

WALLACE EDGAR

THE CLUE OF
THE TWISTED
CANDLE

Edgar Wallace

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CHAPTER I

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

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

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

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

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

The road from Beston Tracey to Little Beston was associated in his mind with some of the finest situations in his novels. It was on this road that he had conceived "The Tilbury Mystery." Between the station and the house he had woven the plot which had made "Gregory Standish" the most popular detective story of the year. For John Lexman was a maker of cunning plots.

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

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

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

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

Beston Priory was little more than a cottage, though one of its walls was an indubitable relic of that establishment which a pious Howard had erected in the thirteenth century. A small and unpretentious building, built in the Elizabethan style with quaint gables and high chimneys, its latticed windows and sunken gardens, its rosary and its tiny meadow, gave it a certain manorial completeness which was a source of great pride to its owner.

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

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

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

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

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

There was nothing of the recluse or the student in his appearance. He was in fact a typical, healthy-looking Britisher, very much like any other man of his class whom one would meet in the mess-room of the British army, in the wardrooms of the fleet, or in the far-off posts of the Empire, where the administrative cogs of the great machine are to be seen at work.

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

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

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

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

She laughed, but became serious again.

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

He raised his eyebrows.

"A visitor? Whoever came down on a day like this?"

She looked at him a little strangely.

"Mr. Kara," she said.

"Kara? How long has he been here?"

"He came at four."

There was nothing enthusiastic in her tone.

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

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

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

"He is in the drawing-room."

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

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

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

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

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

The two men shook hands warmly.

"You'll stay to dinner?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you," said John.

"I am not being uncomplimentary, am I?" smiled the Greek. "I am merely referring to the ingenuity of your plots. Sometimes your books baffle and annoy me. If I cannot see the solution of your mysteries before the book is half through, it angers me a little. Of course in the majority of cases I know the solution before I have reached the fifth chapter."

John looked at him in surprise and was somewhat piqued.

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

Kara nodded.

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

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

"T. X.?"

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

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

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

Usually when she adopted this method she came upon the trivial causes in which apprehension was born, but now she was puzzled to find that a solution was denied her. Her letters of the morning had been pleasant, neither the house nor the servants had given her any trouble. She was well herself, and though she knew John had a little money trouble, since his unfortunate speculation in Roumanian gold shares, and she half suspected that he had had to borrow money to make good his losses, yet his

prospects were so excellent and the success of his last book so promising that she, probably seeing with a clearer vision the unimportance of those money worries, was less concerned about the problem than he.

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

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

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

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

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

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

For a time the conversation was general. Kara, who was a frank admirer of the comfort of the room and who lamented his own inability to secure with money the cosiness which John had obtained at little cost, went on a foraging expedition whilst his host applied himself to a proof which needed correcting.

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

"Quite," replied the other.

"Why?"

"I rather like the light of this lamp."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That sounds thrilling," he said.

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

"It was something more than thrilling," he said.

"And when did this occur?" asked the author curiously.

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

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

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

"'Wild Brazil,'" he read, "by George Gathercole—do you know Gathercole?"

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

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

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

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

The other man looked up.

"On your behalf?"

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

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

Kara shook his head.

“That was not—?” began his host.

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

Lexman nodded.

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

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

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

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

“What have you to complain about!” he asked, with that little drawl of his. “You have your own creative work—the most fascinating branch of labour that comes to a man. He, poor beggar, is bound to actualities. You have the full range of all the worlds which your imagination gives to you. You can create men and destroy them, call into existence fascinating problems, mystify and baffle ten or twenty thousand people, and then, at a word, elucidate your mystery.”

John laughed.

“There is something in that,” he said.

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

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

“I do not see—” he began.

Kara smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

“I wonder if I am,” he said.

And now he spoke with a sudden energy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Will he wait?"

John Lexman shrugged his shoulders.

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

Kara nodded.

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

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

"A little," said the other.

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

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

He stopped and turned.

"Do you know he threatened to kill me?" he asked.

Kara smiled.

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

Kara dropped his hand on the other's arm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a knock at the door.

“That is the post,” explained John.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was signed “Vassalaro.”

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

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

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

John Lexman looked at his watch.

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

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

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

“Will you pay him?” asked Kara softly.

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

“I shall keep this letter,” said John.

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

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

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

He took his leave soon afterwards.

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

Grace rose from the piano as Kara entered the little drawing-room and murmured a few conventional expressions of regret that the visitor's stay had been so short. That there was no sincerity in that regret Kara, for one, had no doubt. He was a man singularly free from illusions.

They stayed talking a little while.

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

There was a little silence after he had gone.

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

"I am always glad to see you, Mr. Kara, or any other of my husband's friends," she said steadily. He inclined his head.

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

"I will find it for you."

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

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

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

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

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

He smiled faintly.

"Is it the money?" she asked anxiously.

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

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

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

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

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"He has not changed very much," she said slowly.

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

She shivered a little.

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

He looked at her in astonishment.

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

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

She had a reason which she did not reveal. She had first met Remington Kara in Salonika two years before. She had been doing a tour through the Balkans with her father—it was the last tour the

famous archeologist made—and had met the man who was fated to have such an influence upon her life at a dinner given by the American Consul.

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

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

He had fallen in love with Grace Terrell. At first his attentions had amused her, and then there came a time when they frightened her, for the man’s fire and passion had been unmistakable. She had made it plain to him that he could base no hopes upon her returning his love, and, in a scene which she even now shuddered to recall, he had revealed something of his wild and reckless nature. On the following day she did not see him, but two days later, when returning through the Bazaar from a dance which had been given by the Governor General, her carriage was stopped, she was forcibly dragged from its interior, and her cries were stifled with a cloth impregnated with a scent of a peculiar aromatic sweetness. Her assailants were about to thrust her into another carriage, when a party of British bluejackets who had been on leave came upon the scene, and, without knowing anything of the nationality of the girl, had rescued her.

In her heart of hearts she did not doubt Kara’s complicity in this medieval attempt to gain a wife, but of this adventure she had told her husband nothing. Until her marriage she was constantly receiving valuable presents which she as constantly returned to the only address she knew—Kara’s estate at Lemazo. A few months after her marriage she had learned through the newspapers that this “leader of Greek society” had purchased a big house near Cadogan Square, and then, to her amazement and to her dismay, Kara had scraped an acquaintance with her husband even before the honeymoon was over.

His visits had been happily few, but the growing intimacy between John and this strange undisciplined man had been a source of constant distress to her.

Should she, at this, the eleventh hour, tell her husband all her fears and her suspicions?

She debated the point for some time. And never was she nearer taking him into her complete confidence than she was as he sat in the big armchair by the side of the piano, a little drawn of face, more than a little absorbed in his own meditations. Had he been less worried she might have spoken. As it was, she turned the conversation to his last work, the big mystery story which, if it would not make his fortune, would mean a considerable increase to his income.

At a quarter to eleven he looked at his watch, and rose. She helped him on with his coat. He stood for some time irresolutely.

“Is there anything you have forgotten?” she asked.

He asked himself whether he should follow Kara’s advice. In any circumstance it was not a pleasant thing to meet a ferocious little man who had threatened his life, and to meet him unarmed was tempting Providence. The whole thing was of course ridiculous, but it was ridiculous that he should have borrowed, and it was ridiculous that the borrowing should have been necessary, and yet he had speculated on the best of advice—it was Kara’s advice.

The connection suddenly occurred to him, and yet Kara had not directly suggested that he should buy Roumanian gold shares, but had merely spoken glowingly of their prospects. He thought a moment, and then walked back slowly into the study, pulled open the drawer of his desk, took out the sinister little Browning, and slipped it into his pocket.

"I shan't be long, dear," he said, and kissing the girl he strode out into the darkness.

Kara sat back in the luxurious depths of his car, humming a little tune, as the driver picked his way cautiously over the uncertain road. The rain was still falling, and Kara had to rub the windows free of the mist which had gathered on them to discover where he was. From time to time he looked out as though he expected to see somebody, and then with a little smile he remembered that he had changed his original plan, and that he had fixed the waiting room of Lewes junction as his rendezvous.

Here it was that he found a little man muffled up to the ears in a big top coat, standing before the dying fire. He started as Kara entered and at a signal followed him from the room.

The stranger was obviously not English. His face was sallow and peaked, his cheeks were hollow, and the beard he wore was irregular-almost unkempt.

Kara led the way to the end of the dark platform, before he spoke.

"You have carried out my instructions?" he asked brusquely.

The language he spoke was Arabic, and the other answered him in that language.

"Everything that you have ordered has been done, Effendi," he said humbly.

"You have a revolver?"

The man nodded and patted his pocket.

"Loaded?"

"Excellency," asked the other, in surprise, "what is the use of a revolver, if it is not loaded?"

"You understand, you are not to shoot this man," said Kara. "You are merely to present the pistol. To make sure, you had better unload it now."

Wondering the man obeyed, and clicked back the ejector.

"I will take the cartridges," said Kara, holding out his hand.

He slipped the little cylinders into his pocket, and after examining the weapon returned it to its owner.

"You will threaten him," he went on. "Present the revolver straight at his heart. You need do nothing else."

The man shuffled uneasily.

"I will do as you say, Effendi," he said. "But—"

"There are no 'buts,'" replied the other harshly. "You are to carry out my instructions without any question. What will happen then you shall see. I shall be at hand. That I have a reason for this play be assured."

"But suppose he shoots?" persisted the other uneasily.

"He will not shoot," said Kara easily. "Besides, his revolver is not loaded. Now you may go. You have a long walk before you. You know the way?"

The man nodded.

"I have been over it before," he said confidently.

Kara returned to the big limousine which had drawn up some distance from the station. He spoke a word or two to the chauffeur in Greek, and the man touched his hat.

CHAPTER II

Assistant Commissioner of Police T. X. Meredith did not occupy offices in New Scotland Yard. It is the peculiarity of public offices that they are planned with the idea of supplying the margin of space above all requirements and that on their completion they are found wholly inadequate to house the various departments which mysteriously come into progress coincident with the building operations.

“T. X.,” as he was known by the police forces of the world, had a big suite of offices in Whitehall. The house was an old one facing the Board of Trade and the inscription on the ancient door told passers-by that this was the “Public Prosecutor, Special Branch.”

The duties of T. X. were multifarious. People said of him—and like most public gossip, this was probably untrue—that he was the head of the “illegal” department of Scotland Yard. If by chance you lost the keys of your safe, T. X. could supply you (so popular rumour ran) with a burglar who would open that safe in half an hour.

If there dwelt in England a notorious individual against whom the police could collect no scintilla of evidence to justify a prosecution, and if it was necessary for the good of the community that that person should be deported, it was T. X. who arrested the obnoxious person, hustled him into a cab and did not loose his hold upon his victim until he had landed him on the indignant shores of an otherwise friendly power.

It is very certain that when the minister of a tiny power which shall be nameless was suddenly recalled by his government and brought to trial in his native land for putting into circulation spurious bonds, it was somebody from the department which T. X. controlled, who burgled His Excellency’s house, burnt the locks from his safe and secured the necessary incriminating evidence.

I say it is fairly certain and here I am merely voicing the opinion of very knowledgeable people indeed, heads of public departments who speak behind their hands, mysterious under-secretaries of state who discuss things in whispers in the remote corners of their clubrooms and the more frank views of American correspondents who had no hesitation in putting those views into print for the benefit of their readers.

That T. X. had a more legitimate occupation we know, for it was that flippant man whose outrageous comment on the Home Office Administration is popularly supposed to have sent one Home Secretary to his grave, who traced the Deptford murderers through a labyrinth of perjury and who brought to book Sir Julius Waglite though he had covered his trail of defalcation through the balance sheets of thirty-four companies.

On the night of March 3rd, T. X. sat in his inner office interviewing a disconsolate inspector of metropolitan police, named Mansus.

In appearance T. X. conveyed the impression of extreme youth, for his face was almost boyish and it was only when you looked at him closely and saw the little creases about his eyes, the setting of his straight mouth, that you guessed he was on the way to forty. In his early days he had been something of a poet, and had written a slight volume of “Woodland Lyrics,” the mention of which at this later stage was sufficient to make him feel violently unhappy.

In manner he was tactful but persistent, his language was at times marked by a violent extravagance and he had had the distinction of having provoked, by certain correspondence which had seen the light, the comment of a former Home Secretary that “it was unfortunate that Mr. Meredith did not take his position with the seriousness which was expected from a public official.”

His language was, as I say, under great provocation, violent and unusual. He had a trick of using words which never were on land or sea, and illustrating his instruction or his admonition with the quaintest phraseology.

Now he was tilted back in his office chair at an alarming angle, scowling at his distressed subordinate who sat on the edge of a chair at the other side of his desk.

"But, T. X.," protested the Inspector, "there was nothing to be found."

It was the outrageous practice of Mr. Meredith to insist upon his associates calling him by his initials, a practice which had earned disapproval in the highest quarters.

"Nothing is to be found!" he repeated wrathfully. "Curious Mike!"

He sat up with a suddenness which caused the police officer to start back in alarm.

"Listen," said T. X., grasping an ivory paperknife savagely in his hand and tapping his blotting-pad to emphasize his words, "you're a pie!"

"I'm a policeman," said the other patiently.

"A policeman!" exclaimed the exasperated T. X. "You're worse than a pie, you're a slud! I'm afraid I shall never make a detective of you," he shook his head sorrowfully at the smiling Mansus who had been in the police force when T. X. was a small boy at school, "you are neither Wise nor Wily; you combine the innocence of a Baby with the grubbiness of a County Parson—you ought to be in the choir."

At this outrageous insult Mr. Mansus was silent; what he might have said, or what further provocation he might have received may be never known, for at that moment, the Chief himself walked in.

The Chief of the Police in these days was a grey man, rather tired, with a hawk nose and deep eyes that glared under shaggy eyebrows and he was a terror to all men of his department save to T. X. who respected nothing on earth and very little elsewhere. He nodded curtly to Mansus.

"Well, T. X.," he said, "what have you discovered about our friend Kara?"

He turned from T. X. to the discomforted inspector.

"Very little," said T. X. "I've had Mansus on the job."

"And you've found nothing, eh?" growled the Chief.

"He has found all that it is possible to find," said T. X. "We do not perform miracles in this department, Sir George, nor can we pick up the threads of a case at five minutes' notice."

Sir George Haley grunted.

"Mansus has done his best," the other went on easily, "but it is rather absurd to talk about one's best when you know so little of what you want."

Sir George dropped heavily into the arm-chair, and stretched out his long thin legs.

"What I want," he said, looking up at the ceiling and putting his hands together, "is to discover something about one Remington Kara, a wealthy Greek who has taken a house in Cadogan Square, who has no particular position in London society and therefore has no reason for coming here, who openly expresses his detestation of the climate, who has a magnificent estate in some wild place in the Balkans, who is an excellent horseman, a magnificent shot and a passable aviator."

T. X. nodded to Mansus and with something of gratitude in his eyes the inspector took his leave.

"Now Mansus has departed," said T. X., sitting himself on the edge of his desk and selecting with great care a cigarette from the case he took from his pocket, "let me know something of the reason for this sudden interest in the great ones of the earth."

Sir George smiled grimly.

"I have the interest which is the interest of my department," he said. "That is to say I want to know a great deal about abnormal people. We have had an application from him," he went on, "which is rather unusual. Apparently he is in fear of his life from some cause or other and wants to know if he can have a private telephone connection between his house and the central office. We told him that he could always get the nearest Police Station on the 'phone, but that doesn't satisfy him. He has made bad friends with some gentleman of his own country who sooner or later, he thinks, will cut his throat."

T. X. nodded.

"All this I know," he said patiently, "if you will further unfold the secret dossier, Sir George, I am prepared to be thrilled."

"There is nothing thrilling about it," growled the older man, rising, "but I remember the Macedonian shooting case in South London and I don't want a repetition of that sort of thing. If people want to have blood feuds, let them take them outside the metropolitan area."

"By all means," said T. X., "let them. Personally, I don't care where they go. But if that is the extent of your information I can supplement it. He has had extensive alterations made to the house he bought in Cadogan Square; the room in which he lives is practically a safe."

Sir George raised his eyebrows.

"A safe," he repeated.

T. X. nodded.

"A safe," he said; "its walls are burglar proof, floor and roof are reinforced concrete, there is one door which in addition to its ordinary lock is closed by a sort of steel latch which he lets fall when he retires for the night and which he opens himself personally in the morning. The window is unreachable, there are no communicating doors, and altogether the room is planned to stand a siege."

The Chief Commissioner was interested.

"Any more?" he asked.

"Let me think," said T. X., looking up at the ceiling. "Yes, the interior of his room is plainly furnished, there is a big fireplace, rather an ornate bed, a steel safe built into the wall and visible from its outer side to the policeman whose beat is in that neighborhood."

"How do you know all this?" asked the Chief Commissioner.

"Because I've been in the room," said T. X. simply, "having by an underhand trick succeeded in gaining the misplaced confidence of Kara's housekeeper, who by the way"—he turned round to his desk and scribbled a name on the blotting-pad—"will be discharged to-morrow and must be found a place."

"Is there any—er—?" began the Chief.

"Funny business?" interrupted T. X., "not a bit. House and man are quite normal save for these eccentricities. He has announced his intention of spending three months of the year in England and nine months abroad. He is very rich, has no relations, and has a passion for power."

"Then he'll be hung," said the Chief, rising.

"I doubt it," said the other, "people with lots of money seldom get hung. You only get hung for wanting money."

"Then you're in some danger, T. X.," smiled the Chief, "for according to my account you're always more or less broke."

"A genial libel," said T. X., "but talking about people being broke, I saw John Lexman to-day—you know him!"

The Chief Commissioner nodded.

"I've an idea he's rather hit for money. He was in that Roumanian gold swindle, and by his general gloom, which only comes to a man when he's in love (and he can't possibly be in love since he's married) or when he's in debt, I fear that he is still feeling the effect of that rosy adventure."

A telephone bell in the corner of the room rang sharply, and T. X. picked up the receiver. He listened intently.

"A trunk call," he said over his shoulder to the departing commissioner, "it may be something interesting."

A little pause; then a hoarse voice spoke to him. "Is that you, T. X.?"

"That's me," said the Assistant Commissioner, commonly.

"It's John Lexman speaking."

"I shouldn't have recognized your voice," said T. X., "what is wrong with you, John, can't you get your plot to went?"

“I want you to come down here at once,” said the voice urgently, and even over the telephone T. X. recognized the distress. “I have shot a man, killed him!”

T. X. gasped.

“Good Lord,” he said, “you are a silly ass!”

CHAPTER III

In the early hours of the morning a tragic little party was assembled in the study at Beston Priory. John Lexman, white and haggard, sat on the sofa with his wife by his side. Immediate authority as represented by a village constable was on duty in the passage outside, whilst T. X. sitting at the table with a writing pad and a pencil was briefly noting the evidence.

The author had sketched the events of the day. He had described his interview with the money-lender the day before and the arrival of the letter.

"You have the letter!" asked T. X.

John Lexman nodded.

"I am glad of that," said the other with a sigh of relief, "that will save you from a great deal of unpleasantness, my poor old chap. Tell me what happened afterward."

"I reached the village," said John Lexman, "and passed through it. There was nobody about, the rain was still falling very heavily and indeed I didn't meet a single soul all the evening. I reached the place appointed about five minutes before time. It was the corner of Eastbourne Road on the station side and there I found Vassalaro waiting. I was rather ashamed of myself at meeting him at all under these conditions, but I was very keen on his not coming to the house for I was afraid it would upset Grace. What made it all the more ridiculous was this infernal pistol which was in my pocket banging against my side with every step I took as though to nudge me to an understanding of my folly."

"Where did you meet Vassalaro?" asked T. X.

"He was on the other side of the Eastbourne Road and crossed the road to meet me. At first he was very pleasant though a little agitated but afterward he began to behave in a most extraordinary manner as though he was lashing himself up into a fury which he didn't feel. I promised him a substantial amount on account, but he grew worse and worse and then, suddenly, before I realised what he was doing, he was brandishing a revolver in my face and uttering the most extraordinary threats. Then it was I remembered Kara's warning."

"Kara," said T. X. quickly.

"A man I know and who was responsible for introducing me to Vassalaro. He is immensely wealthy."

"I see," said T. X., "go on."

"I remembered this warning," the other proceeded, "and I thought it worth while trying it out to see if it had any effect upon the little man. I pulled the pistol from my pocket and pointed it at him, but that only seemed to make it—and then I pressed the trigger...."

"To my horror four shots exploded before I could recover sufficient self-possession to loosen my hold of the butt. He fell without a word. I dropped the revolver and knelt by his side. I could tell he was dangerously wounded, and indeed I knew at that moment that nothing would save him. My pistol had been pointed in the region of his heart...."

He shuddered, dropping his face in his hands, and the girl by his side, encircling his shoulder with a protecting arm, murmured something in his ear. Presently he recovered.

"He wasn't quite dead. I heard him murmur something but I wasn't able to distinguish what he said. I went straight to the village and told the constable and had the body removed."

T. X. rose from the table and walked to the door and opened it.

"Come in, constable," he said, and when the man made his appearance, "I suppose you were very careful in removing this body, and you took everything which was lying about in the immediate vicinity?"

"Yes, sir," replied the man, "I took his hat and his walkingstick, if that's what you mean."

"And the revolver!" asked T. X.

The man shook his head.

“There warn’t any revolver, sir, except the pistol which Mr. Lexman had.”

He fumbled in his pocket and pulled it out gingerly, and T. X. took it from him.

“I’ll look after your prisoner; you go down to the village, get any help you can and make a most careful search in the place where this man was killed and bring me the revolver which you will discover. You’ll probably find it in a ditch by the side of the road. I’ll give a sovereign to the man who finds it.”

The constable touched his hat and went out.

“It looks rather a weird case to me,” said T. X., as he came back to the table, “can’t you see the unusual features yourself, Lexman! It isn’t unusual for you to owe money and it isn’t unusual for the usurer to demand the return of that money, but in this case he is asking for it before it was due, and further than that he was demanding it with threats. It is not the practice of the average money lender to go after his clients with a loaded revolver. Another peculiar thing is that if he wished to blackmail you, that is to say, bring you into contempt in the eyes of your friends, why did he choose to meet you in a dark and unfrequented road, and not in your house where the moral pressure would be greatest? Also, why did he write you a threatening letter which would certainly bring him into the grip of the law and would have saved you a great deal of unpleasantness if he had decided upon taking action!”

He tapped his white teeth with the end of his pencil and then suddenly,

“I think I’ll see that letter,” he said.

John Lexman rose from the sofa, crossed to the safe, unlocked it and was unlocking the steel drawer in which he had placed the incriminating document. His hand was on the key when T. X. noticed the look of surprise on his face.

“What is it!” asked the detective suddenly.

“This drawer feels very hot,” said John,—he looked round as though to measure the distance between the safe and the fire.

T. X. laid his hand upon the front of the drawer. It was indeed warm.

“Open it,” said T. X., and Lexman turned the key and pulled the drawer open.

As he did so, the whole contents burst up in a quick blaze of flame. It died down immediately and left only a little coil of smoke that flowed from the safe into the room.

“Don’t touch anything inside,” said T. X. quickly.

He lifted the drawer carefully and placed it under the light. In the bottom was no more than a few crumpled white ashes and a blister of paint where the flame had caught the side.

“I see,” said T. X. slowly.

He saw something more than that handful of ashes, he saw the deadly peril in which his friend was standing. Here was one half of the evidence in Lexman’s favour gone, irredeemably.

“The letter was written on a paper which was specially prepared by a chemical process which disintegrated the moment the paper was exposed to the air. Probably if you delayed putting the letter in the drawer another five minutes, you would have seen it burn before your eyes. As it was, it was smouldering before you had turned the key of the box. The envelope!”

“Kara burnt it,” said Lexman in a low voice, “I remember seeing him take it up from the table and throw it in the fire.”

T. X. nodded.

“There remains the other half of the evidence,” he said grimly, and when an hour later, the village constable returned to report that in spite of his most careful search he had failed to discover the dead man’s revolver, his anticipations were realized.

The next morning John Lexman was lodged in Lewes gaol on a charge of wilful murder.

A telegram brought Mansus from London to Beston Tracey, and T. X. received him in the library.

“I sent for you, Mansus, because I suffer from the illusion that you have more brains than most of the people in my department, and that’s not saying much.”

"I am very grateful to you, sir, for putting me right with Commissioner," began Mansus, but T. X. stopped him.

"It is the duty of every head of departments," he said oracularly, "to shield the incompetence of his subordinates. It is only by the adoption of some such method that the decencies of the public life can be observed. Now get down to this." He gave a sketch of the case from start to finish in as brief a space of time as possible.

"The evidence against Mr. Lexman is very heavy," he said. "He borrowed money from this man, and on the man's body were found particulars of the very Promissory Note which Lexman signed. Why he should have brought it with him, I cannot say. Anyhow I doubt very much whether Mr. Lexman will get a jury to accept his version. Our only chance is to find the Greek's revolver—I don't think there's any very great chance, but if we are to be successful we must make a search at once."

Before he went out he had an interview with Grace. The dark shadows under her eyes told of a sleepless night. She was unusually pale and surprisingly calm.

"I think there are one or two things I ought to tell you," she said, as she led the way into the drawing room, closing the door behind him.

"And they concern Mr. Kara, I think," said T. X.

She looked at him startled.

"How did you know that?"

"I know nothing."

He hesitated on the brink of a flippant claim of omniscience, but realizing in time the agony she must be suffering he checked his natural desire.

"I really know nothing," he continued, "but I guess a lot," and that was as near to the truth as you might expect T. X. to reach on the spur of the moment.

She began without preliminary.

"In the first place I must tell you that Mr. Kara once asked me to marry him, and for reasons which I will give you, I am dreadfully afraid of him."

She described without reserve the meeting at Salonika and Kara's extravagant rage and told of the attempt which had been made upon her.

"Does John know this?" asked T. X.

She shook her head sadly.

"I wish I had told him now," she said. "Oh, how I wish I had!" She wrung her hands in an ecstasy of sorrow and remorse.

T. X. looked at her sympathetically. Then he asked, "Did Mr. Kara ever discuss your husband's financial position with you?"

"Never."

"How did John Lexman happen to meet Vassalaro!"

"I can tell you that," she answered, "the first time we met Mr. Kara in England was when we were staying at Babbacombe on a summer holiday—which was really a prolongation of our honeymoon. Mr. Kara came to stay at the same hotel. I think Mr. Vassalaro must have been there before; at any rate they knew one another and after Kara's introduction to my husband the rest was easy."

"Can I do anything for John!" she asked piteously.

T. X. shook his head.

"So far as your story is concerned, I don't think you will advantage him by telling it," he said. "There is nothing whatever to connect Kara with this business and you would only give your husband a great deal of pain. I'll do the best I can."

He held out his hand and she grasped it and somehow at that moment there came to T. X. Meredith a new courage, a new faith and a greater determination than ever to solve this troublesome mystery.

He found Mansus waiting for him in a car outside and in a few minutes they were at the scene of the tragedy. A curious little knot of spectators had gathered, looking with morbid interest at the place where the body had been found. There was a local policeman on duty and to him was deputed the ungracious task of warning his fellow villagers to keep their distance. The ground had already been searched very carefully. The two roads crossed almost at right angles and at the corner of the cross thus formed, the hedges were broken, admitting to a field which had evidently been used as a pasture by an adjoining dairy farm. Some rough attempt had been made to close the gap with barbed wire, but it was possible to step over the drooping strands with little or no difficulty. It was to this gap that T. X. devoted his principal attention. All the fields had been carefully examined without result, the four drains which were merely the connecting pipes between ditches at the sides of the crossroads had been swept out and only the broken hedge and its tangle of bushes behind offered any prospect of the new search being rewarded.

“Hullo!” said Mansus, suddenly, and stooping down he picked up something from the ground. T. X. took it in his hand.

It was unmistakably a revolver cartridge. He marked the spot where it had been found by jamming his walking stick into the ground and continued his search, but without success.

“I am afraid we shall find nothing more here,” said T. X., after half an hour’s further search. He stood with his chin in his hand, a frown on his face.

“Mansus,” he said, “suppose there were three people here, Lexman, the money lender and a third witness. And suppose this third person for some reason unknown was interested in what took place between the two men and he wanted to watch unobserved. Isn’t it likely that if he, as I think, instigated the meeting, he would have chosen this place because this particular hedge gave him a chance of seeing without being seen?”

Mansus thought.

“He could have seen just as well from either of the other hedges, with less chance of detection,” he said, after a long pause.

T. X. grinned.

“You have the makings of a brain,” he said admiringly. “I agree with you. Always remember that, Mansus. That there was one occasion in your life when T. X. Meredith and you thought alike.”

Mansus smiled a little feebly.

“Of course from the point of view of the observer this was the worst place possible, so whoever came here, if they did come here, dropping revolver bullets about, must have chosen the spot because it was get-at-able from another direction. Obviously he couldn’t come down the road and climb in without attracting the attention of the Greek who was waiting for Mr. Lexman. We may suppose there is a gate farther along the road, we may suppose that he entered that gate, came along the field by the side of the hedge and that somewhere between here and the gate, he threw away his cigar.”

“His cigar!” said Mansus in surprise.

“His cigar,” repeated T. X., “if he was alone, he would keep his cigar alight until the very last moment.”

“He might have thrown it into the road,” said Mansus.

“Don’t jibber,” said T. X., and led the way along the hedge. From where they stood they could see the gate which led on to the road about a hundred yards further on. Within a dozen yards of that gate, T. X. found what he had been searching for, a half-smoked cigar. It was sodden with rain and he picked it up tenderly.

“A good cigar, if I am any judge,” he said, “cut with a penknife, and smoked through a holder.”

They reached the gate and passed through. Here they were on the road again and this they followed until they reached another cross road that to the left inclining southward to the new Eastbourne Road and that to the westward looking back to the Lewes-Eastbourne railway. The rain

had obliterated much that T. X. was looking for, but presently he found a faint indication of a car wheel.

“This is where she turned and backed,” he said, and walked slowly to the road on the left, “and this is where she stood. There is the grease from her engine.”

He stooped down and moved forward in the attitude of a Russian dancer, “And here are the wax matches which the chauffeur struck,” he counted, “one, two, three, four, five, six, allow three for each cigarette on a boisterous night like last night, that makes three cigarettes. Here is a cigarette end, Mansus, Gold Flake brand,” he said, as he examined it carefully, “and a Gold Flake brand smokes for twelve minutes in normal weather, but about eight minutes in gusty weather. A car was here for about twenty-four minutes—what do you think of that, Mansus?”

“A good bit of reasoning, T. X.,” said the other calmly, “if it happens to be the car you’re looking for.”

“I am looking for any old car,” said T. X.

He found no other trace of car wheels though he carefully followed up the little lane until it reached the main road. After that it was hopeless to search because rain had fallen in the night and in the early hours of the morning. He drove his assistant to the railway station in time to catch the train at one o’clock to London.

“You will go straight to Cadogan Square and arrest the chauffeur of Mr. Kara,” he said.

“Upon what charge!” asked Mansus hurriedly.

When it came to the step which T. X. thought fit to take in the pursuance of his duty, Mansus was beyond surprise.

“You can charge him with anything you like,” said T. X., with fine carelessness, “probably something will occur to you on your way up to town. As a matter of fact the chauffeur has been called unexpectedly away to Greece and has probably left by this morning’s train for the Continent. If that is so, we can do nothing, because the boat will have left Dover and will have landed him at Boulogne, but if by any luck you get him, keep him busy until I get back.”

T. X. himself was a busy man that day, and it was not until night was falling that he again turned to Beston Tracey to find a telegram waiting for him. He opened it and read,

“Chauffeur’s name, Goole. Formerly waiter English Club, Constantinople. Left for east by early train this morning, his mother being ill.”

“His mother ill,” said T. X. contemptuously, “how very feeble,—I should have thought Kara could have gone one better than that.”

He was in John Lexman’s study as the door opened and the maid announced, “Mr. Remington Kara.”

CHAPTER IV

T. X. folded the telegram very carefully and slipped it into his waistcoat pocket.

He favoured the newcomer with a little bow and taking upon himself the honours of the establishment, pushed a chair to his visitor.

"I think you know my name," said Kara easily, "I am a friend of poor Lexman's."

"So I am told," said T. X., "but don't let your friendship for Lexman prevent your sitting down."

For a moment the Greek was nonplussed and then, with a little smile and bow, he seated himself by the writing table.

"I am very distressed at this happening," he went on, "and I am more distressed because I feel that as I introduced Lexman to this unfortunate man, I am in a sense responsible."

"If I were you," said T. X., leaning back in the chair and looking half questioningly and half earnestly into the face of the other, "I shouldn't let that fact keep me awake at night. Most people are murdered as a result of an introduction. The cases where people murder total strangers are singularly rare. That I think is due to the insularity of our national character."

Again the other was taken back and puzzled by the flippancy of the man from whom he had expected at least the official manner.

"When did you see Mr. Vassalaro last?" asked T. X. pleasantly.

Kara raised his eyes as though considering.

"I think it must have been nearly a week ago."

"Think again," said T. X.

For a second the Greek started and again relaxed into a smile.

"I am afraid," he began.

"Don't worry about that," said T. X., "but let me ask you this question. You were here last night when Mr. Lexman received a letter. That he did receive a letter, there is considerable evidence," he said as he saw the other hesitate, "because we have the supporting statements of the servant and the postman."

"I was here," said the other, deliberately, "and I was present when Mr. Lexman received a letter."

T. X. nodded.

"A letter written on some brownish paper and rather bulky," he suggested.

Again there was that momentary hesitation.

"I would not swear to the color of the paper or as to the bulk of the letter," he said.

"I should have thought you would," suggested T. X., "because you see, you burnt the envelope, and I presumed you would have noticed that."

"I have no recollection of burning any envelope," said the other easily.

"At any rate," T. X. went on, "when Mr. Lexman read this letter out to you..."

"To which letter are you referring?" asked the other, with a lift of his eyebrows.

"Mr. Lexman received a threatening letter," repeated T. X. patiently, "which he read out to you, and which was addressed to him by Vassalaro. This letter was handed to you and you also read it. Mr. Lexman to your knowledge put the letter in his safe—in a steel drawer."

The other shook his head, smiling gently.

"I am afraid you've made a great mistake," he said almost apologetically, "though I have a recollection of his receiving a letter, I did not read it, nor was it read to me."

The eyes of T. X. narrowed to the very slits and his voice became metallic and hard.

"And if I put you into the box, will you swear, that you did not see that letter, nor read it, nor have it read to you, and that you have no knowledge whatever of such a letter having been received by Mr. Lexman?"

"Most certainly," said the other coolly.

"Would you swear that you have not seen Vassalaro for a week?"

"Certainly," smiled the Greek.

"That you did not in fact see him last night," persisted T. X., "and interview him on the station platform at Lewes, that you did not after leaving him continue on your way to London and then turn your car and return to the neighbourhood of Beston Tracey?"

The Greek was white to the lips, but not a muscle of his face moved.

"Will you also swear," continued T. X. inexorably, "that you did not stand at the corner of what is known as Mitre's Lot and re-enter a gate near to the side where your car was, and that you did not watch the whole tragedy?"

"I'd swear to that," Kara's voice was strained and cracked.

"Would you also swear as to the hour of your arrival in London?"

"Somewhere in the region of ten or eleven," said the Greek.

T. X. smiled.

"Would you swear that you did not go through Guilford at half-past twelve and pull up to replenish your petrol?"

The Greek had now recovered his self-possession and rose.

"You are a very clever man, Mr. Meredith—I think that is your name?"

"That is my name," said T. X. calmly. "There has been, no need for me to change it as often as you have found the necessity."

He saw the fire blazing in the other's eyes and knew that his shot had gone home.

"I am afraid I must go," said Kara. "I came here intending to see Mrs. Lexman, and I had no idea that I should meet a policeman."

"My dear Mr. Kara," said T. X., rising and lighting a cigarette, "you will go through life enduring that unhappy experience."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. You will always be expecting to meet one person, and meeting another, and unless you are very fortunate indeed, that other will always be a policeman."

His eyes twinkled for he had recovered from the gust of anger which had swept through him.

"There are two pieces of evidence I require to save Mr. Lexman from very serious trouble," he said, "the first of these is the letter which was burnt, as you know."

"Yes," said Kara.

T. X. leant across the desk.

"How did you know?" he snapped.

"Somebody told me, I don't know who it was."

"That's not true," replied T. X.; "nobody knows except myself and Mrs. Lexman."

"But my dear good fellow," said Kara, pulling on his gloves, "you have already asked me whether I didn't burn the letter."

"I said envelope," said T. X., with a little laugh.

"And you were going to say something about the other clue?"

"The other is the revolver," said T. X.

"Mr. Lexman's revolver!" drawled the Greek.

"That we have," said T. X. shortly. "What we want is the weapon which the Greek had when he threatened Mr. Lexman."

"There, I'm afraid I cannot help you."

Kara walked to the door and T. X. followed.

"I think I will see Mrs. Lexman."

"I think not," said T. X.

The other turned with a sneer.

“Have you arrested her, too?” he asked.

“Pull yourself together!” said T. X. coarsely. He escorted Kara to his waiting limousine.

“You have a new chauffeur to-night, I observe,” he said.

Kara towering with rage stepped daintily into the car.

“If you are writing to the other you might give him my love,” said T. X., “and make most tender enquiries after his mother. I particularly ask this.”

Kara said nothing until the car was out of earshot then he lay back on the down cushions and abandoned himself to a paroxysm of rage and blasphemy.

CHAPTER V

Six months later T. X. Meredith was laboriously tracing an elusive line which occurred on an ordnance map of Sussex when the Chief Commissioner announced himself.

Sir George described T. X. as the most wholesome corrective a public official could have, and never missed an opportunity of meeting his subordinate (as he said) for this reason.

“What are you doing there?” he growled.

“The lesson this morning,” said T. X. without looking up, “is maps.”

Sir George passed behind his assistant and looked over his shoulder.

“That is a very old map you have got there,” he said.

“1876. It shows the course of a number of interesting little streams in this neighbourhood which have been lost sight of for one reason or the other by the gentleman who made the survey at a later period. I am perfectly sure that in one of these streams I shall find what I am seeking.”

“You haven’t given up hope, then, in regard to Lexman?”

“I shall never give up hope,” said T. X., “until I am dead, and possibly not then.”

“Let me see, what did he get—fifteen years!”

“Fifteen years,” repeated T. X., “and a very fortunate man to escape with his life.”

Sir George walked to the window and stared out on to busy Whitehall.

“I am told you are quite friendly with Kara again.”

T. X. made a noise which might be taken to indicate his assent to the statement.

“I suppose you know that gentleman has made a very heroic attempt to get you fired,” he said.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said T. X. “I made as heroic an attempt to get him hung, and one good turn deserves another. What did he do? See ministers and people?”

“He did,” said Sir George.

“He’s a silly ass,” responded T. X.

“I can understand all that”—the Chief Commissioner turned round—“but what I cannot understand is your apology to him.”

“There are so many things you don’t understand, Sir George,” said T. X. tartly, “that I despair of ever cataloguing them.”

“You are an insolent cub,” growled his Chief. “Come to lunch.”

“Where will you take me?” asked T. X. cautiously.

“To my club.”

“I’m sorry,” said the other, with elaborate politeness, “I have lunched once at your club. Need I say more?”

He smiled, as he worked after his Chief had gone, at the recollection of Kara’s profound astonishment and the gratification he strove so desperately to disguise.

Kara was a vain man, immensely conscious of his good looks, conscious of his wealth. He had behaved most handsomely, for not only had he accepted the apology, but he left nothing undone to show his desire to create a good impression upon the man who had so grossly insulted him.

T. X. had accepted an invitation to stay a weekend at Kara’s “little place in the country,” and had found there assembled everything that the heart could desire in the way of fellowship, eminent politicians who might conceivably be of service to an ambitious young Assistant Commissioner of Police, beautiful ladies to interest and amuse him. Kara had even gone to the length of engaging a theatrical company to play “Sweet Lavender,” and for this purpose the big ballroom at Hever Court had been transformed into a theatre.

As he was undressing for bed that night T. X. remembered that he had mentioned to Kara that “Sweet Lavender” was his favorite play, and he realized that the entertainment was got up especially for his benefit.

In a score of other ways Kara had endeavoured to consolidate the friendship. He gave the young Commissioner advice about a railway company which was operating in Asia Minor, and the shares of which stood a little below par. T. X. thanked him for the advice, and did not take it, nor did he feel any regret when the shares rose 3 pounds in as many weeks.

T. X. had superintended the disposal of Beston Priory. He had the furniture removed to London, and had taken a flat for Grace Lexman.

She had a small income of her own, and this, added to the large royalties which came to her (as she was bitterly conscious) in increasing volume as the result of the publicity of the trial, placed her beyond fear of want.

"Fifteen years," murmured T. X., as he worked and whistled.

There had been no hope for John Lexman from the start. He was in debt to the man he killed. His story of threatening letters was not substantiated. The revolver which he said had been flourished at him had never been found. Two people believed implicitly in the story, and a sympathetic Home Secretary had assured T. X. personally that if he could find the revolver and associate it with the murder beyond any doubt, John Lexman would be pardoned.

Every stream in the neighbourhood had been dragged. In one case a small river had been dammed, and the bed had been carefully dried and sifted, but there was no trace of the weapon, and T. X. had tried methods more effective and certainly less legal.

A mysterious electrician had called at 456 Cadogan Square in Kara's absence, and he was armed with such indisputable authority that he was permitted to penetrate to Kara's private room, in order to examine certain fitments.

Kara returning next day thought no more of the matter when it was reported to him, until going to his safe that night he discovered that it had been opened and ransacked.

As it happened, most of Kara's valuable and confidential possessions were at the bank. In a fret of panic and at considerable cost he had the safe removed and another put in its place of such potency that the makers offered to indemnify him against any loss from burglary.

T. X. finished his work, washed his hands, and was drying them when Mansus came bursting into the room. It was not usual for Mansus to burst into anywhere. He was a slow, methodical, painstaking man, with a deliberate and an official, manner.

"What's the matter?" asked T. X. quickly.

"We didn't search Vassalaro's lodgings," cried Mansus breathlessly. "It just occurred to me as I was coming over Westminster Bridge. I was on top of a bus—"

"Wake up!" said T. X. "You're amongst friends and cut all that 'bus' stuff out. Of course we searched Vassalaro's lodgings!"

"No, we didn't, sir," said the other triumphantly. "He lived in Great James Street."

"He lived in the Adelphi," corrected T. X.

"There were two places where he lived," said Mansus.

"When did you learn this?" asked his Chief, dropping his flippancy.

"This morning. I was on a bus coming across Westminster Bridge, and there were two men in front of me, and I heard the word 'Vassalaro' and naturally I pricked up my ears."

"It was very unnatural, but proceed," said T. X.

"One of the men—a very respectable person—said, 'That chap Vassalaro used to lodge in my place, and I've still got a lot of his things. What do you think I ought to do?'"

"And you said," suggested the other.

"I nearly frightened his life out of him," said Mansus. "I said, 'I am a police officer and I want you to come along with me.'"

"And of course he shut up and would not say another word," said T. X.

“That’s true, sir,” said Mansus, “but after awhile I got him to talk. Vassalaro lived in Great James Street, 604, on the third floor. In fact, some of his furniture is there still. He had a good reason for keeping two addresses by all accounts.”

T. X. nodded wisely.

“What was her name?” he asked.

“He had a wife,” said the other, “but she left him about four months before he was killed. He used the Adelphi address for business purposes and apparently he slept two or three nights of the week at Great James Street. I have told the man to leave everything as it is, and that we will come round.”

Ten minutes later the two officers were in the somewhat gloomy apartments which Vassalaro had occupied.

The landlord explained that most of the furniture was his, but that there were certain articles which were the property of the deceased man. He added, somewhat unnecessarily, that the late tenant owed him six months’ rent.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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