as soon after 1 o'clock as I can. You are then to remain in this room twenty minutes, in order to give me time to get clear away."

"And don't forget, gentlemen," said the doctor, "that we are all to meet here thirty days from next Thursday night, which will be Saturday, at 8 o'clock sharp, for the paying over of the stakes. If you are not here I shall pocket the money myself."

"And if the bag is up before thirty days?" asked Hartley, still scribbling.

"Meet here and settle up thirty days from Thursday, win or lose," said the doctor positively. "That is the condition to which you will please sign your names here."

Douglas stood up, stretched himself, and laughed. Hartley seemed still to be only half convinced that the whole thing was not a joke of some kind. Maynard was full of animation and he slapped Fletcher on the back as he exclaimed:

"By jove! old fellow, I believe you are right. This is going to be more fun than hunting without a dog!"

They all turned to go. Hartley whispered to Fletcher: "And what hotel will you stop at under the name of James Walton?"

"I have arranged to go to the Realton," replied Fletcher quietly. And then once more he smiled that same cunning smile as he saw Hartley jot down the name in his note book.

CHAPTER VII.

On Wednesday evening Hardy Maxwell dined at the Ohlstroms' home. Always quiet in company, he showed even less than his usual animation during the dinner. Helen thought that she detected the symptoms of the same preoccupied manner that had annoyed her at the beginning of their long afternoon walk.

Hardy made no attempt to lead the conversation. What little he had to say was addressed chiefly to Mr. Ohlstrom. Helen, finding herself almost ignored, devoted her attention to her mother, who was too much concerned with the arrangements of the dinner to notice her guest's manner.

Helen wondered what could make Maxwell so reserved. In some things, she had to admit to herself, he was certainly peculiar. When she had asked him about a certain play that she had seen, it was evident that he had not been inside a theater since he landed. He spoke once of wishing that he could go to some indoor athletic meeting, but he did not explain what prevented him from attending it. The more she thought over their acquaintance, the more she was impressed by a certain air of mystery about him; something that she had not yet penetrated; something she almost feared to confess to herself, that did not ring quite true. He had the power to assume an air of absolute detachment; he had the habit of shutting himself behind an impenetrable wall of polite impersonality.

After dinner, seated in front of a cozy open fire in the parlor, he relapsed into a sort of semi-inattention that was particularly annoying to her just then.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said suddenly, after several attempts to interest him in something.

"Do I appear to be thinking about something besides you?" he asked with a smile.

"Well, I should say that if your thoughts were on a girl at all, she must be a long way from here."

"Perhaps I was thinking about a girl who is here now being a long way from here," and he looked at her quizzically, while she began to wonder just what he meant, and what was coming next.

"I suppose you have heard of girls traveling long distances to get married," he went on. "What do you think of the scheme?" He spoke very slowly and deliberately.

"Why, really," she said with a little gasp, "I can't say that I have. I should not care for it myself."

"But suppose the man could not come to you, on account of his business, or something of that kind?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I should want to be very sure of the man before taking such a step, and very much in love with him. But I don't think I should care for it. In fact, I know I shouldn't. But I shall never be called on to make such a decision, so what does it matter?"

"Then you would be willing to give him up rather than travel to a foreign country to marry him, if he could not come to you?"

"Really Mr. Maxwell, I don't see the use of discussing such things. People don't get engaged by correspondence. If they have been together long enough to love each other, why not get married before they allow oceans to separate them? But there! Let's talk about something else."

"But suppose that the man's circumstances were such that he could not marry at that particular time, and that he knew he could not come back?"

She felt that he was looking at her intently, and she was also conscious that he was leaning forward toward her in his chair. Somehow she felt uneasy.

"Please let us talk about something else. I am not good on problems of that kind. They are too suggestive of something irregular in a person's life." She noticed that he winced a little when she said that, so she hastened to add:

"It seems to me that the bridegroom should always come to claim his bride. The idea of a girl's crawling off to a foreign country to stand up and get married before a lot of total strangers! Not a soul around into whose arms she could throw herself and have a good cry, if she felt like it."

"Then I understand," he said slowly, drawing his chair still nearer, "that it would be useless for a man to propose to you unless he could come to your own home to marry you?"

There was something in his movement toward her, and in the earnestness of his voice, that almost frightened her. At the same time it fascinated her.

"Really," she stammered, "I don't understand you."

"Yes, you do, Helen!" She drew in her under lip convulsively on hearing herself called by her first name, and felt a little shiver as he touched her left hand lightly with his right. Somehow she felt that the safest thing she could do would be to stand up; but she found he still held her hand as he stood up, facing her, and looking fixedly at her face.

"That is your condition, is it? That you will never give yourself to a man that cannot come for his bride?"

"That would depend on the man, after all, I suppose," she faltered, and the words astonished her as they came. But when she realized what they meant she felt a feeling of relief and looked up at him with a smile.

"And if I were the man that asked you?" he whispered tenderly, putting his arm round her waist and drawing her to him.

She looked him straight in the eyes for a moment, and then she unconsciously laid her disengaged hand on his shoulder.

"You would come for me, I know, if it was in heaven or earth. But if not," sinking her head upon his shoulder as she felt his lips touch her cheek, "I suppose I would go to you."

The last words sank into a whisper so low that he could hardly hear them. One lingering embrace, and then she started from him with a little fluttering laugh, and ran upstairs, kissing her hand to him for good night. Safely in her room, she threw herself on the bed and buried her face in her hands, listening for him to go out.

And then, far into the night, the burning flame of a fierce faith in her lover struggled against the chilling influence of an indefinable something that suggested doubt and fear.

CHAPTER VIII.

Thursday night was very cold. Mr. James Walton stepped out of the Realton with the collar of his top coat well turned up and his hands in his pockets. He did not carry a cane in America.

As he passed the row of cabs standing near the hotel his interest in them was sufficiently evident to induce several of the drivers to make a jump for their vehicles and touch their hats. But he passed on without even shaking his head in answer to their eager "Cab, sir?"

A few blocks away he came to another cabstand, and reviewed it with the same apparent interest and with about the same result. Still further away he came to another, and in this manner visited a number of cab ranks in front of stations and hotels, as if he were on a tour of inspection of that particularly industry.

Finally he stopped, abruptly in front of a particular cab and looked the driver over carefully. Evidentially satisfied with the review, which the good-natured Irishman took in good part, he opened the door himself and got in. He told the driver to take him to a certain corner uptown. Arrived at the street, he put his head out and ordered the driver to turn to the left and to go slowly. He seemed to be looking for a particular number, but when the driver asked him what number he wanted he did not answer.

Presently he called to the cabman to stop. On getting out he mounted the steps of a house a few doors further on and rang the bell. Just as he passed inside he called to the cabman to stay where he was for a few minutes. The house was Dr. Ramie's office.

Half an hour passed. Walton came to the door and found the cabman slapping his arms to keep himself warm.

"I am very sorry to keep you waiting so long," Walton said, "but the doctor is not in yet. They expect him every minute." Then he went down a few steps, and looked up and down the street, as if expecting to see the doctor coming along.

He went into the house again. Another half hour passed, but the doctor did not arrive.

The second time Walton appeared at the door he again apologized for the delay and asked the driver if he were not getting cold.

"You're right it's cold it is, sir, and seeming like snow the night."

"Won't your horse stand a minute while you come in and get a snifter to keep you warm?"

Cabby evidently needed no second invitation. After a quick hitch at the horse's blanket and a look at the lamps, he was up the steps beside Mr. James Walton, who still had the collar of his top coat turned well up, and who stood so that the driver could not very well read the name at the side of the door.

The two men passed at once into the doctor's office at the rear, where the physicians assistant was arranging some books. A decanter and glasses were already on the table, from which cabby inferred that his fare had already fortified himself against the chilly atmosphere.

After a good stiff drink cabby was persuaded to take a cigar, the doctor's assistant holding the match for him. Then another drink was in order, and about fifteen minutes had passed without seeming to be more than five. After a few minutes more he proposed that they should take one more drink, and then have a look up and down the street. Cabby, nothing loath, helped himself to a good four fingers of whisky, and then the two men went to the door together, opened it, and stepped out into the night air.

The cab was gone.

After the first exclamations of surprise from Walton and appropriate explosions of blasphemy from the cabman, the two men walked to the corner together, on the chance that they might find some one who had seen which way the cab went. At that hour, and on such a cold night, there were few persons about. None of them had noticed any cab.

Retracing their steps, they went to the other end of the block on which the doctor's office stood. There they found a policeman, who said no cab had passed him; but he had only just come round the corner himself.

After a brief consultation the policeman suggested that the cabman should go into the saloon on the corner below, and telephone to his employers at the stable, as the horse had probably started for home. While both men were sure the horse would be stopped, they agreed that the stable should be notified. Walton then said that he would walk back to the doctor's office and wait there; but that cabby need not come for him. Pulling out a $5 bill, he handed it to the cab driver, and said he was sorry, but hoped the cab would be found all right again. Then he gave the police officer a cigar, and after more regrets for the unfortunate occurrence, he turned back toward the doctor's office and disappeared round the corner.

CHAPTER IX.

About 12 o'clock that night Maynard drove up to the Realton, and told his cabman to wait for him a few minutes.

"All right, sir," said the porter, coming through the glass door into the cold air. He was a new hand and anxious to please. "You don't need any check, sir. The cab will wait for you on the outside line, just across the street, sir."

Passing the office, Maynard stepped up to the information counter and asked that his card be sent up to Mr. James Walton immediately. The boy took the card and was entering the call on the stub when Maynard heard some one pronounce his name. Turning round, he found himself facing the manager, who knew him as a frequent diner at the hotel, and who now extended his hand. The manager's greeting was not as warm as usual, Maynard thought. In fact, he looked worried.

"You will pardon me, Mr. Maynard, I know, but may I ask you to step into my office a moment before you send that card up?" Then, turning to the boy, the manager said sharply: "Just hold that call a few minutes until this gentleman is ready." At the same time he took the card from the boy and motioned to Maynard to follow him into his private office. Once inside, the manager closed the door carefully, and waved his hand to a chair, taking one himself.

"You will pardon my apparent abruptness, Mr. Maynard," he said, "but I know I can trust you. I am sure I can also depend on you to tell me the truth. What I want to impress upon you is that I am disobeying orders in speaking about this matter at all."

"But, my dear fellow, what are you talking about? What is the matter?"

"The matter is this Mr. James Walton, to whom you were about to send a card. I had just relieved our house detective, whom I set to watch every one that called on this Mr. Walton. And here you are the very first person that seems to know him."

"But, my dear fellow—"

"I am sorry, Mr. Maynard," the manager went on, "that you should be the first person we could lay our hands upon in this connection; but, in justice to yourself, I think it is just as well to clear it up through you as through any one else."

"But, my dear fellow, I don't understand what you are driving at, I assure you," protested Maynard.

"Well, that is what I supposed. In fact, I was sure your acquaintance with Mr. Walton must be either trivial or accidental. If you will allow me, I will explain matters as briefly as I can. If you can enlighten us in any way, I shall be very glad, because I am very much worried about the matter. Particularly since you seem to be mixed up in it."

"Mixed up! But, my dear fellow, I am not mixed up in anything. What on earth do you mean?" Mr. Maynard was beginning to think that the little joke which he was to be a part of that night had somehow leaked out.

"Well, not to detain you any longer than necessary, Mr. Maynard, this is the state of the case. A Pinkerton officer—at least I suppose he is from Pinkerton's, they mostly are—followed this Mr. James Walton from the last hotel at which he stayed, at which, it appears, he was registered as Mr. Milton Fletcher." Maynard winced, and wondered how the police could have found out about their little plot so far ahead of its being carried out. "I suppose you know," the manager went on, "that we watch everybody about a hotel like this pretty closely, and the head porter has a specially keen eye for baggage, and also for cabs." Mr. Maynard gave quite a start at this last statement; but the manager did not seem to observe it. "Now," the hotel man continued, "this Milton Fletcher came from another hotel to the one which he left to come here; and his name was neither Fletcher nor Walton at the first one, but Stewart."

"You astonish me," gasped Maynard, now beginning to feel a little nervous. The change of name from Fletcher to Walton he understood; but that Fletcher was also an assumed name came in the nature of a shock. He did not quite know what to say, or what it was that the manager expected him to say. "Did he leave those hotels without paying his bills, then, or what is the matter?" Maynard asked.

"On the contrary, he is most prompt. He owes nothing at the hotel he left, and I have just asked at the cashier's office here, and find he has paid up his bill for a week in advance. There is, I am sorry to say, a little circumstance in connection with the payment which we shall come to presently."

"Not a bad check, I hope, or anything of that kind. Because, you know, I would—"

"Oh, no! That is, not exactly. It is nothing that you could set right. Have a little patience, and let me tell you the important part of the story. The Pinkertons seem to have had instructions simply to identify their man that was known as Fletcher at the other hotel. I think they were rather astonished themselves to find traces further back still. They had three men here to walk through and 'mug' Mr. Walton, as they call it, so that any one of the three would know him again anywhere. We usually extend any little courtesy to the Pinkertons, thinking we might want it returned some day, so Mr. Jacobs, our house detective, gave the other officer a chance to look into Mr. Walton's room, without making any attempt to search it, you understand, but just to see what baggage he had, and if there were any initials upon it.

"Now, to go back a little. I want to call your attention to something that was in the papers a few weeks ago, but which may have escaped you. In fact, I didn't remember it until this Pinkerton man called my attention to it this evening. You know there was a big forgery of English bank notes, supposed to be the work of a gang headed by a man named Ardmore."

"Oh, yes, I recollect it perfectly. It was said the gang came over here, I believe," assented Maynard, and the manager continued:

"From what this Pinkerton man tells me, the members of the gang are supposed to have been a little too quick for the police on the other side and to have landed here all safe and separated. Now he is very anxious that I should not breathe a word of what he suspects to a soul, and above all not to our own man Jacobs. This is why I am disobeying orders in telling you; but I trust you will not repeat it." Maynard hastened to assure him that he would be as silent as the grave, so the manager went on: "This Ardmore came to this country with a companion. They occupied the same room on the steamer, at least that is what the police have dug up by following a baggage clue. The London police did not know he was on board that steamer until she had docked here; it seems, although they knew that Ardmore at least would try to get here.

"Now, it is a curious thing that neither of the two men that were in that stateroom made any attempt to clear any baggage. The customs officers cannot find any declaration of theirs. Yet the bedroom steward was certain that each of them had a valise, and that one of these bags was evidently made to order. As I understand this Pinkerton man, it was peculiar enough to make it pretty sure that there was no other like it. The London police sent a full description of it here by wire, so that Ardmore might be identified by it, as they had no other clue."

The hotel manager paused, and looked at Mr. Maynard with his eyes half shut. Then he continued with marked deliberation and emphasis:

"Well, Mr. Maynard, the bag is in Mr. James Walton's room."

"Great heavens! But you must be mistaken! Why, Fletcher is the dearest chap! You must be mistaken!"

"Possibly; but you will pardon me for having brought you in here to ask you just one question. How long have you known Mr. Walton, or Mr. Fletcher, or Stewart, or whatever his name is, and who introduced him?"

"Why, I met him at the club. Let me see." In his memory ran back rapidly over the past week or two. Maynard looked dazed. Could it be possible? Who was it that had brought Fletcher to the club in the first place? He could not remember anything clearly for a minute. The manager's statements had quite unnerved him. All he could think of to say was, "So you think that Fletcher is this forger Ardmore?"

"Not Ardmore himself, but one of the gang. He does not answer the description of Ardmore, but he fits the steward's description of the man in the cabin with Ardmore absolutely. The Pinkerton man had it all pat. The bag seems to me conclusive. This detective is very anxious that I should not tell Jacobs or the regular police of his suspicions, as he says that would spoil it all. It appears that they never arrest counterfeiters. All they do is to shadow them in order to find out whom they connect with. That is why I want to impress on you not to mention the matter to any one until they have ferreted out the whole gang. Then, it appears, they will pinch the lot. If they thought I had said a word to you and they found out that you were a friend of Walton's, they would blame me for spoiling the work of weeks."

"Then you are not going to arrest Fletcher?"

"You will pardon me, Mr. Maynard, but I see you are more accustomed to calling him Fletcher than Walton. Of course, if you knew him at the other hotel, it was as Fletcher. I suppose you do not care to say why he called himself Walton when he came to this house, or Stewart at another house, and why you sent your card to Mr. Walton?"

This question brought Maynard back to a vivid recollection of the business upon which he and Fletcher were engaged that evening, and which he now saw was apparently completely knocked on the head. He stammered something about Fletcher's having asked to call him Walton just for a few days, and supposed it was a practical joke of some kind. He tried to force a laugh, but in reality he felt very uncomfortable. Finally, in order to escape, if possible, having to answer that awkward question about where he had met Fletcher, he blurted out:

"So you are not going to arrest him?"

"Not until they have traced all his connections. They hope to be able to locate the whole gang, and perhaps the plates. When the steamer gets back they will have that steward up here to identify him on the quiet, I believe. But the great thing is to trace up his pals, and here the very first person we run across is you! I am very glad it was I and not Jacobs that saw you in hand in that card; because while Jacobs does not know what we suspect, he knows Mr. Walton is watched, and he is sharp enough to know that he is a crook of some kind. He would have been watching you next. If you have no objection, Mr. Maynard, I think it would relieve matters a good deal if you would tell me how long you have known this fellow and who introduced you. But if you have any objection to stating the facts, of course, I will not press the matter. You spoke of a practical joke of some kind. I would advise you to cut it out, Mr. Maynard, and at the same time, I trust you will pardon me for trespassing upon your time."

"To tell you the truth, I would rather not answer that question until I have a talk with my lawyer about it," was all Maynard could say. "What do you want me to do now?"

"Oh, nothing! In fact, I am almost sorry that I spoke to you about the matter at all, but I should be very sorry to see one of my patrons caught in the police net with such a dangerous person as one of the Ardmore gang. I am sure of the grounds of your acquaintance, you have been grossly deceived in continuing it, even if you did meet him at a club."

"But Fletcher is the dearest chap, I tell you. I can't think of the slightest thing wrong about him. He seems to be, in every respect, a gentleman and such a charming fellow, don't you know. You certainly must be mistaken."

"Oh, he is a charming fellow, no doubt. In fact, that is one of the things that confirms our belief that he is one of the gang. It appears that one of them makes a specialty of getting letters to some nice girl—forged letters, of course—and then making hot love to her and, if possible, inducing her to run away with him. Once she finds herself in a foreign country, dependent on him for money, he supplies her with these forged bank notes, and she passes them off with great success, because she never dreams that they are not genuine. He takes the change, and the gang gets it."

"But surely you don't mean to say that Fletcher has been doing anything of that kind here? Why, he has never even mentioned the name of a woman to me."

"Indeed!" The manager shook his head and smiled. "I don't like to undeceive you, Mr. Maynard; but your friend Mr. Walton, or Fletcher, or Stewart, or whatever his name is, was followed yesterday, and was seen to connect with a very stunning-looking girl whose name and address the Pinkerton man secured, and who will be carefully watched from now on. They go out together a good deal."

"Why, you astonish me!"

"There are several astonishing things in this connection. You were asking me about his paying his bills. When he paid his bill here he gave us an English bank note, for which he received considerable change. We do not ask people to write their names on the back of these notes as they do in English hotels; but we found three such notes in the cash drawer that evening, two of them from the restaurant. We cannot tell which one he gave us, but on submitting them to an English broker that rooms here, we found one of them was a forgery. The broker said, the moment he saw it, that judging from the descriptions it looked like an Ardmore note."

"Great heavens! I can't believe it! you know."

"But that is not all, Mr. Maynard. You must remember that I am telling you all this in confidence. I promised not to say a word. The fact is that this friend of yours is evidently an old hand, because when he goes out in the evening he always loses his shadow when he wants to. There were four men on his track one evening, but it was no use. He is very active, you know. As quick as a cat. He goes out of this hotel at one door and comes right in at another. He gets on a car going one way, jumps off that and boards one going the other way when both cars at full speed. If any one tried to follow him when he does that stunt they would either break their necks or he would know they were following him. He went out of this hotel tonight about 10 o'clock, and a man tried to follow him. In half an hour the man was back again, having given it up. Jacobs thinks that Walton's beard and mustache are false, because he says if they were it would be impossible to recognize him without them, there being nothing peculiar about his features that a detective could fix."

"All this is most extraordinary," Maynard commented, looking worried. "I cannot realize it, you know."

"I am afraid I have trespassed on your time too long now, Mr. Maynard," said the manager, bowing. "I see clearly, although I trust you will pardon me for saying it, that this is not an old or tried acquaintance of yours by any means. Let me warn you to be very careful. Shall I send your card up now?"

"Not yet. I will think over what you have said first." The manager bowed again, handed him the card, opened the door and walked away, leaving Maynard standing there, completely nonplussed.

Instead of sending up his card, Maynard thought he would take a short stroll outside to get a breath of fresh air and to recover his self-possession. The night had grown warmer instead of colder, and he took off his hat to cool his throbbing forehead. He was pacing up and down the sidewalk in front of the hotel, with no idea of what to do next, when he suddenly recollected his cab. He went back and asked the porter where it was.

"That's it over there, sir. Third from the corner. Got number forty-four on the lamp. I noticed it when you drove up. Have it here in a second, sir."

Maynard explained that he wished only to speak to the driver for a moment. Then he crossed the street and the porter saw the driver touch his hat several times very energetically. Whatever they said was in tones too low for any one else to hear, except the cabman's last words as Maynard turned away: "You can depend on me, sir. That will be all right, sir. You can depend on me."

Walking back to the crossing, Maynard was about to return to the hotel when he came face to face with Milton Fletcher.

"I waited for you in the room so long after the time that I was afraid something had happened to you," said Fletcher, "so I came out to have a look round, and here you are. It is getting late. They will be waiting for us, you know. Where did you leave your cab?"

Maynard was so taken aback by the Englishman's sudden appearance that he did not know what to say. The events of the last half hour had completely upset him. He did not want any scene, especially on the street. During the time he had walked up and down in front of the hotel, he had about made up his mind to carry out the part he had agreed to play, but not until he had from Fletcher some sort of explanation as to who he was and what his business was. He could ask for that in the cab. If the explanation was not satisfactory, he would drive direct to Green's and explain matters to Douglas and Hartley. He felt that the petty interests of the police in hunting for a forger were small considerations beside the danger which he and his friends were running.

Feeling safe with the cabman on the box, he put the best face he could on the matter for the moment, and asked Fletcher to get in first. Turning to the driver, he said aloud: "You know where to go?" to which the cabman touched his hat without answering. Maynard got in, still rather confused as to how he should begin his demand for an explanation, and the cab drove off.

CHAPTER X.

It was nearly 2 o'clock in the morning when Fletcher cautiously opened the door of the private dining room at Green's and walked in. Douglas was deep in the attractions of a Welsh rarebit, while Hartley was puffing a cigar. The doctor, always late, had only just arrived.

They noticed that Fletcher was very pale, but otherwise he seemed the same as usual. He would not sit down, but simply laid a red pocketbook on the table in front of the doctor, pulled out his watch and remarked that, according to the agreement, they were to remain in the room until twenty minutes after he had left. With a nod to each he moved toward the door, still keeping his eye on the three men at the table.

In another moment he was gone.

Hartley was the first to speak.

"This thing still seems to me like a big joke," he began. "But I suppose that pocketbook is a sign that the alleged robbery has been committed and that the hunt is on?"

"That's what it is," remarked the doctor dryly. "And I am going to have a Welsh rarebit myself now, to pass the time. I was afraid I was too late, but I could not help the delay. Doctors are such slaves. I suppose there is no objection to calling a waiter, if we don't leave the room ourselves?"

The minutes passed. Douglas was lighting a cigar, when he suggested that the doctor should count the money in the pocketbook to see that everything was all right before putting it back in the coat.

"That's so," exclaimed Hartley, with a start. "We must not forget any of these details. I suppose we should all go to see the pocketbook safely deposited in Maynard's old coat. Or can we trust you, doctor?" and he laughed as if it were a great joke.

As he had just finished his rarebit, the doctor picked up the pocketbook very deliberately. There was a little red stain on the cloth where it had lain. The same stain was on his fingers, which he smelt critically.

"Fletcher must have cut his finger or something," he remarked very coolly. "Looks like blood."

Douglas and Hartley both seemed disconcerted at the doctor's words. They drew the tablecloth gingerly toward them and peered at the stain, while the doctor opened the pocketbook.

"Not a cent in it," he explained. Then he peeped into each compartment again. "Some mistake, I suppose. But I thought the money was to be left in the pocketbook. Perhaps the fugitive wants something for traveling expenses."

Hartley and Douglas looked at each other, and then at the doctor. He turned the pocketbook over to them for examination.

"Not a red!" exclaimed Hartley. "I thought he was to put $5,000 in it. Don't you think we had better go after him and have some sort of an explanation?"

"Not on your life," shouted Douglas. "A bargain's a bargain. We stay here for twenty minutes. We've got eight more yet. If one of you leaves the room I claim the stakes, as you don't abide by the conditions."

"Which way would you go to look for him, I should like to know?" asked the doctor, smiling at Douglas' earnestness. "Sit still and let things slide. You will find Maynard will be round in the morning. Probably he didn't like to risk the actual cash, in case Fletcher was nabbed before he got away from the hotel. It would look all the better to find he had left the cash at home, you know. If he saw Fletcher was caught he could say nothing about a pocketbook and mention only the cash."

In spite of anything the doctor could say, Hartley was evidently ill at ease; but he sat there until the twenty minutes had expired. His last words as he jumped into his cab to be driven home were:

"Saturday night, thirty days from now, win or lose, doctor. Good-by."

CHAPTER XI.

On leaving the private room Fletcher went down to the basement. Assuring himself that there was no one in the washroom at that time of the morning, he walked up to one of the basins and filled a small cup with hot water. Taking out a safety razor set, he made short work of his beard and mustache.

After a good look at himself in the mirror, he seemed to be satisfied with the job of shaving, if not quite with his altered appearance. He opened the door and glanced up the stairs as if to see if the coast was clear, and seemed rather annoyed to find that the proprietor was standing, with his back against the banister, talking to the head waiter.

As the door creaked on its hinges the proprietor looked down. Apparently realizing that it would attract too much attention to retreat, Fletcher put a bold face on it and ascended the stairs. When he reached the top it was evident that the proprietor did not recognize him, although he looked at him curiously. At that late hour both the proprietor and the head waiter thought that they knew every one who was on the premises.

It must have been a critical moment for Fletcher. If he could pass the proprietor of a restaurant who had waited on him more than once, had asked him how he liked American cooking, and whose business it was to remember faces, he could probably pass any one. But there was still another test to be undergone—a test which has placed many a man in the hands of the police. He would be obliged to say something, and there is nothing so difficult to disguise as the voice.

He must have done some remarkably rapid thinking during the few moments that it took to mount those stairs, with the eyes of the head waiter and the proprietor upon him the whole time, both of them evidently waiting for the remark which would explain his presence there at that hour in the morning. Little did they dream that $10,000 depended on what that remark should be.

CHAPTER XII.

Mr. George Hartley was late in arriving at his office next morning. When he stepped out of the elevator he found a man pacing up and down the corridor waiting for him.

"Good morning, Johnson. Been waiting long?" he asked hurriedly. "Come right in."

The visitor was a smooth faced, stockily built man who wore a heavy coat tightly buttoned up. He held his slouch hat in both hands, and seemed not particularly at ease.

"Well, what news?" demanded Hartley briefly as he ran his hand through a pile of letters that had been placed on his desk.

"Your man never come to no Earlswood hotel last night, sir."

Hartley turned round in his chair with a start. He looked incredulous.

"No, sir. Never showed up at all. I had three men there; two of them on the entrances. One was in the corridor upstairs. Engaged a room for him day before. They waited till breakfast time this morning, sir, but there wasn't nothing doing." After a pause, seeing the look of complete dismay on Mr. Hartley's face, he went on: "I think we should have shadowed him from the Realton, sir. Then we'd knowed what hotel he did go to. But you know, sir, you was so sure about his going to the Earlswood we supposed it was all right to wait for him there. We went on watch at 10 o'clock; but he never showed up."

"Are you sure the people you had there didn't fail to recognize him?"

"No fear of that, sir. I started on the job right after you gave me the orders on Monday morning, sir. Three of us had walked through the room where he was sitting at the Realton, sir, and had a good look at him. Not an easy man to make a mistake about, that, sir. Fine looking—almost what you calls handsome. I went up to the Realton the day he moved in, as you ordered, sir, and saw him get out of the cab. Just for the sake of curiosity, and having nothing particular to do, I went over to the hotel he come from, sir. After a talk to the head porter there, sir, I got wise to it that he come from another hotel where his name wasn't neither Walton nor Fletcher, sir."

"What's that?" Hartley almost snapped. "Wait a minute," he added, stepping to the door that led to the outer office and opening it. Addressing some one there, he said hurriedly: "I'm not in to any one at present, James. Don't disturb me on any account. You understand?"

He came back to his desk, and after turning over a few of the papers, still standing up, he beckoned Johnson to come into the inner room. This room was provided with double doors. Through one of them anything passing in the private office could be heard; but when both were shut this little interior den was absolutely sound-proof. Hartley had found it convenient to let people look into his private office occasionally as a demonstration of the truth of the clerk's assertion that he was not in, while in reality he was in this sanctum, the door of which could not be seen through the door of the private office, as it was in the same wall.

Both men sat down. Hartley pulled open the drawer of a desk and took out a box of cigars, offering one to his visitor and taking one himself.

"Let me get this straight, now," he said. "What was that about another hotel and another name?"

"Well, sir, you know, sir, when you put me on the job, I didn't know what might happen, so I thought I would get all the information I could, sir. It sometimes comes in handy when you lose the trail like we have this one. Of course, sir," twisting his hat nervously, and puffing at his cigar, "I don't want to meddle into none of your business, sir, but it's my opinion that your man is one of the Ardmore gang."

"What's that? Nonsense! Ridiculous! Why, he belongs to the— But that doesn't matter. Where did you get such an idea as that?"

"To cut it short, sir, he's got Ardmore's bag in his room at the Realton."

"Ardmore's bag! What do you mean?"

"General orders was read out at the head office some weeks ago now, sir, to keep an eye out for a man with a peculiar kind of a Gladstone bag, sir. It was stolen from a gent in Sheffield, and if Ardmore got to this country he had it with him. The bag had a brass-lined slit at the top, with a leather flap over it. The gent that owned it had that put in, so he could slip letters in without unlocking the bag, sir. Ardmore most likely didn't know how peculiar it was, sir, or he wouldn't have carried it. The head porter at the Realton let me take a peep at Mr. James Walton's room, sir, and the bag we're all looking for was right there under his dressing table, though I would have swore it did not come with him on the cab."

"You must be mistaken."

"Not a bit of it, sir. Course I didn't say nothing to the porter; but I took the manager one side and asked him about this Mr. Walton. Knowing he could be trusted to keep his mouth shut, I told him what was up."

"Why didn't you arrest him at once?"

"We never do that with counterfeiters, sir. We just shadow them to see who they connect with. After a bit we have the whole gang spotted, and all the joints they visited marked down. But I'm coming to the strangest part about your man, sir, and that's this: He's never wrote a letter and never got a letter at any hotel he's been at. No telegrams, nothing. It's very useful to have a sample of a man's writing, sir, so as to tell his letters when they come. I can't find that this one ever wrote a line in his life. That don't seem so me human, that don't sir."

(To Be Continued.)