

Wallace Edgar

Bones in London



Edgar Wallace
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CHAPTER I

BONES AND BIG BUSINESS

There was a slump in the shipping market, and men who were otherwise decent citizens wailed for one hour of glorious war, when Kenyon Line Deferred had stood at 88 1/2, and even so poor an organization as Siddons Steam Packets Line had been marketable at 3 3/8.

Two bareheaded men came down the busy street, their hands thrust into their trousers pockets, their sleek, well-oiled heads bent in dejection.

No word they spoke, keeping step with the stern precision of soldiers. Together they wheeled through the open doors of the Commercial Trust Building, together they left-turned into the elevator, and simultaneously raised their heads to examine its roof, as though in its panelled ceiling was concealed some Delphic oracle who would answer the riddle which circumstances had set them.

They dropped their heads together and stood with sad eyes, regarding the attendant's leisurely unlatching of the gate. They slipped forth and walked in single file to a suite of offices inscribed "Pole Brothers, Brokers," and, beneath, "The United Merchant Shippers' Corporation," and passed through a door which, in addition to this declaration, bore the footnote "Private."

Here the file divided, one going to one side of a vast pedestal desk and one to the other. Still with their hands pushed deep into their pockets, they sank, almost as at a word of command, each into his cushioned chair, and stared at one another across the table.

They were stout young men of the middle thirties, clean-shaven and ruddy. They had served their country in the late War, and had made many sacrifices to the common cause. One had worn uniform and one had not. Joe had occupied some mysterious office which permitted and, indeed, enjoined upon him the wearing of the insignia of captain, but had forbidden him to leave his native land. The other had earned a little decoration with a very big title as a buyer of boots for Allied nations. Both had subscribed largely to War Stock, and a reminder of their devotion to the cause of liberty was placed to their credit every half-year.

But for these, war, with its horrific incidents, its late hours, its midnight railway journeys by trains on which sleeping berths could not be had for love or money, its food cards and statements of excess profits, was past. The present held its tragedy so poignant as to overshadow that breathless terrifying moment when peace had come and found the firm with the sale of the Fairy Line of cargo steamers uncompleted, contracts unsigned, and shipping stock which had lived light-headedly in the airy spaces, falling deflated on the floor of the house.

The Fairy Line was not a large line. It was, in truth, a small line. It might have been purchased for two hundred thousand pounds, and nearly was. To-day it might be acquired for one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and yet it wasn't.

"Joe," said the senior Mr. Pole, in a voice that came from his varnished boots, "we've got to do something with Fairies."

"Curse this War!" said Joe in cold-blooded even tones. "Curse the Kaiser! A weak-kneed devil who might at least have stuck to it for another month! Curse him for making America build ships, curse him for –"

"Joe," said the stout young man on the other side of the table, shaking his head sadly, "it is no use cursing, Joe. We knew that they were building ships, but the business looked good to me. If Turkey hadn't turned up her toes and released all that shipping –"

"Curse Turkey!" said the other, with great calmness. "Curse the Sultan and Enver and Taalat, curse Bulgaria and Ferdinand – "

"Put in one for the Bolsheviks, Joe," said his brother urgently, "and I reckon that gets the lot in trouble. Don't start on Austria, or we'll find ourselves cursing the Jugo-Slavs."

He sighed deeply, pursed his lips, and looked at his writing-pad intently.

Joe and Fred Pole had many faults, which they freely admitted, such as their generosity, their reckless kindness of heart, their willingness to do their worst enemies a good turn, and the like. They had others which they never admitted, but which were none the less patent to their prejudiced contemporaries.

But they had virtues which were admirable. They were, for example, absolutely loyal to one another, and were constant in their mutual admiration and help. If Joe made a bad deal, Fred never rested until he had balanced things against the beneficiary. If Fred in a weak moment paid a higher price to the vendor of a property than he, as promoter, could afford, it was Joe who took the smug vendor out to dinner and, by persuasion, argument, and the frank expression of his liking for the unfortunate man, tore away a portion of his ill-gotten gains.

"I suppose," said Joe, concluding his minatory exercises, and reaching for a cigar from the silver box which stood on the table midway between the two, "I suppose we couldn't hold Billing to his contract. Have you seen Cole about it, Fred?"

The other nodded slowly.

"Cole says that there is no contract. Billing offered to buy the ships, and meant to buy them, undoubtedly; but Cole says that if you took Billing into court, the judge would chuck his pen in your eye."

"Would he now?" said Joe, one of whose faults was that he took things literally. "But perhaps if you took Billing out to dinner, Fred – "

"He's a vegetarian, Joe" – he reached in his turn for a cigar, snipped the end and lit it – "and he's deaf. No, we've got to find a sucker, Joe. I can sell the *Fairy May* and the *Fairy Belle*: they're little boats, and are worth money in the open market. I can sell the wharfage and offices and the goodwill – "

"What's the goodwill worth, Fred?"

"About five pence net," said the gloomy Fred. "I can sell all these, but it is the *Fairy Mary* and the *Fairy Tilda* that's breaking my heart. And yet, Joe, there ain't two ships of their tonnage to be bought on the market. If you wanted two ships of the same size and weight, you couldn't buy 'em for a million – no, you couldn't. I guess they must be bad ships, Joe."

Joe had already guessed that.

"I offered 'em to Saddler, of the White Anchor," Fred went on, "and he said that if he ever started collecting curios he'd remember me. Then I tried to sell 'em to the Coastal Cargo Line – the very ships for the Newcastle and Thames river trade – and he said he couldn't think of it now that the submarine season was over. Then I offered 'em to young Topping, who thinks of running a line to the West Coast, but he said that he didn't believe in Fairies or Santa Claus or any of that stuff."

There was silence.

"Who named 'em *Fairy Mary* and *Fairy Tilda*?" asked Joe curiously.

"Don't let's speak ill of the dead," begged Fred; "the man who had 'em built is no longer with us, Joe. They say that joy doesn't kill, but that's a lie, Joe. He died two days after we took 'em over, and left all his money – all our money – to a nephew."

"I didn't know that," said Joe, sitting up.

"I didn't know it myself till the other day, when I took the deed of sale down to Cole to see if there wasn't a flaw in it somewhere. I've wired him."

"Who – Cole?"

"No, the young nephew. If we could only – "

He did not complete his sentence, but there was a common emotion and understanding in the two pairs of eyes that met.

"Who is he – anybody?" asked Joe vaguely.

Fred broke off the ash of his cigar and nodded.

"Anybody worth half a million is somebody, Joe," he said seriously. "This young fellow was in the Army. He's out of it now, running a business in the City – 'Schemes, Ltd.,' he calls it. Lots of people know him – shipping people on the Coast. He's got a horrible nickname."

"What's that, Fred?"

"Bones," said Fred, in tones sufficiently sepulchral to be appropriate, "and, Joe, he's one of those bones I want to pick."

There was another office in that great and sorrowful City. It was perhaps less of an office than a boudoir, for it had been furnished on the higher plan by a celebrated firm of furnishers and decorators, whose advertisements in the more exclusive publications consisted of a set of royal arms, a photograph of a Queen Anne chair, and the bold surname of the firm. It was furnished with such exquisite taste that you could neither blame nor praise the disposition of a couch or the set of a purple curtain.

The oxydized silver grate, the Persian carpets, the rosewood desk, with its Venetian glass flower vase, were all in harmony with the panelled walls, the gentlemanly clock which ticked sedately on the Adam mantelpiece, the Sheraton chairs, the silver – or apparently so – wall sconces, the delicate electrolier with its ballet skirts of purple silk.

All these things were evidence of the careful upbringing and artistic earnings of the young man who "blended" for the eminent firm of Messrs. Worrows, By Appointment to the King of Smyrna, His Majesty the Emperor – (the blank stands for an exalted name which had been painted out by the patriotic management of Worrows), and divers other royalties.

The young man who sat in the exquisite chair, with his boots elevated to and resting upon the olive-green leather of the rosewood writing-table, had long since grown familiar with the magnificence in which he moved and had his being. He sat chewing an expensive paper-knife of ivory, not because he was hungry, but because he was bored. He had entered into his kingdom brimful of confidence and with unimagined thousands of pounds to his credit in the coffers of the Midland and Somerset Bank.

He had brought with him a bright blue book, stoutly covered and brassily locked, on which was inscribed the word "Schemes."

That book was filled with writing of a most private kind and of a frenzied calculation which sprawled diagonally over pages, as for example:

Buy up old houses... say 2,000 pounds.
Pull them down... say 500 pounds.
Erect erect 50 Grand Flats... say 10,000 pounds.
Paper, pante, windows, etc... say 1,000 pounds.

—

Total... 12,000 pounds.
50 Flats let at 80 pounds per annum. 40,000 lbs.
Net profit... say 50 per cent.

NOTE. – For good middle class families steady steady people. By this means means doing good turn to working classes solving housing problems and making money which can be distributed distributed to the poor.

Mr. Augustus Tibbetts, late of H.M. Houssa Rifles, was, as his doorplate testified, the Managing Director of "Schemes, Ltd." He was a severe looking young man, who wore a gold-rimmed monocle on his grey check waistcoat and occasionally in his left eye. His face was of that brick-red which spoke

of a life spent under tropical suns, and whenever he conveyed a momentary impression of a departed militarism.

He uncurled his feet from the table, and, picking up a letter, read it through aloud – that is to say, he read certain words, skipped others, and substituted private idioms for all he could not or would not trouble to pronounce.

"Dear Sir," (he mumbled), "as old friends of your dear uncle, and so on and so forth, we are taking the first opportunity of making widdlywiddly wee... Our Mr. Fred Pole will call upon you and place himself widdly widdly wee – tum tiddly um tum. – Yours truly."

Mr. Tibbetts frowned at the letter and struck a bell with unnecessary violence. There appeared in the doorway a wonderful man in scarlet breeches and green zouave jacket. On his head was a dull red tarbosh, on his feet scarlet slippers, and about his waist a sash of Oriental audacity. His face, large and placid, was black, and, for all his suggestiveness of the brilliant East, he was undoubtedly negroid.

The costume was one of Mr. Tibbetts's schemes. It was faithfully copied from one worn by a gentleman of colour who serves the Turkish coffee at the Wistaria Restaurant. It may be said that there was no special reason why an ordinary business man should possess a bodyguard at all, and less reason why he should affect one who had the appearance of a burlesque Othello, but Mr. Augustus Tibbetts, though a businessman, was not ordinary.

"Bones" – for such a name he bore without protest in the limited circles of his friendship – looked up severely.

"Ali," he demanded, "have you posted the ledger?"

"Sir," said Ali, with a profound obeisance, "the article was too copious for insertion in aperture of collection box, so it was transferred to the female lady behind postal department counter."

Bones leapt up, staring.

"Goodness gracious, Heavens alive, you silly old ass – you – you haven't posted it – in the post?"

"Sir," said Ali reproachfully, "you instructed posting volume in exact formula. Therefore I engulfed it in wrappings and ligatures of string, and safely delivered it to posting authority."

Bones sank back in his chair.

"It's no use – no use, Ali," he said sadly, "my poor uncivilized savage, it's not your fault. I shall never bring you up to date, my poor silly old josser. When I say 'post' the ledger, I mean write down all the money you've spent on cabs in the stamp book. Goodness gracious alive! You can't run a business without system, Ali! Don't you know that, my dear old image? How the dooce do you think the auditors are to know how I spend my jolly old uncle's money if you don't write it down, hey? Posting means writing. Good Heavens" – a horrid thought dawned on him – "who did you post it to?"

"Lord," said Ali calmly, "destination of posted volume is your lordship's private residency."

All's English education had been secured in the laboratory of an English scientist in Sierra Leone, and long association with that learned man had endowed him with a vocabulary at once impressive and recondite.

Bones gave a resigned sigh.

"I'm expecting –" he began, when a silvery bell tinkled.

It was silvery because the bell was of silver. Bones looked up, pulled down his waistcoat, smoothed back his hair, fixed his eye-glass, and took up a long quill pen with a vivid purple feather.

"Show them in," he said gruffly.

"Them" was one well-dressed young man in a shiny silk hat, who, when admitted to the inner sanctum, came soberly across the room, balancing his hat.

"Ah, Mr. Pole – Mr. Fred Pole." Bones read the visitor's card with the scowl which he adopted for business hours. "Yes, yes. Be seated, Mr. Pole. I shall not keep you a minute."

He had been waiting all the morning for Mr. Pole. He had been weaving dreams from the letter-heading above Mr. Pole's letter.

Ships ... ships ... house-flags ... brass-buttoned owners...

He waved Mr. Fred to a chair and wrote furiously. This frantic pressure of work was a phenomenon which invariably coincided with the arrival of a visitor. It was, I think, partly due to nervousness and partly to his dislike of strangers. Presently he finished, blotted the paper, stuck it in an envelope, addressed it, and placed it in his drawer. Then he took up the card.

"Mr. Pole?" he said.

"Mr. Pole," repeated that gentleman.

"Mr. *Fred* Pole?" asked Bones, with an air of surprise.

"Mr. Fred Pole," admitted the other soberly.

Bones looked from the card to the visitor as though he could not believe his eyes.

"We have a letter from you somewhere," he said, searching the desk.

"Ah, here it is!" (It was, in fact, the only document on the table.)

"Yes, yes, to be sure. I'm very glad to meet you."

He rose, solemnly shook hands, sat down again and coughed. Then he took up the ivory paper-knife to chew, coughed again as he detected the lapse, and put it down with a bang.

"I thought I'd like to come along and see you, Mr. Tibbetts," said Fred in his gentle voice; "we are so to speak, associated in business."

"Indeed?" said Bones. "In-deed?"

"You see, Mr. Tibbetts," Fred went on, with a sad smile, "your lamented uncle, before he went out of business, sold us his ships. He died a month later."

He sighed and Bones sighed.

"Your uncle was a great man, Mr. Tibbetts," he said, "one of the greatest business men in this little city. What a man!"

"Ah!" said Bones, shaking his head mournfully.

He had never met his uncle and had seldom heard of him. Saul Tibbetts was reputedly a miser, and his language was of such violence that the infant Augustus was invariably hurried to the nursery on such rare occasions as old Saul paid a family visit. His inheritance had come to Bones as in a dream, from the unreality of which he had not yet awakened.

"I must confess, Mr. Tibbetts," said Fred, "that I have often had qualms of conscience about your uncle, and I have been on the point of coming round to see you several times. This morning I said to my brother, 'Joe,' I said, 'I'm going round to see Tibbetts.' Forgive the familiarity, but we talk of firms like the Rothschilds and the Morgans without any formality."

"Naturally, naturally, naturally," murmured Bones gruffly.

"I said: 'I'll go and see Tibbetts and get it off my chest. If he wants those ships back at the price we paid for them, or even less, he shall have them.' 'Fred,' he said, 'you're too sensitive for business.' 'Joe,' I said, 'my conscience works even in business hours.'"

A light dawned on Bones and he brightened visibly.

"Ah, yes, my dear old Pole," he said almost cheerily, "I understand. You diddle my dear old uncle – bless his heart – out of money, and you want to pay it back. Fred" – Bones rose and extended his knuckly hand – "you're a jolly old sportsman, and you can put it there!"

"What I was going to say – " began Fred seriously agitated.

"Not a word. We'll have a bottle on this. What will you have – ginger-beer or cider?"

Mr. Fred suppressed a shudder with difficulty.

"Wait, wait, Mr. Tibbetts," he begged; "I think I ought to explain. We did not, of course, knowingly rob your uncle – "

"No, no, naturally," said Bones, with a facial contortion which passed for a wink. "Certainly not. We business men never rob anybody. Ali, bring the drinks!"

"We did not consciously rob him," continued Mr. Fred desperately, "but what we did do – ah, this is my confession!"

"You borrowed a bit and didn't pay it back. Ah, naughty!" said Bones. "Out with the corkscrew, Ali. What shall it be – a cream soda or non-alcoholic ale?"

Mr. Fred looked long and earnestly at the young man.

"Mr. Tibbetts," he said, and suddenly grasped the hand of Bones, "I hope we are going to be friends. I like you. That's my peculiarity – I like people or I dislike them. Now that I've told you that we bought two ships from your uncle for one hundred and forty thousand pounds when we knew – yes, positively knew – they were worth at least twenty thousand pounds more – now I've told you this, I feel happier."

"Worth twenty thousand pounds more?" said Bones thoughtfully.

Providence was working overtime for him, he thought.

"Of anybody's money," said Fred stoutly. "I don't care where you go, my dear chap. Ask Cole – he's the biggest shipping lawyer in this city – ask my brother, who, I suppose, is the greatest shipping authority in the world, or – what's the use of asking 'em? – ask yourself. If you're not Saul Tibbetts all over again, if you haven't the instinct and the eye and the brain of a shipowner – why, I'm a Dutchman! That's what I am – a Dutchman!"

He picked up his hat and his lips were pressed tight – a gesture and a grimace which stood for grim conviction.

"What are they worth to-day?" asked Bones, after a pause.

"What are they worth to-day?" Mr. Fred frowned heavily at the ceiling. "Now, what are they worth to-day? I forget how much I've spent on 'em – they're in dock now."

Bones tightened *his* lips, too.

"They're in dock now?" he said. He scratched his nose. "Dear old Fred

Pole," he said, "you're a jolly old soul. By Jove that's not bad!

'Pole' an' 'soul' rhyme – did you notice it?"

Fred had noticed it.

"It's rum," said Bones, shaking his head, "it is rum how things get about. How did you know, old fellow-citizen, that I was going in for shipping?"

Mr. Fred Pole did not know that Bones was going in for shipping, but he smiled.

"There are few things that happen in the City that I *don't* know," he admitted modestly.

"The Tibbetts Line," said Bones firmly, "will fly a house-flag of purple and green diagonally – that is, from corner to corner. There will be a yellow anchor in a blue wreath in one corner and a capital Tin a red wreath in the other."

"Original, distinctly original," said Fred in wondering admiration.

"Wherever did you get that idea?"

"I get ideas," confessed Bones, blushing, "some times in the night, sometimes in the day. The fleet" – Bones liked the sound of the word and repeated it – "the fleet will consist of the *Augustus*, the *Sanders* – a dear old friend of mine living at Hindhead – the *Patricia* – another dear old friend of mine living at Hindhead, too – in fact, in the same house. To tell you the truth, dear old Fred Pole, she's married to the other ship. And there'll be the *Hamilton*, another precious old soul, a very, very, very, very dear friend of mine who's comin' home shortly – "

"Well, what shall we say, Mr. Tibbetts?" said Fred, who had an early luncheon appointment. "Would you care to buy the two boats at the same price we gave your uncle for them?"

Bones rang his bell.

"I'm a business man, dear old Fred," said he soberly. "There's no time like the present, and I'll fix the matter — *now!*"

He said "now" with a ferociousness which was intended to emphasize his hard and inflexible business character.

Fred came into the private office of Pole & Pole after lunch that day, and there was in his face a great light and a peace which was almost beautiful.

But never beamed the face of Fred so radiantly as the countenance of the waiting Joe. He lay back in his chair, his cigar pointing to the ceiling.

"Well, Fred?" – there was an anthem in his voice.

"Very well, Joe." Fred hung up his unnecessary umbrella.

"I've sold the *Fairies*!"

Joe said it and Fred said it. They said it together. There was the same lilt of triumph in each voice, and both smiles vanished at the identical instant.

"*You've* sold the *Fairies*!" they said.

They might have been rehearsing this scene for months, so perfect was the chorus.

"Wait a bit, Joe," said Fred; "let's get the hang of this. I understand that you left the matter to me."

"I did; but, Fred, I was so keen on the idea I had that I had to nip in before you. Of course, I didn't go to him as Pole & Pole – "

"To him? What him?" asked Fred, breathing hard.

"To What's-his-name – Bones."

Fred took his blue silk handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his face.

"Go on, Joe," he said sadly

"I got him just before he went out to lunch. I sent up the United Merchant Shippers' card – it's our company, anyway. Not a word about Pole & Pole."

"Oh, no, of course not!" said Fred.

"And, my boy," – this was evidently Joe's greatest achievement, for he described the fact with gusto – "not a word about the names of the ships. I just sold him two steamers, so and so tonnage, so and so classification – "

"For how much?"

Fred was mildly curious. It was the curiosity which led a certain political prisoner to feel the edge of the axe before it beheaded him.

"A hundred and twenty thousand!" cried Joe joyously. "He's starting afleet, he says. He's calling it the Tibbetts Line, and bought a couple of ships only this morning."

Fred examined the ceiling carefully before he spoke.

"Joe," he said, "was it a firm deal? Did you put pen to paper?"

"You-bet-your-dear-sweet-life," said Joe, scornful at the suggestion that he had omitted such an indispensable part of the negotiation.

"So did I, Joe," said Fred. "Those two ships he bought were the two *Fairies*."

There was a dead silence.

"Well," said Joe uneasily, after a while, "we can get a couple of ships – "

"Where, Joe? You admitted yesterday there weren't two boats in the world on the market."

Another long silence.

"I did it for the best, Fred."

Fred nodded

"Something must be done. We can't sell a man what we haven't got. Joe, couldn't you go and play golf this afternoon whilst I wangle this matter out?"

Joe nodded and rose solemnly. He took down his umbrella from the peg and his shiny silk hat from another peg, and tiptoed from the room.

From three o'clock to four Mr. Fred Pole sat immersed in thought, and at last, with a big, heavy sigh, he unlocked his safe, took out his cheque-book and pocketed it.

Bones was on the point of departure, after a most satisfactory day's work, when Fred Pole was announced.

Bones greeted him like unto a brother – caught him by the hand at the very entrance and, still holding him thus, conducted him to one of his beautiful chairs.

"By Jove, dear old Fred," he babbled, "it's good of you, old fellow – really good of you! Business, my jolly old shipowner, waits for no man. Ali, my cheque-book!"

"A moment – just a moment, dear Mr. Bones," begged Fred. "You don't mind my calling you by the name which is already famous in the City?"

Bones looked dubious.

"Personally, I prefer Tibbetts," said Fred.

"Personally, dear old Fred, so do I," admitted Bones.

"I've come on a curious errand," said Fred in such hollow tones that

Bones started. "The fact is, old man, I'm – "

He hung his head, and Bones laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

"Anybody is liable to get that way, my jolly old roysterer," he said. "Speakin' for myself, drink has no effect upon me – due to my jolly old nerves of iron an' all that sort of thing."

"I'm ashamed of myself," said Fred.

"Nothing to be ashamed of, my poor old toper," said Bones honestly in error. "Why, I remember once – "

"As a business man, Mr. Tibbetts," said Fred bravely, "can you forgive sentiment?"

"Sentiment! Why, you silly old jossler, I'm all sentiment, dear old thing! Why, I simply cry myself to sleep over dear old Charles What's-his-name's books!"

"It's sentiment," said Fred brokenly. "I just can't – I simply can't part with those two ships I sold you."

"Hey?" said Bones.

"They were your uncle's, but they have an association for me and my brother which it would be – er – profane to mention. Mr. Tibbetts, let us cry off our bargain."

Bones sniffed and rubbed his nose.

"Business, dear old Fred," he said gently. "Bear up an' play the man, as dear old Francis Drake said when they stopped him playin' cricket. Business, old friend. I'd like to oblige you, but – "

He shook his head rapidly

Mr. Fred slowly produced his cheque-book and laid it on the desk with the sigh of one who was about to indite his last wishes.

"You shall not be the loser," he said, with a catch in his voice, for he was genuinely grieved. "I must pay for my weakness. What is five hundred pounds?"

"What is a thousand, if it comes to that, Freddy?" said Bones. "Gracious goodness, I shall be awfully disappointed if you back out – I shall be so vexed, really."

"Seven hundred and fifty?" asked Fred, with pleading in his eye.

"Make it a thousand, dear old Fred," said Bones; "I can't add up fifties."

So "in consideration" (as Fred wrote rapidly and Bones signed more rapidly) "of the sum of one thousand pounds (say £1,000), the contract as between &c., &c.," was cancelled, and Fred became again the practical man of affairs.

"Dear old Fred," said Bones, folding the cheque and sticking it in his pocket, "I'm goin' to own up – frankness is a vice with me – that I don't understand much about the shippin' business. But tell me, my jolly old merchant, why do fellows sell you ships in the mornin' an' buy 'em back in the afternoon?"

"Business, Mr. Tibbetts," said Fred, smiling, "just big business."

Bones sucked an inky finger.

"Dinky business for me, dear old thing," he said. "I've got a thousand from you an' a thousand from the other Johnny who sold me two ships. Bless my life an' soul – "

"The other fellow," said Fred faintly – "a fellow from the United Merchant Shippers?"

"That was the dear lad," said Bones.

"And has he cried off his bargain, too?"

"Positively!" said Bones. "A very, very nice, fellow. He told me I could call him Joe – jolly old Joe!"

"Jolly old Joe!" repeated Fred mechanically, as he left the office, and all the way home he was saying "Jolly old Joe!"

CHAPTER II

HIDDEN TREASURE

Mrs. Staleyborn's first husband was a dreamy Fellow of a Learned University.

Her second husband had begun life at the bottom of the ladder as a three-card trickster, and by strict attention to business and the exercise of his natural genius, had attained to the proprietorship of a bucket-shop.

When Mrs. Staleyborn was Miss Clara Smith, she had been housekeeper to Professor Whitland, a biologist who discovered her indispensability, and was only vaguely aware of the social gulf which yawned between the youngest son of the late Lord Bortledyne and the only daughter of Albert Edward Smith, mechanic. To the Professor she was Miss *H. Sapiens*— an agreeable, featherless plantigrade biped of the genus *Homo*. She was also thoroughly domesticated and cooked like an angel, a nice woman who apparently never knew that her husband had a Christian name, for she called him "Mr. Whitland" to the day of his death.

The strain and embarrassment of the new relationship with her master were intensified by the arrival of a daughter, and doubled when that daughter came to a knowledgeable age. Marguerite Whitland had the inherent culture of her father and the grace and delicate beauty which had ever distinguished the women of the house of Bortledyne.

When the Professor died, Mrs. Whitland mourned him in all sincerity.

She was also relieved. One-half of the burden which lay upon her had been lifted; the second half was wrestling with the binomial theorem at

Cheltenham College.

She had been a widow twelve months when she met Mr. Cresta Morris, and, if the truth be told, Mr. Cresta Morris more fulfilled her conception as to what a gentleman should look like than had the Professor. Mr. Cresta Morris wore white collars and beautiful ties, had a large gold watch-chain over what the French call poetically a *gilet de fantasie*, but which he, in his own homely fashion, described as a "fancy weskit." He smoked large cigars, was bluff and hearty, spoke to the widow — he was staying at Harrogate at the time in a hydropathic establishment — in a language which she could understand. Dimly she began to realize that the Professor had hardly spoken to her at all.

Mr. Cresta Morris was one of those individuals who employed a vocabulary of a thousand words, with all of which Mrs. Whitland was well acquainted; he was also a man of means and possessions, he explained to her. She, giving confidence for confidence, told of the house at Cambridge, the furniture, the library, the annuity of three hundred pounds, earmarked for his daughter's education, but mistakenly left to his wife for that purpose, also the four thousand three hundred pounds invested in War Stock, which was wholly her own.

Mr. Cresta Morris became more agreeable than ever. In three months they were married, in six months the old house at Cambridge had been disposed of, the library dispersed, as much of the furniture as Mr. Morris regarded as old-fashioned sold, and the relict of Professor Whitland was installed in a house in Brockley.

It was a nice house — in many ways nicer than the rambling old building in Cambridge, from Mrs. Morris's point of view. And she was happy in a tolerable, comfortable kind of fashion, and though she was wholly ignorant as to the method by which her husband made his livelihood, she managed to get along very well without enlightenment.

Marguerite was brought back from Cheltenham to grace the new establishment and assist in its management. She shared none of her mother's illusions as to the character of Mr. Cresta Morris, as that gentleman explained to a very select audience one January night.

Mr. Morris and his two guests sat before a roaring fire in the dining-room, drinking hot brandies-and-waters. Mrs. Morris had gone to bed; Marguerite was washing up, for Mrs. Morris had the "servant's mind," which means that she could never keep a servant.

The sound of crashing plates had come to the dining-room and interrupted Mr. Morris at a most important point of his narrative. He jerked his head round.

"That's the girl," he said; "she's going to be a handful."

"Get her married," said Job Martin wisely.

He was a hatchet-faced man with a reputation for common-sense. He had another reputation which need not be particularized at the moment.

"Married?" scoffed Mr. Morris. "Not likely!"

He puffed at his cigar thoughtfully for a moment, then:

"She wouldn't come in to dinner – did you notice that? We are not good enough for her. She's fly! Fly ain't the word for it. We always find her nosing and sneaking around."

"Send her back to school," said the third guest.

He was a man of fifty-five, broad-shouldered, clean-shaven, who had literally played many parts, for he had been acting in a touring company when Morris first met him – Mr. Timothy Webber, a man not unknown to the Criminal Investigation Department.

"She might have been useful," Mr. Morris went on regretfully, "very useful indeed. She is as pretty as a picture, I'll give her that due. Now, suppose she –"

Webber shook his head.

"It's my way or no way," he said decidedly. "I've been a month studying this fellow, and I tell you I know him inside out."

"Have you been to see him?" asked the second man.

"Am I a fool?" replied the other roughly. "Of course I have not been to see him. But there are ways of finding out, aren't there? He is not the kind of lad that you can work with a woman, not if she's as pretty as paint."

"What do they call him?" asked Morris.

"Bones," said Webber, with a little grin. "At least, he has letters which start 'Dear Bones,' so I suppose that's his nickname. But he's got all the money in the world. He is full of silly ass schemes, and he's romantic."

"What's that to do with it?" asked Job Martin, and Webber turned with a despairing shrug to Morris.

"For a man who is supposed to have brains –" he said, but Morris stopped him with a gesture.

"I see the idea – that's enough."

He ruminated again, chewing at his cigar, then, with a shake of his head —

"I wish the girl was in it."

"Why?" asked Webber curiously.

"Because she's –" He hesitated. "I don't know what she knows about me. I can guess what she guesses. I'd like to get her into something like this, to – to –" He was at a loss for a word.

"Compromise?" suggested the more erudite Webber.

"That's the word. I'd like to have her like that!" He put his thumb down on the table in an expressive gesture.

Marguerite, standing outside, holding the door-handle hesitating as to whether she should carry in the spirit kettle which Mr. Morris had ordered, stood still and listened.

The houses in Oakleigh Grove were built in a hurry, and at best were not particularly sound-proof. She stood fully a quarter of an hour whilst the three men talked in low tones, and any doubts she might have had as to the nature of her step-father's business were dispelled.

Again there began within her the old fight between her loyalty to her mother and loyalty to herself and her own ideals. She had lived through purgatory these past twelve months, and again and

again she had resolved to end it all, only to be held by pity for the helpless woman she would be deserting. She told herself a hundred times that her mother was satisfied in her placid way with the life she was living, and that her departure would be rather a relief than a cause for uneasiness. Now she hesitated no longer, and went back to the kitchen, took off the apron she was wearing, passed along the side-passage, up the stairs to her room, and began to pack her little bag.

Her mother was facing stark ruin. This man had drawn into his hand every penny she possessed, and was utilizing it for the furtherance of his own nefarious business. She had an idea – vague as yet, but later taking definite shape – that if she might not save her mother from the wreck which was inevitable, she might at least save something of her little fortune.

She had "nosed around" to such purpose that she had discovered her step-father was a man who for years had evaded the grip of an exasperated constabulary. Some day he would fall, and in his fall bring down her mother.

Mr. Cresta Morris absorbed in the elaboration of the great plan, was reminded, by the exhaustion of visible refreshment, that certain of his instructions had not been carried out.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I told that girl to bring in the kettle at half-past nine. I'll go out and get it. Her royal highness wouldn't lower herself by bringing it in, I suppose!"

He found the kettle on the kitchen table, but there was no sign of Marguerite. This was the culmination of a succession of "slights" which she had put on him, and in a rage he walked along the passage, and yelled up the stairs:

"Marguerite!"

There was no reply, and he raced up to her room. It was empty, but what was more significant, her dresses and the paraphernalia which usually ornamented her dressing-table had disappeared.

He came down a very thoughtful man.

"She's hopped," he said laconically. "I was always afraid of that."

It was fully an hour before he recovered sufficiently to bring his mind to a scheme of such fascinating possibilities that even his step-daughter's flight was momentarily forgotten

* * * * *

On the following morning Mr. Tibbetts received a visitor.

That gentleman who was, according to the information supplied by Mr. Webber, addressed in intimate correspondence as "Dear Bones," was sitting in his most gorgeous private office, wrestling with a letter to the eminent firm of Timmins and Timmins, yacht agents, on a matter of a luckless purchase of his.

"DEAR SIRS GENTLEMEN" (ran the letter. Bones wrote as he thought, thought faster than he wrote, and never opened a dictionary save to decide a bet) – "I told you I have told you 100,000 times that the yacht *Luana* I bought from your client (a nice client I must say!!!) is a fraud and a swindle. It is much too big. 2000 pounds was a swindle outrageous!! Well I've got it got it now so there's no use crying over split milk. But do like a golly old yacht-seller get rid of it. Sell it to *anybody* even for a 1000 pounds. I must have been mad to buy it but he was such a plausible chap..."

This and more he wrote and was writing, when the silvery bell announced a visitor. It rang many times before he realized that he had sent his factotum, Ali Mahomet, to the South Coast to recover from a sniffle – the after-effects of a violent cold – which had been particularly distressing to both. Four times the bell rang, and four times Bones raised his head and scowled at the door, muttering violent criticisms of a man who at that moment was eighty-five miles away.

Then he remembered, leapt up, sprinted to the door, flung it open with an annoyed:

"Come in! What the deuce are you standing out there for?"

Then he stared at his visitor, choked, went very red, choked again, and fixed his monocle.

"Come in, young miss, come in," he said gruffly. "Jolly old bell's out of order. Awfully sorry and all that sort of thing. Sit down, won't you?"

In the outer office there was no visible chair. The excellent Alipreferred sitting on the floor, and visitors were not encouraged.

"Come into my office," said Bones, "my private office."

The girl had taken him in with one comprehensive glance, and a little smile trembled on the corner of her lips as she followed the harassed financier into his "holy of holies."

"My little den," said Bones incoherently. "Sit down, jolly old – young miss. Take my chair – it's the best. Mind how you step over that telephone wire. Ah!"

She did catch her feet in the flex, and he sprang to her assistance.

"Upsy, daisy, dear old – young miss, I mean."

It was a breathless welcome. She herself was startled by the warmth of it; he, for his part, saw nothing but grey eyes and a perfect mouth, sensed nothing but a delicate fragrance of a godlike presence.

"I have come to see you – " she began.

"Jolly good of you," said Bones enthusiastically. "You've no idea how fearsomely lonely I get sometimes. I often say to people: 'Look me up, dear old thing, any time between ten and twelve or two and four; don't stand on ceremony – '"

"I've come to see you – " she began again.

"You're a kind young miss," murmured Bones, and she laughed.

"You're not used to having girls in this office, are you?"

"You're the first," said Bones, with a dramatic flourish, "that ever burst tiddly-um-te-um!"

To be mistaken for a welcome visitor – she was that, did she but guess it – added to her natural embarrassment.

"Well," she said desperately, "I've come for work."

He stared at her, refixing his monocle.

"You've come for work my dear old – my jolly old – young miss?"

"I've come for work," she nodded.

Bones's face was very grave.

"You've come for work." He thought a moment; then: "What work? Of course," he added in a flurry, "there's plenty of work to do! Believe me, you don't know the amount I get through in this sanctum – that's Latin for 'private office' – and the wretched old place is never tidy – never! I am seriously thinking" – he frowned – "yes, I am very seriously thinking of sacking the lady who does the dusting. Why, do you know, this morning – "

Her eyes were smiling now, and she was to Bones's unsophisticated eyes, and, indeed, to eyes sophisticated, superhumanly lovely.

"I haven't come for a dusting job," she laughed.

"Of course you haven't," said Bones in a panic. "My dear old lady – my precious – my young person, I should have said – of course you haven't!"

You've come for a job – you've come to work! Well, you shall have it!

Start right away!"

She stared.

"What shall I do?" she asked.

"What would I like you to do?" said Bones slowly. "What about scheming, getting out ideas, using brains, initiative, bright – " He trailed off feebly as she shook her head.

"Do you want a secretary?" she asked, and Bones's enthusiasm rose to the squeaking point.

"The very thing! I advertised in this morning's *Times*. You saw the advertisement?"

"You are not telling the truth," she said, looking at him with eyes that danced. "I read all the advertisement columns in *The Times* this morning, and I am quite sure that you did not advertise."

"I meant to advertise," said Bones gently. "I had the idea last night; that's the very piece of paper I was writing the advertisement on."

He pointed to a sheet upon the pad.

"A secretary? The very thing! Let me think."

He supported his chin upon one hand, his elbow upon another.

"You will want paper, pens, and ink – we have all those," he said. "There is a large supply in that cupboard. Also india-rubber. I am not sure if we have any india-rubber, but that can be procured. And a ruler," he said, "for drawing straight lines and all that sort of thing."

"And a typewriter?" she suggested.

Bones smacked his forehead with unnecessary violence.

"A typewriter! I knew this office wanted something. I said to Ali yesterday: 'You silly old ass –'"

"Oh, you have a girl?" she said disappointedly.

"Ali," said Bones, "is the name of a native man person who is devoted to me, body and soul. He has been, so to speak, in the family for years," he explained.

"Oh, it's a man," she said.

Bones nodded.

"Ali. Spelt A-l-y; it's Arabic."

"A native?"

Bones nodded.

"Of course he will not be in your way," he hastened to explain. "He is in Bournemouth just now. He had sniffles," he explained rapidly, "and then he used to go to sleep, and snore. I hate people who snore, don't you?"

She laughed again. This was the most amazing of all possible employers.

"Of course," Bones went on, "I snore a bit myself. All thinkers do – I mean all brainy people. Not being a jolly old snorer yourself –"

"Thank you," said the girl.

Other tenants or the satellites of other tenants who occupied the palatial buildings wherein the office of Bones was situated saw, some few minutes later, a bare-headed young man dashing down the stairs three at a time; met him, half an hour later, staggering up those same stairs handicapped by a fifty-pound typewriter in one hand, and a chair in the style of the late Louis Quinze in the other, and wondered at the urgency of his movements.

"I want to tell you," said the girl, "that I know very little about shorthand."

"Shorthand is quite unnecessary, my dear – my jolly old stenographer," said Bones firmly. "I object to shorthand on principle, and I shall always object to it. If people," he went on, "were intended to write shorthand, they would have been born without the alphabet. Another thing –"

"One moment, Mr. Tibbetts," she said. "I don't know a great deal about typewriting, either."

Bones beamed.

"There I can help you," he said. "Of course it isn't necessary that you should know anything about typewriting. But I can give you a few hints," he said. "This thing, when you jiggle it up and down, makes the thingummy-bob run along. Every time you hit one of these letters – I'll show you... Now, suppose I am writing 'Dear Sir,' I start with a 'D.' Now, where's that jolly old 'D'?" He scowled at the keyboard, shook his head, and shrugged his shoulders. "I thought so," he said; "there ain't a 'D.' I had an idea that that wicked old –"

"Here's the 'D,'" she pointed out.

Bones spent a strenuous but wholly delightful morning and afternoon.

He was half-way home to his chambers in Curzon Street before he realized that he had not fixed the rather important question of salary.

He looked forward to another pleasant morning making good that lapse.

It was his habit to remain late at his office at least three nights a week, for Bones was absorbed in his new career.

"Schemes Ltd." was no meaningless title. Bones had schemes which embraced every field of industrial, philanthropic, and social activity. He had schemes for building houses, and schemes for planting rose trees along all the railway tracks. He had schemes for building motor-cars, for founding labour colonies, for harnessing the rise and fall of the tides, he had a scheme for building a theatre where the audience sat on a huge turn-table, and, at the close of one act, could be twisted round, with no inconvenience to themselves, to face a stage which has been set behind them. Piqued by a certain strike which had caused him a great deal of inconvenience, he was engaged one night working out a scheme for the provision of municipal taxicabs, and he was so absorbed in his wholly erroneous calculations that for some time he did not hear the angry voices raised outside the door of his private office.

Perhaps it was that that portion of his mind which had been left free to receive impressions was wholly occupied with a scheme – which appeared in no books or records – for raising the wages of his new secretary.

But presently the noise penetrated even to him, and he looked up with a touch of annoyance.

"At this hour of the night! ... Goodness gracious ... respectable building!"

His disjointed comments were interrupted by the sound of a scuffle, and then a crash against his door and a groan, and Bones sprang to the door and threw it open.

As he did so a man who was leaning against it fell in.

"Shut the door, quick!" he gasped, and Bones obeyed.

The visitor who had so rudely interrupted himself was a man of middle age, wearing a coarse pea-jacket and blue jersey of a seaman, his peaked hat covered with dust, as Bones perceived later, when the sound of scurrying footsteps had died away.

The man was gripping his left arm as if in pain, and a thin trickle of red was running down the back of his big hand.

"Sit down, my jolly old mariner," said Bones anxiously. "What's the matter with you? What's the trouble, dear old sea-dog?"

The man looked up at him with a grimace.

"They nearly got it, the swine!" he growled.

He rolled up his sleeve and, deftly tying a handkerchief around a red patch, chuckled:

"It is only a scratch," he said. "They've been after me for two days, Harry Weatherall and Jim Curtis. But right's right all the world over. I've suffered enough to get what I've got – starved on the high seas, and starved on Lomo Island. Is it likely that I'm going to let them share?"

Bones shook his head.

"You sit down, my dear old fellow," he said sympathetically.

The man thrust his hands laboriously into his inside pocket and pulled out a flat oilskin case. From this he extracted a folded and faded chart.

"I was coming up to see a gentleman in these buildings," he said, "a gentleman named Tibbetts."

Bones opened his mouth to speak, but stopped himself.

"Me and Jim Curtis and young Harry, we were together in the *Serpent*

Queen – my name's Dibbs. That's where we got hold of the yarn about

Lomo Island, though we didn't believe there was anything in it. But when this Dago died – "

"Which Dago?" asked Bones.

"The Dago that knew all about it," said Mr. Dibbs impatiently, "and we come to split up his kit in his mess-bag, I found this." He shook the oilskin case in Bones's face. "Well, the first thing I did, when I got to Sydney, was to desert, and I got a chap from Wellington to put up the money to hire a boat to take me to Lomo. We were wrecked on Lomo."

"So you got there?" said Bones sympathetically.

"Six weeks I was on Lomo. Ate nothing but crabs, drank nothing but rain-water. But the stuff was there all right, only" – he was very emphatic, was this simple old sea-dog – "it wasn't under the

third tree, but the fourth tree. I got down to the first of the boxes, and it was as much as I could do to lift it out. I couldn't trust any of the Kanaka boys who were with me."

"Naturally," said Bones. "An' I'll bet they didn't trust you, thenaughty old Kanakas."

"Look here," said Mr. Dibbs, and he pulled out of his pocket a handful of gold coins which bore busts of a foreign-looking lady and gentleman. "Spanish gold, that is," he said. "There was four thousand in the little box. I filled both my pockets, and took 'em back to Sydney when we were picked up. I didn't dare try in Australia. 'That gold will keep,' I says to myself. 'I'll get back to England and find a man who will put up the money for an expedition' – a gentleman, you understand?"

"I quite understand," said Bones, all a-quiver with excitement.

"And then I met Harry and Jim. They said they'd got somebody who would put the money up, an American fellow, Rockefeller. Have you ever heard of him?"

"I've heard of him," said Bones; "he's got a paraffin mine."

"It may be he has, it may be he hasn't," said Mr. Dibbs and rose. "Well, sir, I'm very much obliged to you for your kindness. If you'll direct me to Mr. Tibbetts's office – "

It was a dramatic moment.

"I am Mr. Tibbetts," said Bones simply.

Blank incredulity was on the face of Mr. Dibbs.

"You?" he said. "But I thought Mr. Tibbetts was an older gentleman?"

"Dear old treasure-finder," said Bones, "be assured I am Mr. Tibbetts.

This is my office, and this is my desk. People think I am older because – " He smiled a little sadly, then: "Sit down!" he thundered.

"Let us go into this."

He went into the matter, and the City clocks were booming one when he led his mariner friend into the street.

He was late at the office the next morning, because he was young and healthy and required nine hours of the deepest slumber that Morpheus kept in stock.

The grey-eyed girl was typing at a very respectable speed the notes Bones had given her the evening before. There was a telegram awaiting him, which he read with satisfaction. Then:

"Leave your work, my young typewriter," said Bones imperiously. "I have a matter of the greatest importance to discuss with you! See that all the doors are closed," he whispered; "lock 'em if necessary."

"I hardly think that's necessary," said the girl. "You see, if anybody came and found all the doors locked – "

"Idiot!" said Bones, very red.

"I beg your pardon," said the startled girl.

"I was speaking to me," said Bones rapidly. "This is a matter of the greatest confidence, my jolly old Marguerite " – he paused, shaking at his temerity, for it was only on the previous day that he had discovered her name – "a matter which requires tact and discretion, young Marguerite – "

"You needn't say it twice," she said.

"Well once," said Bones, brightening up. "That's a bargain – I'll call you Marguerite once a day. Now, dear old Marguerite, listen to this."

She listened with the greatest interest, jotting down the preliminary expenses. Purchase of steamer, five thousand pounds; provisioning of same, three thousand pounds, etc., etc. She even undertook to make a copy of the plan which Mr. Dibbs had given into his charge, and which Bones told her had not left him day nor night.

"I put it in my pyjama pocket when I went to bed," he explained unnecessarily, "and – " He began to pat himself all over, consternation in his face.

"And you left it in your pyjama pocket," said the girl quietly. "I'll telephone to your house for it."

"Phew!" said Bones. "It seems incredible. I must have been robbed."

"I don't think so," said the girl; "it is probably under your pillow.

Do you keep your pyjamas under your pillow?"

"That," said Bones, "is a matter which I never discuss in public. I hate to disappoint you, dear old Marguerite – "

"I'm sorry," said the girl, with such a simulation of regret that Bones dissolved into a splutter of contrition.

A commissionaire and a taxicab brought the plan, which was discovered where the girl in her wisdom had suggested.

"I'm not so sure how much money I'm going to make out of this," said Bones off-handedly, after a thorough and searching examination of the project. "It is certain to be about three thousand pounds – it may be a million or two million. It'll be good for you, dear old stenographer."

She looked at him.

"I have decided," said Bones, playing with his paper-knife, "to allow you a commission of seven and a half per cent. on all profits. Seven and a half per cent. on two million is, roughly, fifty thousand pounds – "

She laughed her refusal.

"I like to be fair," said Bones.

"You like to be generous," she corrected him, "and because I am a girl, and pretty – "

"Oh, I say," protested Bones feebly – "oh, really you are not pretty at all. I am not influenced by your perfectly horrible young face, believe me, dear old Miss Marguerite. Now, I've a sense of fairness, a sense of justice – "

"Now, listen to me, Mr. Tibbetts." She swung her chair round to face him squarely. "I've got to tell you a little story."

Bones listened to that story with compressed lips and folded arms. He was neither shocked nor amazed, and the girl was surprised.

"Hold hard, young miss," he said soberly. "If this is a jolly old swindle, and if the naughty mariner – "

"His name is Webber, and he is an actor," she interrupted.

"And dooed well he acted," admitted Bones. "Well, if this is so, what about the other johnny who's putting up ten thousand to my fifteen thousand?"

This was a facer for the girl, and Bones glared his triumph.

"That is what the wicked old ship-sailer said. Showed me the money, an' I sent him straight off on the job. He said he'd got a Stock Exchange person named Morris – "

"Morris!" gasped the girl. "That is my step-father!"

Bones jumped up, a man inspired.

"The naughty old One, who married your sainted mother?" he gurgled.

"My miss! My young an' jolly old Marguerite!"

He sat down at his desk, yanked open the drawer, and slapped down his cheque-book.

"Three thousand pounds," he babbled, writing rapidly. "You'd better keep it for her, dear old friend of Faust."

"But I don't understand," she said, bewildered.

"Telegram," said Bones briefly. "Read it."

She picked up the buff form and read. It was postmarked from Cowes, and ran:

"In accordance your telegraphed instructions, have sold your schooner-yacht to Mr. Dibbs, who paid cash. Did not give name of owner. Dibbs did not ask to see boat. All he wanted was receipt for money."

"They are calling this afternoon for my fifteen thousand," said Bones, cackling light-headedly. "Ring up jolly old Scotland Yard, and ask 'em to send me all the police they've got in stock!"

CHAPTER III

BONES AND THE WHARFINGERS

I

The kite wheeling invisible in the blue heavens, the vulture appearing mysteriously from nowhere in the track of the staggering buck, possess qualities which are shared by certain favoured human beings. No newspaper announced the fact that there had arrived in the City of London a young man tremendously wealthy and as tremendously inexperienced.

There were no meetings of organized robber gangs, where masked men laid nefarious plans and plots, but the instinct which called the kite to his quarry and the carrion to the kill brought many strangers – who were equally strange to Bones and to one another – to the beautiful office which he had fitted for himself for the better furtherance of his business.

One day a respectable man brought to Mr. Tibbetts a plan of a warehouse. He came like a gale of wind, almost before Bones had digested the name on the card which announced his existence and identity.

His visitor was red-faced and big, and had need to use a handkerchief to mop his brow and neck at intervals of every few minutes. His geniality was overpowering.

Before the startled Bones could ask his business, he had put his hat upon one chair, hooked his umbrella on another, and was unrolling, with that professional tremblement of hand peculiar to all who unroll large stiff sheets of paper, a large coloured plan, a greater portion of which was taken up by the River Thames, as Bones saw at a glance.

He knew that blue stood for water, and, twisting his neck, he read "Thames." He therefore gathered that this was the plan of a property adjacent to the London river.

"You're a busy man; and I'm a busy man," said the stentorian man breathlessly. "I've just bought this property, and if it doesn't interest you I'll eat my hat! My motto is small profits and quick returns. Keep your money at work, and you won't have to. Do you see what I mean?"

"Dear old hurricane," said Bones feebly, "this is awfully interesting, and all that sort of thing, but would you be so kind as to explain why and where – why you came in in this perfectly informal manner? Against all the rules of my office, dear old thing, if you don't mind me snubbing you a bit. You are sure you aren't hurt?" he asked.

"Not a bit, not a bit!" bellowed the intruder. "Honest John, I am – John Staines. You have heard of me?"

"I have," said Bones, and the visitor was so surprised that he showed it.

"You have?" he said, not without a hint of incredulity.

"Yes," said Bones calmly. "Yes, I have just heard you say it, Honest John Staines. Any relation to John o' Gaunt?"

This made the visitor look up sharply.

"Ha, ha!" he said, his laugh lacking sincerity. "You're a bit of a joker, Mr. Tibbetts. Now, what do you say to this? This is Stivvins' Wharf and Warehouse. Came into the market on Saturday, and I bought it on Saturday. The only river frontage which is vacant between Greenwich and Gravesend. Stivvins, precious metal refiner, went broke in the War, as you may have heard. Now, I am a man of few words and admittedly a speculator. I bought this property for fifteen thousand pounds. Show me a profit of five thousand pounds and it's yours."

Before Bones could speak, he stopped him with a gesture.

"Let me tell you this: if you like to sit on that property for a month, you'll make a sheer profit of twenty thousand pounds. You can afford to do it – I can't. I tell you there isn't a vacant wharfage between Greenwich and Gravesend, and here you have a warehouse with thirty thousand feet of floor-space, derricks – derrick, named after the hangman of that name: I'll bet you didn't know that? – cranes, everything in – Well, it's not in apple-pie order," he admitted, "but it won't take much to make it so. What do you say?"

Bones started violently.

"Excuse me, old speaker, I was thinking of something else. Do you mind saying that all over again?"

Honest John Staines swallowed something and repeated his proposition.

Bones shook his head violently.

"Nothing doing!" he said. "Wharves and ships —no!"

But Honest John was not the kind that accepts refusal without protest.

"What I'll do," said he confidentially, "is this: I'll leave the matter for twenty-four hours in your hands."

"No, go, my reliable old wharf-seller," said Bones. "I never go up the river under any possible circumstances – By Jove, I've got an idea!"

He brought his knuckly fist down upon the unoffending desk, and Honest John watched hopefully.

"Now, if – yes, it's an idea!"

Bones seized paper, and his long-feathered quill squeaked violently.

"That's it – a thousand members at ten pounds a year, four hundred bedrooms at, say, ten shillings a night – How many is four hundred times ten shillings multiplied by three hundred and sixty-five? Well, let's say twenty thousand pounds. That's it! A club!"

"A club?" said Honest John blankly.

"A river club. You said Greenhithe – that's somewhere near Henley, isn't it?"

Honest John sighed.

"No, sir," he said gently, "it's in the other direction – toward the sea."

Bones dropped his pen and pinched his lip in an effort of memory.

"Is it? Now, where was I thinking about? I know – Maidenhead! Is it near Maidenhead?"

"It's in the opposite direction from London," said the perspiring Mr.

Staines.

"Oh!"

Bones's interest evaporated.

"No good to me, my old speculator. Wharves! Bah!"

He shook his head violently, and Mr. Staines aroused himself.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. Tibbetts," he said simply; "I'll leave the plans with you. I'm going down into the country for a night. Think it over. I'll call to-morrow afternoon."

Bones still shook his head.

"No go, nothin' doin'. Finish this palaver, dear old Honesty!"

"Anyway, no harm is done," urged Mr. Staines. "I ask you, is there any harm done? You have the option for twenty-four hours. I'll roll the plans up so that they won't be in the way. Good morning!"

He was out of the office door before Bones could as much as deliver the preamble to the stern refusal he was preparing.

At three o'clock that afternoon came two visitors. They sent in a card bearing the name of a very important Woking firm of land agents, and they themselves were not without dignity of bearing.

There was a stout gentleman and a thin gentleman, and they tiptoed into the presence of Bones with a hint of reverence which was not displeasing.

"We have come on a rather important matter," said the thin gentleman.

"We understand you have this day purchased Stivvins' Wharf – "

"Staines had no right to sell it?" burst in the stout man explosively. "A dirty mean trick, after all that he promised us! It is just his way of getting revenge, selling the property to a stranger!"

"Mr. Sole" – the thin gentleman's voice and attitude were eloquent of reproof – "*please* restrain yourself! My partner is annoyed," he explained "and not without reason. We offered fifty thousand pounds for Stivvins', and Staines, in sheer malice, has sold the property – which is virtually necessary to our client – literally behind our backs. Now, Mr. Tibbetts, are you prepared to make a little profit and transfer the property to us?"

"But – " began Bones.

"We will give you sixty thousand," said the explosive man. "Take it or leave it – sixty thousand."

"But, my dear old Boniface," protested Bones, "I haven't bought the property – really and truly I haven't. Jolly old Staines wanted me to buy it, but I assure you I didn't."

The stout man looked at him with glazed eyes, pulled himself together, and suggested huskily:

"Perhaps you will buy it – at his price – and transfer it to us?"

"But why? Nothing to do with me, my old estate agent and auctioneer.

Buy it yourself. Good afternoon. *Good* afternoon!"

He ushered them out in a cloud of genial commonplaces.

In the street they looked at one another, and then beckoned Mr.

Staines, who was waiting on the other side of the road.

"This fellow is either as wide as Broad Street or he's a babe in arms," said the explosive man huskily.

"Didn't he fall?" asked the anxious Staines.

"Not noticeably," said the thin man. "This is your scheme, Jack, and if I've dropped four thousand over that wharf, there's going to be trouble."

Mr. Staines looked very serious.

"Give him the day," he begged. "I'll try him to-morrow – I haven't lost faith in that lad."

As for Bones, he made an entry in his secret ledger.

"A person called Stains and two persons called Sole Bros. Brother tried me with the old Fiddle Trick. You take a Fiddle in a Pawn Broker's leave it with him along comes another Fellow and pretends it's a Stradivarius a valuable Fiddle. 2nd Fellow offers to pay a fabulous sum pawnbroker says I'll see. When 1st fellow comes for his fiddle pawnbroker buys it at a fabulous sum to sell it to the 2nd fellow. But 2nd fellow doesn't turn up.

"*Note.* – 1st Fellow called himself Honest John!! I doubt if I thought it."

Bones finished his entries, locked away his ledger, and crossed the floor to the door of the outer office.

He knocked respectfully, and a voice bade him come in.

It is not usual for the principal of a business to knock respectfully or otherwise on the door of the outer office, but then it is not usual for an outer office to house a secretary of such transcendental qualities, virtue, and beauty as were contained in the person of Miss Marguerite Whitland.

The girl half turned to the door and flashed a smile which was of welcome and reproof.

"Please, Mr. Tibbetts," she pleaded, "do not knock at my door. Don't you realize that it isn't done?"

"Dear old Marguerite," said Bones solemnly, "a new era has dawned in the City. As jolly old Confucius says: 'The moving finger writes, and that's all about it.' Will you deign to honour me with your presence in my sanctorum, and may I again beg of you" – he leaned his bony knuckles on the ornate desk which he had provided for her, and looked down upon her soberly – "may I again ask you, dear old miss, to let me change offices? It's a little thing, dear old miss. I'm never, never going to ask you to dinner again, but this is another matter. I am out of my element in such a place as – " He waved

his hand disparagingly towards his sanctum. "I'm a rough old adventurer, used to sleeping in the snow – hardships – I can sleep anywhere."

"Anyway, you're not supposed to sleep in the office," smiled the girl, rising.

Bones pushed open the door for her, bowed as she passed, and followed her. He drew a chair up to the desk, and she sat down without further protest, because she had come to know that his attentions, his extravagant politeness and violent courtesies, signified no more than was apparent – namely, that he was a great cavalier at heart.

"I think you ought to know," he said gravely, "that an attempt was made this morning to rob me of umpteen pounds."

"To rob you?" said the startled girl.

"To rob me," said Bones, with relish. "A dastardly plot, happily frustrated by the ingenuity of the intended victim. I don't want to boast, dear old miss. Nothing is farther from my thoughts or wishes, but what's more natural when a fellow is offered a –"

He stopped and frowned.

"Yes?"

"A precious metal refiner's – That's rum," said Bones.

"Rum?" repeated the girl hazily. "What is rum?"

"Of all the rummy old coincidences," said Bones, with restrained and hollow enthusiasm – "why, only this morning I was reading in *TwiddlyBits*, a ripping little paper, dear old miss – There's a column called 'Things You Ought to Know,' which is honestly worth the twopence."

"I know it," said the girl curiously. "But what did you read?"

"It was an article called 'Fortunes Made in Old Iron,'" said Bones.

"Now, suppose this naughty old refiner – By Jove, it's an idea!"

He paced the room energetically, changing the aspect of his face with great rapidity, as wandering thoughts crowded in upon him and vast possibilities shook their alluring banners upon the pleasant scene he conjured. Suddenly he pulled himself together, shot out his cuffs, opened and closed all the drawers of his desk as though seeking something – he found it where he had left it, hanging on a peg behind the door, and put it on – and said with great determination and briskness:

"Stivvins' Wharf, Greenhithe. You will accompany me. Bring your note-book. It is not necessary to bring a typewriter. I will arrange for a taxicab. We can do the journey in two hours."

"But where are you going?" asked the startled girl.

"To Stivvins'. I am going to look at this place. There is a possibility that certain things have been overlooked. Never lose an opportunity, dear old miss. We magnates make our fortune by never ignoring the little things."

But still she demurred, being a very sane, intelligent girl, with an imagination which produced no more alluring mental picture than a cold and draughty drive, a colder and draughtier and even more depressing inspection of a ruined factory, and such small matters as a lost lunch.

But Bones was out of the room, in the street, had flung himself upon a hesitant taxi-driver, had bullied and cajoled him to take a monstrous and undreamt-of journey for a man who, by his own admission, had only sufficient petrol to get his taxi home, and when the girl came down she found Bones, with his arm entwined through the open window of the door, giving explicit instructions as to the point on the river where Stivvins' Wharf was to be found.

II

Bones returned to his office alone. The hour was six-thirty, and he was a very quiet and thoughtful young man. He almost tiptoed into his office, closed and locked the door behind him, and sat at his desk with his head in his hands for the greater part of half an hour.

Then he unrolled the plan of the wharf, hoping that his memory had not played him false. Happily it had not. On the bottom right-hand corner Mr. Staines had written his address! "Stamford Hotel, Blackfriars."

Bones pulled a telegraph form from his stationery rack and indited an urgent wire.

Mr. Staines, at the moment of receiving that telegram, was sitting at a small round table in the bar of The Stamford, listening in silence to certain opinions which were being expressed by his two companions in arms and partners in misfortune, the same opinions relating in a most disparaging manner to the genius, the foresight, and the constructive ability of one who in his exuberant moments described himself as Honest John.

The explosive gentleman had just concluded a fanciful picture of what would happen to Honest John if he came into competition with the average Bermondsey child of tender years.

Honest John took the telegram and opened it. He read it and gasped. He stood up and walked to the light, and read it again, then returned, his eyes shining, his face slightly flushed.

"You're clever, ain't you?" he asked. "You're wise – I don't think!

Look at this!"

He handed the telegram to the nearest of his companions, who was the tall, thin, and non-explosive partner, and he in turn passed it without a word to his more choleric companion.

"You don't mean to say he's going to buy it?"

"That's what it says, doesn't it?" said the triumphant Mr. Staines.

"It's a catch," said the explosive man suspiciously.

"Not on your life," replied the scornful Staines. "Where does the catch come in? We've done nothing he could catch us for?"

"Let's have a look at that telegram again," said the thin man, and, having read it in a dazed way, remarked: "He'll wait for you at the office until nine. Well, Jack, nip up and fix that deal. Take the transfers with you. Close it and take his cheque. Take anything he'll give you, and get a special clearance in the morning, and, anyway, the business is straight."

Honest John breathed heavily through his nose and staggered from the bar, and the suspicious glances of the barman were, for once, unjustified, for Mr. Staines was labouring under acute emotions.

He found Bones sitting at his desk, a very silent, taciturn Bones, who greeted him with a nod.

"Sit down," said Bones. "I'll take that property. Here's my cheque."

With trembling fingers Mr. Staines prepared the transfers. It was he who scoured the office corridors to discover two agitated char-ladies who were prepared to witness his signature for a consideration.

He folded the cheque for twenty thousand pounds reverently and put it into his pocket, and was back again at the Stamford Hotel so quickly that his companions could not believe their eyes.

"Well, this is the rummiest go I have ever known," said the explosive man profoundly. "You don't think he expects us to call in the morning and buy it back, do you?"

Staines shook his head.

"I know he doesn't," he said grimly. "In fact, he as good as told me that that business of buying a property back was a fake."

The thin man whistled.

"The devil he did! Then what made him buy it?"

"He's been there. He mentioned he had seen the property," said Staines. And then, as an idea occurred to them all simultaneously, they looked at one another.

The stout Mr. Sole pulled a big watch from his pocket.

"There's a caretaker at Stivvins', isn't there?" he said. "Let's go down and see what has happened."

Stivvins' Wharf was difficult of approach by night. It lay off the main Woolwich Road, at the back of another block of factories, and to reach its dilapidated entrance gates involved an adventurous

march through a number of miniature shell craters. Night, however, was merciful in that it hid the desolation which is called Stivvins' from the fastidious eye of man. Mr. Sole, who was not aesthetic and by no means poetical, admitted that Stivvins' gave him the hump.

It was ten o'clock by the time they had reached the wharf, and half-past ten before their hammering on the gate aroused the attention of the night-watchman – who was also the day-watchman – who occupied what had been in former days the weigh-house, which he had converted into a weatherproof lodging.

"Hullo!" he said huskily. "I was asleep."

He recognized Mr. Sole, and led the way to his little bunk-house.

"Look here, Tester," said Sole, who had appointed the man, "did a young swell come down here to-day?"

"He did," said Mr. Tester, "and a young lady. They gave Mr. Staines' name, and asked to be showed round, and," he added, "I showed 'em round."

"Well, what happened?" asked Staines.

"Well," said the man, "I took 'em in the factory, in the big building, and then this young fellow asked to see the place where the metal was kept."

"What metal?" asked three voices at one and the same time.

"That's what I asked," said Mr. Tester, with satisfaction. "I told 'em Stivvins dealt with all kinds of metal, so the gent says: 'What about gold?'"

"What about gold?" repeated Mr. Staines thoughtfully. "And what did you say?"

"Well, as a matter of fact," explained Tester, "I happen to know this place, living in the neighbourhood, and I used to work here about eighty years ago, so I took 'em down to the vault."

"To the vault?" said Mr. Staines. "I didn't know there was a vault."

"It's under the main office. You must have seen the place," said Tester. "There's a big steel door with a key in it – at least, there was a key in it, but this young fellow took it away with him."

Staines gripped his nearest companion in sin, and demanded huskily:

"Did they find anything in – in the vault?"

"Blessed if I know!" said the cheerful Tester, never dreaming that he was falling very short of the faith which at that moment, and only at that moment, had been reposed in him. "They just went in. I've never been inside the place myself."

"And you stood outside, like a – a –"

"Blinking image!" said the explosive companion.

"You stood outside like a blinking image, and didn't attempt to go in, and see what they were looking at?" said Mr. Staines heatedly. "How long were they there?"

"About ten minutes."

"And then they came out?"

Tester nodded.

"Did they bring anything out with them?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Tester emphatically.

"Did this fellow – what's his name? – look surprised or upset?" persisted the cross-examining Honest John.

"He was a bit upset, now you come to mention it, agitated like, yes," said Tester, reviewing the circumstances in a new light. "His 'and was, so to speak, shaking."

"Merciful Moses!" This pious ejaculation was from Mr. Staines. "He took away the key, you say. And what are you supposed to be here for?" asked Mr. Staines violently. "You allow this fellow to come and take our property away. Where is the place?"

Tester led the way across the littered yard, explaining en route that he was fed up, and why he was fed up, and what they could do to fill the vacancy which would undoubtedly occur the next day, and where they could go to, so far as he was concerned, and so, unlocking one rusty lock after another,

passed through dark and desolate offices, full of squeaks and scampers, down a short flight of stone steps to a most uncompromising steel door at which they could only gaze.

III

Bones was at his office early the following morning, but he was not earlier than Mr. Staines, who literally followed him into his office and slammed down a slip of paper under his astonished and gloomy eye.

"Hey, hey, what's this?" said Bones irritably. "What the dooce is this, my wicked old fiddle fellow?"

"Your cheque," said Mr. Staines firmly. "And I'll trouble you for the key of our strong-room."

"The key of your strong-room?" repeated Bones. "Didn't I buy this property?"

"You did and you didn't. To cut a long story short, Mr. Tibbetts, I have decided not to sell – in fact, I find that I have done an illegal thing in selling at all."

Bones shrugged his shoulders. Remember that he had slept, or half-slept, for some nine hours, and possibly his views had undergone a change. What he would have done is problematical, because at that moment the radiant Miss Whitland passed into her office, and Bones's acute ear heard the snap of her door.

"One moment," he said gruffly, "one moment, old Honesty."

He strode through the door which separated the private from the public portion of his suite, and Mr. Staines listened. He listened at varying distances from the door, and in his last position it would have required the most delicate of scientific instruments to measure the distance between his ear and the keyhole. He heard nothing save the wail of a Bones distraught, and the firm "No's" of a self-possessed female.

Then, after a heart-breaking silence Bones strode out, and Mr. Staines did a rapid sprint, so that he might be found standing in an attitude of indifference and thought near the desk. The lips of Bones were tight and compressed. He opened the drawer, pulled out the transfers, tossed them across to Mr. Staines.

"Key," said Bones, chucking it down after the document.

He picked up his cheque and tore it into twenty pieces.

"That's all," said Bones, and Mr. Staines beat a tremulous retreat.

When the man had gone, Bones returned to the girl who was sitting at a table before her typewriter. It was observable that her lips were compressed too.

"Young Miss Whitland," said Bones, and his voice was hoarser than ever, "never, never in my life will I ever forgive myself!"

"Oh, please, Mr. Tibbetts," said the girl a little wearily, "haven't I told you that I have forgiven you? And I am sure you had no horrid thought in your mind, and that you just acted impulsively."

Bones bowed his head, at once a sign of agreement and a crushed spirit.

"The fact remains, dear old miss," he said brokenly, "that I did kiss you in that beastly old private vault. I don't know what made me do it," he gulped, "but I did it. Believe me, young miss, that spot was sacred. I wanted to buy the building to preserve it for all time, so that no naughty old foot should tread upon that hallowed ground. You think that's nonsense!"

"Mr. Tibbetts."

"Nonsense, I say, romantic and all that sort of rot." Bones threw out his arms. "I must agree with you. But, believe me, Stivvins' Wharf is hallowed ground, and I deeply regret that you would not let me buy it and turn it over to the jolly old Public Trustee or one of those johnnies... You do forgive me?"

She laughed up in his face, and then Bones laughed, and they laughed together.

CHAPTER IV

THE PLOVER LIGHT CAR

The door of the private office opened and after a moment closed. It was, in fact, the private door of the private office, reserved exclusively for the use of the Managing Director of Schemes Limited. Nevertheless, a certain person had been granted the privilege of ingress and egress through that sacred portal, and Mr. Tibbetts,ycleptBones, crouching over his desk, the ferocity of his countenance intensified by the monocle which was screwed into his eye, and the terrific importance of his correspondence revealed by his disordered hair and the red tongue that followed the movements of his pen, did not look up.

"Put it down, put it down, young miss," he murmured, "on the table, on the floor, anywhere."

There was no answer, and suddenly Bones paused and scowled at the half-written sheet before him.

"That doesn't look right." He shook his head. "I don't know what's coming over me. Do you spell 'cynical' with one 'k' or two?"

Bones looked up.

He saw a brown-faced man, with laughing grey eyes, a tall man in a long overcoat, carrying a grey silk hat in his hand.

"Pardon me, my jolly old intruder," said Bones with dignity, "this is a private – " Then his jaw dropped and he leant on the desk for support. "Not my – Good heavens!" he squeaked, and then he leapt across the room, carrying with him the flex of his table lamp, which fell crashing to the floor.

"Ham, you poisonous old reptile!" He seized the other's hand in his bony paw, prancing up and down, muttering incoherently.

"Sit down, my jolly old Captain. Let me take your overcoat. Well! Well! Well! Give me your hat, dear old thing – dear old Captain, I mean. This is simply wonderful! This is one of the most amazing experiences I've ever had, my dear old sportsman and officer. How long have you been home? How did you leave the Territory? Good heavens! We must have a bottle on this!"

"Sit down, you noisy devil," said Hamilton, pushing his erstwhile subordinate into a chair, and pulling up another to face him.

"So this is your boudoir!" He glanced round admiringly. "It looks rather like the waiting-room of a *couturière*."

"My dear old thing," said the shocked Bones, "I beg you, if you please, remember, remember – " He lowered his voice, and the last word was in a hoarse whisper, accompanied by many winks, nods, and pointings at and to a door which led from the inner office apparently to the outer. "There's a person, dear old man of the world – a young person – wellbrought up – "

"What the – " began Hamilton.

"Don't be peeved!" Bones's knowledge of French was of the haziest. "Remember, dear old thing," he said solemnly, wagging his inky forefinger, "as an employer of labour, I must protect the young an' innocent, my jolly old skipper."

Hamilton looked round for a missile, and could find nothing better than a crystal paper-weight, which looked too valuable to risk.

"*Couturière*," he said acidly, "is French for 'dressmaker'."

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