

Le Queux William

The Hunchback of Westminster



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Содержание

Preface	5
Chapter One.	6
Chapter Two.	9
Chapter Three.	12
Chapter Four.	15
Chapter Five.	18
Chapter Six.	23
Chapter Seven.	28
Chapter Eight.	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

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Preface

A Word Before Reading.

For many years I have busied myself making a collection of rare and valuable historical documents, and strange indeed are some of the stories and scandals which these ancient, crinkled parchments whisper to me in my hours of leisure.

In France, in Italy, in Russia, in Germany, in Belgium, in all corners of England, this craze of mine has led me, through many adventures, free but captive; and, looking back now, I realise that it has been really through this little-known hobby of mine, the hobby of palaeography, that there have come some of the most suggestive and magical hours I have ever spent in a wandering, erratic life that has never been wholly free from movement, but has often held its time of danger and its restless, restless passion for change, romance, and adventure.

Perhaps, then, it is not really wonderful that this love of mine for the records of the dead-and-gone ages colours my later stories. Yet, in a sense, it would be strangely odd if it did not, for when an author hears so weird and thrilling a narrative of hidden treasure as this I have here striven to recount it would surely be more than human of him to fail to put it into print.

This “Hunchback of Westminster” is really no idle fiction spun for the entertainment of an idle hour. In many ways, indeed, it is tragically true – particularly that portion which tells how men only a few months ago in this prosaic London of ours fought for a certain treasure worth several millions of pounds.

William Le Queux.

Chapter One.

How Don José Baited His Trap

It was in the second year of my practice as a private detective that young José Casteno came to my office in Stanton Street, WC, and entrusted me with that strange and terrible mission in regard to which I have really hesitated, in all sincerity, for some days before I could actually nerve myself to take the public into my confidence.

Up to that time, I remember, my big brass plate, with the legend “Mr Hugh Glynn, Secret Investigator,” had only succeeded in drawing a very average and ordinary amount of business. True, I had had several profitable cases in which wives wanted to know what happened to their husbands when they didn’t come home at the usual hours, and employers were anxious to discover certain leakages through which had disappeared a percentage of their cash; but for the most part my work had been shockingly humdrum, and already I had begun to regret the whim that had prompted me, after reading certain latter-day romances, to throw up my career as a barrister in Gray’s Inn to emulate the romancer’s heroes in real life.

Indeed, at the rate of progress I was making then, I calculated that it would be exactly forty-seven and a half years before I could save 1000 pounds out of my expenses, and, with that as a nest-egg, dare to ask pretty Doris Napier to marry me; and hence, as such long engagements were no more fashionable then than they are now, I can assure you I often felt a trifle despondent about my future.

Still, that was before José Casteno appeared on the scene in Stanton Street, WC. Afterwards things, as you will see, were different.

Now, of course, there are always plenty of people who do not believe that the great and wonderful things that happen in life come heralded by a sky angry with the glow of blood or by a storm in which the wind seems to range from end to end of the gamut of all human emotion, and to sob and shriek and sigh as though it were possessed by some fugitive spirit stricken with mortal pain. On the contrary, they argue, the biggest things have the smallest beginnings, and hence one never knows what tiny affair betokens crisis. As a matter of fact, I hadn’t noticed, I own, any peculiar association of sympathy between Man and Nature until this particular night I write of, but then I do recollect very well it did so happen that I was very late indeed at the office, that there was a most terrifying thunderstorm in London, and that, just about midnight, the darkness was both cavernous and oppressive.

As I close my eyes I can recall the whole scene again – that black, deserted street, the flickering gaslights, the vague suggestion, in the swirl of the rain, of a mighty, impalpable presence that was sweeping through the metropolis rent by passion and terrors which no human imagination could ever give shape to. Then, all at once, a great calm seemed to fall over the night, and as I swung my chair round from the fireplace to see what had happened I became suddenly conscious of a white, haggard face pressed to the window-pane staring at me with wide, dilated eyes that dogged my every movement and seemed to hypnotise all my senses.

For a moment, I admit, I paused, paralysed by a nameless horror. Immediately afterwards the utter absurdity of any serious cause for fright on a ground floor in a thoroughfare not a dozen yards from the never-dying turmoil of the Strand broke upon me. With one bound I sprang to my office door, which I instantly flung far open, and there immediately entered to me, without a word being uttered on either side, a tall, thin, foreign-looking man of about twenty-five. His was the face which I had seen staring at me so eagerly through the window-pane!

“Pardon me coming at this unseasonable hour,” he said, with a profound gesture of humility, yet in a gentle, refined accent that suggested the student and the scholar. “Permit me to introduce

myself,” and, with a flourish, he handed me a large-sized card, on which was engraved the name, in a distinctly foreign hand, “Don José Casteno,” but the address was scratched out.

For an instant his eyes met mine in one long, keen, lingering gaze of scrutiny – in that fatal instant, indeed, which follows the coming together of all men destined to do much in common, and which I have always found, in my experience, invariably decides whether we trust or we hate. Strange as his arrival had been, I will say, frankly, I took a liking to him even in that ghostly glare of the firelight; and, motioning him to a chair opposite to my desk, I turned up the gas. Then as he removed a wide-brimmed felt hat and unfastened a shabby black coat with a kind of Inverness cape, most often seen in use by foreign priests, I noticed his pale, intellectual-looking, clean-shaven face, with a mouth as tender and expressive as a girl’s.

“My business,” he began in a low voice of explanation as soon as he saw me seat myself and take up a pen to follow him, “is by no means a piece of common detective work which I am anxious that you should undertake in my behalf. On the contrary, it deals, Mr Glynn,” and now his voice became very grave, “with much that is startling and mysterious – much that spells ugly words like ‘treachery’ even in London – striking, as it does, at the root of at least one far-reaching unprincipled, foreign intrigue. First of all, then, I must ask you to tell me quite openly and frankly, are you free and prepared to undertake a series of difficult and dangerous missions?”

“I am,” I replied after a moment’s pause; “but it must be on terms.”

“And what are those terms?”

“First, that I am well and punctually paid,” and, in spite of myself, I smiled, for I found quite suddenly I had grown quite mercenary after my bitter reflections about Doris.

“Certainly, you shall be promptly remunerated,” he returned, and, thrusting a hand into a breast pocket, he withdrew a letter case stuffed with bank notes. “Pray let me put you right on that point at once by placing that in your safe,” he added. “Take from it as the work progresses any sums you may reasonably require. When all is over I will call on you to account for the amount. To-night it stands at 750 pounds.”

I counted the notes. They were quite new, but perfectly genuine, and of the amount he had stated, and I promptly locked them up in the small strong room that adjoined my office, which, alas! had hitherto seen too little of all such valuables. Then I faced Don José again.

“My next condition,” I said slowly, “is that you give me your entire confidence. There must be nothing kept from me. You must tell me all – absolutely all.”

“Ah, but – that is impossible,” he replied gently. “I simply dare not reveal the details of the secret, which I want you to work on, to any single soul. If I did, my life would be taken within the following four and twenty hours.” And all at once he shivered, as though he had himself caught instinctively some eerie presentiment of his doom.

“But how can I hope to work successfully in the dark?” I cried, throwing up my hands.

“Easily enough,” he returned. “All you have to do is to carry out my instructions, then nothing need be feared. For instance, here is the first task which I desire you should undertake.” And again he put his hand in his breast pocket, and this time he did not produce a pocket-book, but a tiny cutting which he explained came from that evening’s *Globe*, and which set out this odd notice:

To be sold – without Reserve – the Library and Effects of a Refugee Spanish priest, lately deceased. Contains many early printed Books, Horae, Liturgical, and other Manuscripts. By Auction to-morrow (Friday) at 3 PM. The Bromley Mart, King’s Street, Covent Garden, WC.

Now, almost in spite of myself, I felt flattered by this quaint and unexpected turn of negotiations which dropped so suddenly a mystery and touched on concrete things.

Let me explain the reason. As a matter of fact, if there was one hobby at that moment that appealed to me more than another it was that connected with old books, old furniture, old silver, old deeds, and charters. Indeed, I admit freely, I had attained already some certain amount of notoriety amongst the well-informed in this direction, acting as I had done for the young Earl of Fotheringay

before I became a secret investigator, and at a time when I had leisure to roam from auction mart to curiosity shop, and thence to old country mansions on the eve of important sales – where more bargains in antiques are picked up than most wealthy curio-collectors dream of. But how Don José could have guessed I had any specialist knowledge of this sort I was powerless to explain. None the less, the probability of some romance, or some rare discovery in this sale, tempted me sorely, and the Spaniard, who had been narrowly watching my features, seemed to divine that, to recognise that I was then almost as good as won to his cause, for all at once he lowered his eyes before me, but not before I caught in their deep, dark depths the glint of some conscious triumph.

“So you wish me to bid for these things,” I at length suggested tentatively, laying the cutting on the table and tapping it interrogatively. “All of them or some?” I asked after another moment’s pause.

“One lot. Number 82, a bundle of manuscripts. These are very valuable.” And again his eyes flashed.

“What limit may I go to?”

“2500 pounds,” he answered promptly, and at this I started, for there are few old records in evidence worth so sensational a sum as this. “If the things are knocked down to you,” he went on eagerly, “a draft on a bank to the required amount will be put into your hands at once. As a matter of fact, the Bank of South and Central America have promised to send a special messenger to the mart itself to watch you and to take all the financial responsibilities off your shoulders.” He paused, and looked at me. “But you will never get them,” he added the next second, “of that I am certain,” and, half unconsciously, he gave a low, desponding sigh.

“Oh, that’s absurd,” I cried, although my own brain reeled at the magnitude of the commission, “we must not lose heart at the start. After all, an auction is an auction; money has money’s power the world over. Pay enough – and I feel sure you are bound to triumph.”

“So it would seem. But then you don’t know the secret foes whom you will have against you. Their power – their daring – their resources are marvellous.”

And he rose and paced my office, as though he could not bear even to think.

None the less, I made one further effort. “Why,” questioned I, “should they, or you for the matter of that, struggle for a few old parchment documents of an obscure Spanish priest? What are they to you, or to anyone?”

“Ah, that’s precisely what I cannot tell you. Rest assured, however, that they are, that we shall strive to buy them, and that they are almost practically certain to beat you. Nevertheless, fight for the things just as long as you have the strength. Afterwards, should you be out-classed in the actual sale, fix your mind on the next point in our quest – to discover where those documents are taken. Even if you can only find that simple fact out for me you will, in one sense, amply repay me.”

“But after the sale where shall we meet? Where will you come that I may report to you?” I asked, still in much confusion of mind.

“Here,” said he; “I’ll come to-morrow night at the same hour. Till then, I must beg you, have two watchwords – and two watchwords alone – ‘secrecy’ and ‘dispatch.’” And moving forward suddenly he picked up his hat and, with a low bow, crossed to the door.

I, too, rose, but I was not in time. He was too quick for me. All at once he gave me another profound bow, and with a sharp turn of the wrist threw open the door, through which he passed again as swiftly and as mysteriously as he had come.

Not to be beaten, though, I followed him instantly into the street. A thousand questions called to me for answers. I felt I could not let him go in that manner.

By this time the storm had completely died down, the sky had cleared, and was now cloudless and studded with stars. Yet, look where I would, I could not catch a trace of his fleeing shadow, although, by all rules of time and distance, he could not then have covered seven or eight yards at the most. It seemed, indeed, as though the pavement must have opened suddenly and swallowed him up.

Just, however, as I was about to turn indoors again another strange thing happened.

Chapter Two. Lot Eighty-Two

Just at that moment a man's form emerged from the darkness on the opposite side of the street, and a familiar voice called to me in a loud but commanding whisper: "Glynn! Glynn! Is that you? You're here late, aren't you?" I wheeled round suddenly, and recognised the speaker. It was Detective-Inspector Naylor of Scotland Yard, with whom in times past I had been engaged in several joint investigations in which society and crime played parts of equally unpleasant prominence.

"Hullo!" I said, puzzled to know what to say, and still bewildered by the unexpected climax to my last interview. "What the deuce are you doing here at this ungodly time of night? Got something good professionally on, eh?"

"Oh, rather a queer job," he answered lightly, bending down and pretending to strike a match on a shop front, wherewith to light the cigar he was carrying. "I'm after a young foreign chap who has just escaped from the monastery where he was a novice, and is accused of the murder of a well-known English nobleman in peculiarly atrocious circumstances. Good-bye. Take care of yourself. I'm a bit late as it is, although I think I've got a splendid clue."

And he, too, vanished just as suddenly into the night.

Luckily my business as a professional investigator of the odd, the queer, and the misunderstood in life had given me a stout nerve and an obedient brain, so, crushing down all the flood of idle speculation that rose in me as to the reason and connection of those two most extraordinary coincidences, I patiently retraced my steps, locked up my rooms, and turned into my bed.

"Enough for the day is the worry thereof," I told myself as I mixed a glass of steaming grog. "I've got the money from this Spaniard, and I've got the commission to go to that auction, and when I am able to answer any or all the puzzling questions that this mysterious visit of Don José Casteno has suggested to me I'll ask them quickly enough – but not before. As for Mr Naylor, well, he's got his troubles. So have I. 'One dog, one bone,' as my old groom used to say when any of the other servants tried to interfere with his prerogatives. I'll stick to my own lines, and that, at present, is nothing more formidable, in spite of his dark hints and tall talk, than the acquisition of these old manuscripts for Don José." And gulping down the hot jorum I had prepared I resolutely threw the bedclothes over my head, and soon was fast asleep.

Next day, however, I turned up punctually at the mart in Covent Garden just before the hour the advertisement specified.

To say I was not anxious about the result of my action would be foolish. I was – for always behind my business, you must remember, lurked those soft, shy, tender eyes of Doris Napier, which I wanted to shine on me alone. All the same, I had no idea of the strange and bewildering acts of trickery in which, contrary to my best efforts, I was destined to become a central figure. Had I known, of course, the sequel to them might have been very different, and maybe, too, this story would never have been written. As it was – but there! let the affair speak for itself. It happened like this:

Directly I arrived in King's Street I found the huge wooden apartment, with its familiar roof of green opaque glass and its big staring advertisements in colour on the walls, known to curio lovers all over the world as the "Brom," crowded from end to end and door to door with foreigners. Now this was extremely unusual. In an ordinary way the same dealers and amateurs turn up at these functions time after time – these people fall into methods of their own of quick and agreeable acquaintance – and the bidding is conducted with certain airs of old-world politeness and decorum, which men who love the work find very delightful and refreshing in themselves, and yet conducive to the best business results.

To-day, however, the whole atmosphere and method of the place were changed as if by magic. A crowd of Jews, Spaniards, and Italians had practically taken entire possession of this huge and rambling mart, and their eager, polyglot conversation recalled nothing less than the Tower of Babel as they chattered, twisted, turned, elbowed, and gesticulated with as much animation as though they had met to devour the effects of a Rothschild instead of the books and goods of a poor, unnamed, dead refugee priest.

Indeed, it was just as much as I could do to elbow my way into the place at all. The crowd didn't actively impede my progress, but they showed no desire to move out of my path; but finally I did, with a free use of my shoulders and knees, squeeze myself into a good position on a packing case, which lifted me high above the crowd, and yet which also gave me a splendid view of the rostrum upon which, as it happened, the auctioneer had just taken his seat.

Even he seemed rather stupefied by this vast, unexpected, and quite unusual assemblage, for no sooner had he called silence with a touch of his mallet on the table than he cleared his throat and said:

"I hope, gentlemen, that you have not been drawn here this afternoon under any misapprehension. This is not really one of the days of our big sales; all we have to dispose of are some two hundred books, a few vestments, and some quaint, old manuscripts belonging to a priest – a father –"

He turned despairingly to his clerk, who consulted his ledger, and supplied the name needed.

"I mean a Father Alphonse Calasactius, who, I am told, arrived quite mysteriously in Southampton late last week by the royal mail steamer *Tartar*, and was, unfortunately, found dead in the room he took in a private hotel in the Adelphi only the night afterwards.

"My idea, to-day, is to get things over as quickly as possible, and so I will put up the manuscripts first. I confess I don't know myself whether certain of them are of any value, or whether they are some mere monkish jests of some centuries ago when men had more leisure to penetrate long legal-looking hoaxes. I ought to tell you, though, that I took several of them myself to an expert at the British Museum yesterday afternoon, and he was inclined to think they might be exceedingly precious, for he found that they related to some extraordinary secret which certain Jesuit monks in Mexico had taken that means of putting on record. All the same, he said quite frankly, he could not pledge himself on the point, for, as it happened, he could make nothing out of the greater part of the writing on them, which seemed to him, read in the ordinary fashion, mere gibberish, which might take years of patient study and research to unravel, and then be worth nothing in the end."

The sale commenced, and the prices realised by some of the codices that comprised the first lots were ridiculously low. Whoever bought them made magnificent investments. For instance, a fourteenth-century English manuscript of Sower's "Confessio Amantes" on vellum, with eighty-five miniatures – a perfect gem, worth at least the fifteen hundred pounds which the Fountaine copy realised – went for eighteen pounds ten. A French manuscript of the Bible of the same period with a number of ornamental initials and miniatures fetched only sixteen pounds, although, as a collector, I knew it to be worth three hundred at least; while a thirteenth-century manuscript, "De Regimen Principium" of Egidius, written on vellum in double columns, with a beautifully illuminated border on the front page, and bearing the stencil mark of the well-known collector, Sir Thomas Phillips, fetched only twenty-one pounds ten; while a twelfth-century "Decretales Gregorii," an eleventh-century Latin Bible, and a "Biblia Versificata" of the twelfth century, once the property of the Jesuits' College at Heidelberg, fetched equally low prices.

Presently the three manuscripts comprising lot eighty-two were held up for inspection. Each was about a foot square, and was intolerably dirty and stained by damp and time.

"Now, gentlemen, what offers?" cried the auctioneer, and again he brought his hammer down on the table with a sharp knock.

"I'll give ten pounds for them," instantly shouted a voice in the crowd, and all at once I caught sight of the face of the owner thereof, which, to my intense astonishment, proved to be no other than

my friend Peter Zouche, that odd-shaped, deformed person who is familiarly known to the rich and learned everywhere as “The Hunchback of Westminster.”

Now, how had Peter Zouche, who was reputed to spend his life between Sotheby’s, Quaritch’s, Dobell’s, and Maggs’s, and that mysterious den in which he lived, under the shadow of the Houses of Parliament, got wind of these treasures.

Instinctively I felt there was something more in these documents than even Don José had hinted, and so with a quick turn I caught the eye of the auctioneer and nodded briskly again.

“Twenty pounds offered,” he said, and he pointed his hammer straight at me, whereat all the crowd appeared to turn and stare suddenly and openly at me with fierce and malevolent looks.

Then, almost in a flash as it were, the real excitement of the gathering broke out.

Before I quite knew what had happened bids had poured in from a hundred eager voices, and the figures had miraculously climbed up, up, up with the rapidity of lightning, so that before I had interposed five times I believe they were actually all trembling on the brink of a thousand pounds!

And this for three dirty, crisp rolls of parchment!

All the same, I must admit that my determination to get possession of those records seemed to have been carefully noted by my rivals. In fact, I was continually made conscious of those looks of veiled hostility which continued to be shot at me from every direction as time after time I topped the bids. Meanwhile, too, a steady hubbub began to arise around me, above which I found it was increasingly difficult to make oneself heard or noted. Also, during a lull in the contest, the crowd appeared to sway and part, and all at once, to my astonishment, I found that the Hunchback of Westminster himself was standing beside me, and with him the dearest friend and fellow-collector I had ever had, the Earl of Fotheringay, and when I came to examine them I was stupefied to find that both men’s faces were deadly white.

“For God’s sake, for your own sake, Glynn,” whispered Lord Fotheringay in my ear impressively, “end this mad rivalry with us; you have no idea what terrible havoc you are making of things by your wild bids at this momentous juncture. Stand down, man, stand down, or you’ll ruin all.”

But, with my teeth set hard, I glared at him defiantly. “What was my business to him?” Indeed, my blood was up – I knew I was bound in honour – and I nodded again to the auctioneer, who saw me instantly, and repeated aloud: “Mr Glynn says twelve hundred and fifty pounds. Is there any advance?”

The hunchback now turned on me with a snarling expression like a tiger’s.

“Fool,” he hissed, “you won’t be warned,” and, raising his arm, he made a sign with his hand.

Almost instantly the crowd appeared to rise up *en masse* and to roll right over us, but as I stumbled backward, headlong from my foothold, I was astonished to see a man, got up to resemble me exactly in every feature, scramble on to my place on the upturned case, and in a voice that seemed my very own, to cry out to the auctioneer: “That, sir, is the most I can do. I now retire.” And as a cheer broke out from the crowd he too skipped down instantly out of sight.

“Ah, this is indeed treachery,” I told myself. And, gripping my teeth hard, I let my fists go; next, with a mighty effort, I sprang forward to roll the surging human mob out of my path – to make my voice heard, to regain my old position, to take command of the situation again, for I heard the bids still mounting higher, higher, higher.

In vain.

Lord Fotheringay, who, I thought, loved me as a brother, was on me with a bound like a lion’s, and catching me by the throat exerted all his force and hurled me backwards.

Next second I found myself caught up in other and even stronger arms, and, before I could utter aught save a muffled curse, I was flung head first into an empty piano case, the heavy lid of which was instantly closed on me – but not before I heard the hammer fall and the auctioneer call: “The deeds are Mr Peter Zouche’s. The price is eighteen hundred pounds.” I had been tricked!

Chapter Three.

I Determine to Go Forward

How long I remained imprisoned in that box whilst the sale of the dead priest's effects went steadily onward I have no knowledge. Certainly, for a time, rage deprived me of all power of reason, and I know I fought and struggled like a madman in those stout wooden walls before I recognised that I was, in truth, fairly beaten, and that the best thing I could do, in such futile circumstances as these, was to wait with what fortitude I could summon for that dramatic moment when it would please my so-called "friends," the Earl of Fotheringay and the hunchback, to arrange my release.

As to their extraordinary conduct, I could not, I admit frankly, bring myself to think. It was, it appeared to me, so brutal, so unfair, so absolutely diabolical. Don José Casteno, as he called himself, had warned me, of course, to expect treachery, and also to be cautious about some mysterious, far-reaching, and sensational intrigue – but not even I, in my wildest moods, could have expected that I should be caught up in a London auction market in broad daylight by a band of foreign mercenaries and that my bids would be put out of competition just at the second that my client demanded all my shrewdness, my intelligence, and my power to fix a hard deal. And the abduction seemed only the more bitter to me because it had been so cunningly engineered by two of my own most particular and intimate "friends!"

Eventually, however, some sounds did penetrate the box wherein I had been concealed. I was conscious of heavy weights being moved along the same floor and of a thump and rattle of noisy chains. Then I heard a sharp crack, as if nails were being driven into the lid of the case in which I had been confined, and the whole structure began to quiver and creak and groan under these blows, until, at length, so loud and terrifying was the noise that my head seemed to split with the rush of blood and the pain.

Fortunately, the hammer ceased sooner than I anticipated, and I became conscious of the case being hoisted through the air, to fall swiftly on to some springy cart or waggon that was doubtless in waiting outside the mart. A few minutes later the box itself began to shake, jolt, and rattle, and then I knew that I was being carried over some of the rough cobbled streets around Covent Garden. In the end, lulled by this movement, that by-and-by became more regular and even, and also worn out by exhaustion from the struggle I had passed through, I must have slept, for when I next came to note my experiences I found that every movement had ceased and that all now was dull and silent as the grave.

What had happened?

Half unconsciously I rose from my crouching posture in the box and placed my hands high above my head. As I did so I was startled to catch the bright gleam of a chisel, that just then was being inserted from the outside, and all at once I heard some fresh blows from a hammer, which made me hope that at length the expected time of my deliverance had come, and that the lid of the case was in process of being forced open to set me free.

A moment afterwards the wooden framework yielded with a crash. A flood of light poured into the box, rendering me for the time quite blind, for the interior of the case had been perfectly dark. Directly, however, I recovered myself from this I sprang out, and, to my chagrin, found that I was only partially released, for I was now in a cellar about twenty feet square, lit in the centre by a ship's lantern which depended from the ceiling by an iron chain. Unfortunately, too, I was not quick enough to see who it was that had struck off the lid, for almost the same second as I emerged an iron door at the far end of the apartment closed with a crash, a key turned in the lock, and I heard a man's footsteps die away in the distance.

Not to be balked, I seized the hammer which he had dropped in his excitement, and with this beat upon the door.

“Let me out,” I shouted. “Let me out at once.”

A reply came more quickly than I expected.

Almost immediately there followed the sounds of returning footsteps, and to my utter astonishment I heard a familiar voice cry: “Hugh! Hugh!” And the door was flung open, and no other than Doris Napier herself rushed to my arms.

Laughing and crying alternately, she could give me no coherent word of explanation then, but half led, half dragged me out of this strange hiding-place to a large apartment on the floor above, which, from the specific kind of curiosities it contained, I recognised at once as one of the showrooms of Peter Zouche, the Hunchback of Westminster.

“By heaven!” I cried in amazement as I stopped suddenly close to the open door near the street; and almost stupefied I surveyed the apartment in Tufton Street in which I had been so often an honoured visitor, “and so this is the place of the man who has dared to abduct me in the open – is it? The Hunchback of Westminster! Well, now I know with whom I shall have to reckon. He shall not find I am remiss.” And I set my teeth hard.

“Don’t talk like that,” pleaded Doris, laying a gentle detaining hand on my arm and trying to lead me in the direction of the pavement. “Remember Mr Zouche and Lord Fotheringay are both friends of yours, and realise for once that you have had a very narrow escape with your life. You can have no idea of the peril you have been in.”

“No doubt,” I returned grimly. “But that’s scarcely the point just now, is it? You can leave me to deal with them – ‘friends’ as you call them – or foes. What, dearest, I want to hear from you is this” – and I smiled into her eyes – “On what mad pretext were you lured here? How did you, of all the sweet and helpful souls on God’s earth, come to learn that I had been kidnapped – ”

“Father told me,” she replied, with a blush – and she bent her head.

“Colonel Napier! Your father told you,” I ejaculated. “But how in the name of fate did he come to be mixed up in this affair, which may end anywhere – even an assize court.”

“Lord Fotheringay came and had a private chat with him in our flat at Whitehall Court,” she explained. “That was about half-an-hour ago. I don’t know, of course, what passed between them, but suddenly father came to me and said that you were in great danger and had been rescued by Mr Zouche’s cleverness and the earl’s quickness. He added, too, that somehow you had mixed yourself up in some terrible conspiracy which he had promised the earl, when he told him about it in confidence, that he would not reveal to a soul, but that I might, if I cared for you as much as ever, and did really wish to help you, take a hansom here and release you from this cellar and tell you from him that, whatever you do, you must instantly drop all connection with some man he called José Casteno?”

“Thanks, but that’s not enough,” I answered hotly. “The truth is, I’ve undertaken certain work for Casteno, and I shall carry it through. Believe me that, after all has been said and explained, it is Colonel Napier who has been made a puppet and not myself.”

“Yes,” I went on; “I mean Lord Fotheringay and Peter Zouche,” and I saw the girl start and her face blanch. “Bah! you can never know what they have dared to do to me.” And in a few graphic but incisive sentences I recounted to her all my humiliating and baffling experiences in the mart that afternoon.

“But perhaps,” suggested Doris timidly when I had finished my passionate outburst, “they did not mean anything unkind to you after all. Look at the affair outside yourself. Perhaps great issues hang on the recovery of those three old manuscripts, and it is really you who are, as they assert, being made a tool of – to ruin them.”

“I don’t care whether I am or not.” I retorted savagely, pulling my hat tightly across my temples. “I have seen Casteno, and I, who am usually reputed a fine judge of character by voice and face, like him, and I shall not cease my association with him until I prove conclusively that he is not worthy of my trust or assistance.

“Besides, Doris,” I went on earnestly, “this particular commission of his means everything that I really value in life – it means you! Don’t you recollect, as keenly as I do, how the colonel has forbidden us to be formally engaged until I can point to at least a thousand pounds, which I can tell him truthfully that I have made out of this new fantastic profession of mine as a secret investigator? Well, listen to me. If all goes well I see my way now quite easily to make this amount out of Casteno alone. Already he has handed me seven hundred and fifty pounds, and I can quickly run out other work on his behalf amounting to that extra two fifty. As for Lord Fotheringay, he’ll never be of any professional use to me. Ever since he got back from America he’s been quite a different man to all of us who were his old friends. Something dreadful must have happened to him there. He’s changed hideously for the worse.”

And then I stopped suddenly. This casual reference to America recalled something to me (like casual references often do to all of us) that I had quite forgotten. It was nothing less than a connection with America which both Lord Fotheringay and the dead priest, Father Alphonse Calasanctius, had in common. Could it – I now asked myself – could it really happen that Don José Casteno had also come from that same South American Republic – the Republic of Mexico? And could those faded parchment rolls relate to some secret which the Earl of Fotheringay had discovered whilst he was in Mexico, and in regard to which he had procured the assistance of Zouche, one of the finest, most noted palaeographers and experts in mediaeval cypher that the British Museum has ever employed?

“I don’t care,” put in Doris firmly, “I don’t care about this point of view of yours. I’ve a strong intuition that no good will come to you or to me by your association with this foreigner, Casteno. Believe me at least in this, that my father is not a man to speak or to act lightly, and he who really knows all, remember, says most solemnly that you must give this man’s friendship up now – at once.”

“I won’t,” I snapped decisively.

“For my sake,” she pleaded, and her eyes were lustrous with unshed tears.

“I have given my word,” I repeated, throwing my shoulders back with an effort.

“Break it. It was obtained from you by fraud,” suggested this gentle casuist. “’T would be no sin.”

“But the money,” I cried, and the thought restored my determination to its full strength.

Even Doris wavered. The temptation was indeed cruel.

“The money will do us no good,” she replied at length. “I prefer we should wait.”

“But I don’t,” I retorted, setting my chin firmly and clenching my fists. “I am tired of being treated as a little less than your friend, dear heart, and a little more than an acquaintance. I want you – your father – ay, all the world,” I went on wildly, “to recognise me as your accepted lover. And inasmuch as José Casteno assists me to that end, I say now, once and for all, that I will not give him up for your father or anybody else. Besides, aren’t we told there’s a tide in the affairs of men? Well, I now put my intuition boldly against yours – against Colonel Napier’s – even against the vamped-up stories of the ugly old Hunchback of Westminster – and I say that this tide of fortune has at last come to me, and that I will take it at the full flood no matter who may raise their hand in protest.”

“You are quite determined?” gasped poor Doris, with a little shiver.

“Quite,” I answered, and my teeth again closed with a snap.

“Then,” said she, with a little gulp of terror, turning towards the door, “I – I must hurry back. I promised father that I would leave you at once if you refused, and I too must keep my word. Let me, however, whisper one word to you.”

And still burning with self-righteousness I bent down.

“Mizpah,” said she in a low voice, almost like a prayer: “The Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. Only He can protect us both. Please heaven He will.” And kissing me hurriedly on the cheek she darted away.

Next instant she had sprung into a passing hansom and had vanished from my sight, leaving me for a second quite dumbfounded.

Chapter Four.

The House at Hampstead

Thus began my powerful fight for Don José Casteno's rights!

Looking back to-day I, of course, can see quite clearly how very foolish and headstrong I then was, how I refused to be warned, even by the best friend man ever has – the woman who loves him. But there! we can all be wise after the event, can't we?

Oddly enough though, I did not meet Casteno in my offices that day at midnight as we had both so carefully arranged. True, I immediately made my way to Stanton Street, and by then eight o'clock had actually boomed forth from Big Ben, but no sooner did I reach my desk than I found thereon a telegram which had been despatched at 4:30 PM from the Charing Cross Telegraph Office by the mysterious Spaniard, cancelling the appointment, and calling upon me to:

“Come immediately to St. Bruno's, Chantry Road, Hampstead. I know all. – Casteno.”

As a consequence of this I was soon speeding half across London in that swift ten-horse Panhard of mine, which had been given to me a month previously in a burst of generosity by a foolish client, an old man, whom I had succeeded in delivering from a gang of needy blackmailers without scandal. Indeed, in less than an hour from receipt of his message, I had reached the long, winding, and secluded thoroughfare which he had specified.

As a matter of fact, too, if anybody sought a spot where he could hide effectually from police and public in London, he could never choose a better or a more suitable district than the aristocratic portions of Hampstead. Much of the wild character of the heath still lingers in those avenues, and the dwellers in those parts are curiously few, select, and quite indifferent to what goes on outside their own ken.

St. Bruno's, I discovered, was one of the finest of the many fine but solitary-looking mansions that still exist in Chantry Road. It stood at the far end of the thoroughfare in a *cul de sac*, in which but one gas lamp burned feebly, throwing into more striking relief the dense, dark character of the surrounding trees and moss-grown pavement. The only entrance to the place I could find was a small oaken door in a lofty wall of stone, like those we see built so often for the vestries of our parish churches, and when I pulled an old and rusty iron bell-ring there was a disquietening pause of some minutes before I heard the movement of any servant. Even then the door itself did not open, but a small panel about nine inches square was thrust apart at a point about the height of the average man and commanding a good view of the stranger's face and form.

“What seek you, my son?” asked a clear, refined voice like a priest's, but when I answered; “Don José Casteno – he has sent for me,” all was changed. The space beyond seemed flooded with light – the door itself was thrown open wide – and I found myself being escorted by a man in the habit of a Benedictine monk, across a flagged courtyard to a fine building, the entrance to which was commanded by two huge wooden doors.

“This is the home of the Order of St. Bruno,” said my guide, who was old and decrepit, apparently about sixty years of age. His tones were those of courteous conversation as used by a man of culture, and he swung to and fro an old lantern he was carrying to light my path as we both waited patiently for somebody inside the building to unbar this formidable-looking entrance. “We St. Bruno-ites,” he added, “have houses in many quarters – in Delhi for instance, in Sydney, in America – but this is our principal place.”

“Roman Catholic, of course,” I remarked, buttoning up my overcoat, for I felt chilled after my brisk ride. “Or High Church?” I ventured as I saw his bright eyes frown.

“Not at all,” the man returned with some asperity. “We are of neither of those sects.” But he never explained what their religion was. Just then the doors of the main house opened and we were

ushered into a magnificent hall, decorated with dark oak panels, and relieved half-way by a finely-wrought gallery which ran on three sides of this spacious apartment. On the fourth wall was a wrought-iron bracket on which stood an immense statue of a woman carved out of white marble, decorated with rare exotic flowers, and cunningly lit by a series of candles, with reflectors which depressed all the light on features beautiful only with the passionless splendour of a Venus de Milo.

Down the centre of the hall was placed a long table, flanked on either side by forms, and headed by a chair or a small throne fashioned like an abbot's.

As a matter of fact, I had barely time to take these details in before the brother who had first admitted me turned with a low bow and left me. My new guide who had now ushered me in was much younger – about thirty I guessed – but he also was dressed in the same sombre habit of black as the one who had first received me, save that his hood and girdle were white.

No words passed between us, but, in a silence that was almost oppressive in so brilliantly illuminated and furnished a place, he escorted me down a long, richly-carpeted passage, hung with valuable classical pictures of a modern school, to a room at the far end, the door of which stood invitingly open. Here I was left, but as I turned to examine my new surroundings, which suggested the rich, well-furnished library of some bibliophile of a generation ago, I was conscious of somebody stealing up behind me.

I turned quickly.

It was Casteno, who, this time, was dressed in an ordinary Roman cassock, and carried a biretta.

"I'm glad that you have come so quickly," he said in those smooth, even tones, motioning me to a chair on the opposite side to one in which he sat close to the fireplace. "As I wired you, I was at the auction. I saw you had failed."

"Then why ever didn't you bid for the manuscripts yourself?" I cried in amazement. "Why did you let them go without a protest?"

"I didn't," he answered quietly. "As a matter of fact, I was the man who was got up to personate you, and I stopped the mad rush of bids, for I was satisfied, when I saw beyond all doubt that it was the Hunchback of Westminster into whose hands those precious documents would fall, we should win our way through in the end. At first I feared it would be the other man."

"Fotheringay?" I asked.

He nodded.

"But they are intimate friends. They are acting together, hand and glove."

"They may now, but they won't long," he returned significantly, fixing his eyes in a dreamy way upon the fire.

Then he roused himself with an effort.

"Look here," he went on quickly, as though he had suddenly arrived at a momentous decision, "don't let's beat about the bush. Let me come at once to business. Don't bother me with a lot of questions. I can now see that you are simply exploding to put a lot of interrogatories to me, beginning with a demand for the reason why I came to you at all; how I dared to dress myself up exactly like yourself; what on earth has Colonel Napier to do with this business; and ending with a perfectly legitimate request for my true reasons for having so strong and deadly a hatred against this man Fotheringay, whom I know, before he went out big game shooting, you always believed was your most firm and ardent friend.

"Well, just don't ask me, that's all. If you do, I can't answer you. If you persist it will inevitably mean that you and I will have to part. In the latter case you will never get any nearer the solution of that mystery of lot eighty-two – the three manuscripts which were found in the effects of the dead Father Alphonse Calasanctius – than you are to-night.

"As a matter of fact, I want your aid in deeds, not words. Now, say at once – are you prepared to trust me, and to help me, and not to bother me for a lot of utterly needless explanations that will really – take my word for it – leave you in a bigger fog than ever, or do you feel that you absolutely must

have my confidence or turn up the work now, at once? Speak out quite plainly. Don't be influenced by the thought of cash. Consider the seven-fifty I have handed to you as yours – whatever happens. Now, bed-rock fact!”

For a moment I reflected. My enthusiasm was stirred by his speech, and in turn I mentally defied Doris, the colonel, and even the weird old hunchback.

“I am prepared to trust you,” I answered, holding out my hand, which he clasped with the firm touch of a straightforward, honest man.

“Then take this letter for me,” he said, fumbling in the pocket of his cassock and producing therefrom a formidable-looking document done up with big splashes of red legal-looking wax. “Go to the House of Commons with it, and do not open it until you reach the hall in which Members of Parliament meet any strangers who desire to speak to them. Then read the instructions you will find therein and – ” and all at once he stopped and looked confused.

“And what?” I queried, rising from my seat and fixing his eyes with mine.

“Well – you will see,” he answered, with a strange smile, touching a bell, which warned me that our interview was at an end.

Chapter Five. Introduces the Hunchback

I left St. Bruno's and made as hard as my motor would go for Westminster. Under the new rules I knew that the House of Commons did practically no business at all on Saturdays, so that if I missed the opportunity afforded me that night I realised that I should have to wait until Monday afternoon before I broke the seal.

Luckily, the streets about that hour were practically free from traffic, and my Panhard went pounding along at a pace which, if it were horribly illegal, was certainly mightily pleasant and exhilarating so that by the time I was tearing through Westminster all my doubts as to the strangeness of my reception by this queer-looking monk had vanished and I was quite keen to put this new mission through with rapidity and success.

Now, as most people are aware, the House of Commons is about the most easy place in the world of access if any man or woman has the most flimsy pretext of business with any one of its six hundred or so solemn and dignified members. I sprang from my car, handed it over to the care of a loafer who quickly hurried up, and simply nodded to the constables in the entrance. Then I marched up that long passage, peopled with the statues of dead and gone Parliamentarians, with head erect and heart that beat high with anticipation at some good and sensational development.

As arranged, I stopped in the big hall, where some forty or fifty persons were waiting either for admission to the strangers' gallery or intent on interviews; and, slipping on to one of the leather-covered lounges in a corner, I drew the precious missive from my pocket and broke the heavy seals with which it had been fastened.

As I expected, the package did not all at once yield up its secret. The outer wrapper, of a stout linen cloth similar to those used by the post-office for registered envelopes, merely fell off and revealed two other envelopes, also carefully stamped with red wax. On the top one was written in printed characters, as though the writer were afraid that his handwriting might be recognised:

"To John Cooper-Nassington, Esq, MP, St. Stephen's, Westminster, SW."

"The Bearer waits."

On the other, to my astonishment, I discovered no less an address than this:

Urgent. Private.

"To the Most Hon. Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs."

"Only to be delivered by Mr Hugh Glynn in case Mr Cooper-Nassington should decline."

For a second, I confess, I felt too astonished to say, or to do, or even to think of anything at all. I sat, with these big legal-looking letters in front of me, gazing into space, trying vainly to interpret the meaning of all these extraordinary manoeuvres on the part of a youthful Spaniard who might, it was true, be really a most important envoy of some far-off foreign state, but equally might be also, and with more apparent reason it seemed to me, absolutely nobody at all.

For Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, as all England was aware (in common with our foreign enemies, no matter how big they might be or bullying in tone or aggressive), was the very last man to be trifled with. He it was who, when Lord Garthdown fell, told Germany so sharply to keep out of an African negotiation we had on hand just then or he would apply an English form of the Monroe doctrine to the entire continent of Africa and never allow them to acquire there another foot of space. He had also, when the United States raised some futile question about boundaries that ought to have been fixed up a century ago, told America that he had settled the matter in his own mind; their claim was preposterous; and that, if they wished to enforce it, they had the remedy common to all nations; but

he should advise them to remember that once they put foot into European complications they couldn't lift it out. And they, too, I recollect very well, promptly busied themselves about troubles elsewhere.

Not a nice man, perhaps – not even a courteous man – but, at all events, a man whom the House and the country feared, and on whom nobody dared play any game or trick.

Yet here was evidently an urgent private communication to him from Don José Casteno. What was at the bottom of it? – a secret of State or of life?

Like a man in a dream I arose and approached one of those sturdy, well-fed constables who stand ever at the barriers that mark off the sacred corridors of the House from the vulgar footstep of the unselect public.

“Please give that to Mr Cooper-Nassington,” I said in a voice that I think had not the slightest resemblance to my natural tones.

My mood now was one of absolute indifference. Whatever happened, I recognised now that I was in for something extraordinary, and I felt I might as well get it over at once as sit on a lounge in that close, stuffy, noisy hall and speculate about a mystery to which I had no clue.

Even John Cooper-Nassington, millionaire, was no small legislative lion to tackle. In the days when South American industries were booming on the Stock Exchange he had appeared with the most wonderful options for railways in the different states – here, there, everywhere – and in three years he had emerged from the pit of speculation with hands cleaner and pockets heavier than most. Ever since he had been regarded as a great authority on things South American. Whenever Chili and Peru had a set-to, which they did regularly once in two years, or Venezuela grew offensive to its friends, or Mexico wanted to swell itself a little, John Cooper-Nassington was sent for by one side or the other; yet, alas, his enemies said he had more pleasure in putting down half-a-million to pay the expenses of a revolution in which five or six thousand innocent varlets were burnt or blown into eternity than he had in subsequently floating a costly war loan, three parts of which usually meandered into his own pocket.

Still, John Cooper-Nassington, when all was said and done, was but a penny pictorial paper kind of Boanerges compared with the quick, Napoleonic qualities of Lord Cyril Cuthbertson who, by the way, had a curious personal resemblance to the First Consul, and was certainly not more than thirty-five years of age. Nassington, now, was a big, heavy-jawed man of about fifty, with a head and beard of iron-grey hair and a brawny, hairy, massive fist that would have felled a man at a blow; yet, as he suddenly projected himself through the swing doors that divided the lobby from the hall to meet me, I saw that he was carrying the letter I had sent carefully closed in his hands still but that his face was white and his looks strangely agitated.

“Ah, Mr Glynn,” he said as I advanced to meet him, handing him my card, “this is an extraordinary business, isn't it?” And he wrung my hand with a vigour that suggested a high degree of excitement and nervous tension.

“I am but an ambassador, sir,” I replied, falling into step with his, and commencing to pace up and down the corridor that led into the street. “I have no knowledge of the contents of the communication which I handed to you.”

“Quite so. Quite so,” he returned hurriedly. “I gathered as much from what was said by the writer to me. Still, I am told I can make what use of you I think fit, and, truth to say, that is one of the things that puzzle me. Shall I take you with me or shall I send you back?”

“Does that, sir, mean you decline?” I queried, remembering the superscription on the other envelope I was treasuring in a secret pocket within my vest.

“Good heavens, man, no!” he thundered. “Do you think I am a born fool or idiot, or what? Why, that terrible man Cuthbertson would give five years of his life, or one of his hands, to have a magnificent chance of a sensational *coup* such as this may prove to be if we are right and have a quarter of an ounce of luck. Just get this clear, will you? I accept – I accept – I accept.” And he enforced his words with a grip on my arm that almost crushed the flesh into the bones.

A pause followed; and then, stopping dead, he fixed me with his eyes. I could see that, shrewd, clever man of the world as he was, he was taking my measure before he came to any deliberate resolution, and I met his gaze with a glance as steadfast and as fearless as his own. After all, what had I to be ashamed of in six feet of lithe, clean figure, an athletic step, and features that my worst friends would say, although my mouth was hidden by a heavy black moustache like a cavalryman's, were honest-looking and reliable?

"All right," he said in that sharp, decisive way of his; "I won't beat about the bush any longer. You shall go with me, and if, between us, we don't make some of these fiends sit up, and do a fine stroke of business for the old flag, I'll sit down and let that man I hate so cordially – Lord Cyril Cuthbertson – have a shot at it. But I won't – I won't – I won't." And once again he stretched out that vice-like hand of his to enforce his words on my over-slow imagination. But this time I was too quick for him – I slipped on one side – and he broke into a hearty laugh.

"You'll do," he said admiringly, giving me a hearty slap on the back. "Just meet me at the main entrance to the House in thirty minutes, will you? Then we'll go straight on."

But as he hastened back I could not help two questions recurring to me with startling distinctness: What "fiends" were those we had got to face?

And why should an insignificant-looking fellow like José Casteno so well understand the bitter personal rivalries that spring up between strong men on the same party side in the British Houses of Parliament as to be able to play what looked like a game of childish see-saw between two such redoubtable antagonists as Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and John Cooper-Nassington, uncrowned Emperor of Greater South America?

Both problems, however, were destined to be answered much more rapidly and sensationally than ever I expected when I left the House that night. I drove my Panhard at break-neck rate back to its garage in St. Martin's Lane, Charing Cross, snatched a hurried meal, and tore back in a hansom to St. Stephen's.

One thing was soon evident – Cooper-Nassington was a man of his word. As a matter of fact, I hadn't been waiting three minutes by those large and imposing gates that mark the main entrance to the Houses of Parliament before his *coupé* and handsome pair of bays clattered across the courtyard, and pulled up with a jerk close to the kerb, and he thrust his head out of the carriage and bade me enter.

In response, I took a vacant seat beside him, and without a word being exchanged between footman and master, the servant mounted the box again, and the carriage was driven rapidly away.

Now did I confess here that I was anxious as to our destination, worried as to what would happen, timid as to the safety of myself and my companion even after my grim and provoking experiences in the auction mart, I should not put down what was the fact. In truth, I never felt less concerned about the issue of any adventure in the whole course of my career. Indeed, one had only to be in the company of Cooper-Nassington to catch some of the wonderful vitality, assurance, and resource of this most extraordinary individual. The very presence of the man braced up the nerves, and insensibly one acquired some of that strong, masterful habit of mind and that breadth of outlook which seemed to make him feel that, whatever mischances befell some of God's creatures, he, at least, was one destined to pass on – ever successful, always victorious.

As it happened, the journey we went was in itself short. Barely had we passed half-way along Millbank Street than we made a sharp turn to the left, and before I had time to utter an expression of recognition, the carriage drew up with a jerk outside the old, dingy curiosity shop in Tufton Street in which I had earlier in the day been imprisoned, – the retreat of that uncanny man, Peter Zouche, the Hunchback of Westminster.

Choking down any feeling of surprise I had on the subject, I meekly descended from the brougham at the heels of my companion and without a word of protest heard him tell his coachman:

“Home.” It seemed to me then that we were both walking into the lion’s den together, and that, if anything untoward happened, much the same fate would befall us both.

The carriage rolled away, and as its red lights disappeared round the bend of the street, which seemed strangely silent and deserted, I was rather startled to hear my companion muffle something uncommonly like a sigh of regret. To think, of course, that he was a bit nervous about the upshot of our mission was nothing short of treason. None the less, as he advanced to the side door, and gave three peculiar taps on the woodwork, I found my hand travelling instinctively to that small pocket of mine in which rested a revolver.

Almost instantly his summons was answered, and there appeared, framed in the entrance, the grotesque figure of the hunchback, a man about four feet high, with a tiny head and face that instinctively recalled the profile of an eagle. He was carrying a candle in a heavy brass candlestick, and as he raised this above his head the light streamed full upon our features.

For a second he paused, uncertain what to do. Then a derisive smile curled around his toothless gums, and, with a sneer that I knew only too well from old and bitter experiences meant mischief, he said:

“Oh, it’s you, Nassington, also Glynn – is it? Well, come in. It’s as cheap inside as out, and not so deuced unpleasant.” And he backed up against the wall as we picked our way through the passage into a tiny parlour at the back of the shop.

The hunchback closed, locked, and bolted the door and followed us into the room, placing the candle, with great deliberation, on the mantelpiece. Then, rubbing his hands together and still sneering, he turned and faced us.

“And now, gentlemen,” he said, never attempting to ask us to be seated, “perhaps you will be as good as to tell me to what I owe the honour of this visit? Myself, I should have thought that my young friend here, Hugh Glynn, had had enough of Peter Zouche and his shop and of his way of paying out silly fellows who try to upset his plans.”

Cooper-Nassington took a step forward and interposed his big brawny frame between myself and the hunchback.

“Look here, Zouche,” he said in that strong, masterful way of his, “leave those tricks of nastiness for children, who may, perhaps, fly into a temper over them, and lose sight of the object of their visits, but we sha’n’t.” And he flung his hat deliberately on the table, and, dragging forward the most comfortable chair in the room, he coolly seated himself therein, pulled out a cigar case, extracted a weed therefrom, and began to smoke.

“As for you, Glynn,” he cried to me in a pause between the puffs, “you make yourself at home too. Have a cigar,” handing me the case and a box of vestas, “but don’t let that old scoundrel, Zouche, have one. It all depends on his behaviour whether we ever leave him again now we’ve taken up our quarters in this musty old den of his.” And he reached for a decanter of whiskey and a glass which were standing near, but the hunchback, who was now pallid with rage, made a grab for him and dragged them out of his grasp.

“You brute!” he hissed. “The same old brute too. Tell me your business, and get you gone.”

“Ah, now you’re talking sense,” said my companion, whose object evidently had been to get the hunchback into a rage, “and I’ll repay your compliment by emulating your example and talking to the point too. As you guess, I have come about those three old manuscripts which you purchased at the sale of the effects of a certain Father Alphonse Calasactius. You have had time to decipher them since, and you know they are of precious importance to the gentleman who is employing Mr Glynn here, to that young idiot, Lord Fotheringay, and, also incidentally, to myself. Now, what did they contain?”

And he fixed Peter Zouche with those terrible eyes of his.

To me, a plain onlooker, it was, of course, obvious that there must be some strong, secret bond between the hunchback and the millionaire. Nobody else, I was certain, would have dared to defy

Peter Zouche like this, for, whatever might be his faults, the old curio dealer lacked neither position in the world, the respect of his fellows, nor wealth, that was sometimes spoken of as almost fabulous. True, he had all that petty spite, that malevolence, that ache for sinister mischief that somehow one almost always finds with people who have been deformed from birth, but that night none of these obvious defects were uppermost. His attitude, on the contrary, suggested a man who had been brought to bay much against his will – that of one who was faced by two dread alternatives – either to fight to the bitter end an associate of old who had some most uncanny and far-reaching hold over him, or to meekly yield up some secret which he valued almost as highly as his life.

Who would triumph?

One – two – three – four – five minutes went by. Half instinctively I watched the clock on the mantelpiece; and still the hunchback made no sign, but stood half huddled over the fire, his gaze obstinately fixed on the flames.

I remember now how breathlessly I watched that terrific conflict between those two men of extraordinary position, influence, and power, – and I remember, too, thinking how it was all the more deadly and impressive because it was all so silent. One heard nothing, absolutely nothing, in that old back parlour but the steady tick-tick of antique clocks in the shop adjacent, the puff of the MP's cigar, and the quick, laboured breathing of the grotesque figure poised near the fender.

Chapter Six. The Sacred Secret

Had I ever been tempted, indeed, to think that the mission which Don José Casteno had confided to me was some small matter of a collector's gain, I should not have done so after the part I played as sole witness of this wordless drama. The very atmosphere of the room was pregnant with mysterious suggestion of the tremendous issues that were hanging then in the balance. I knew at last, with as much certainty as though I had read the documents themselves, that these manuscripts that had dropped so carelessly from the hands of a dead monk into all the hurly-burly of a commonplace auction room were precious records that affected the lives, the happiness, the fortunes of thousands.

Again the problem stated itself: Who would triumph? And again I had to wait, for neither Peter Zouche nor John Cooper-Nassington would make any sign.

Suddenly, though, the dwarf stood up and fixed his eager, burning, avaricious eyes on me. "You, Mr Glynn," he snapped, "are a man who knows as much about old manuscripts as most folks. I have seen your collection, and, for one who has had no means to speak of, you have done exceedingly well. Why don't you tell this big, bullying, aggressive friend of ours what those three deeds contained? You were employed by some peculiar people to get possession of them, no matter what the cost might be. You received very explicit instructions about them. You made a clever fight for them."

"And," I broke in sternly, "you, sir, filled the room with a 'knock out' of dirty, hungry aliens from Whitechapel; and, when I grew dangerous, you and your friends did not scruple to hound me down and kidnap me. That was the way you put me out of competition and snatched your beggarly triumph, but you know as well as I do that I am ignorant of the precise contents or qualities of the documents which I was employed to make such a strenuous battle for."

"But, sir," he sneered, rolling back his lips and showing his toothless gums, "think of that beautiful sign outside your office: 'Mr Hugh Glynn, Secret Investigator!' why, nothing should be hidden from you!" And he threw out his hands with a gesture of infinite comprehensiveness and burst into a loud and offensive mocking laugh.

"Nor will this thing be a mystery to me long," I retorted boldly, rising and striking the top of the table with my clenched fist. "You, Peter Zouche, understand that! At present I am merely a private soldier obeying the orders of a superior officer, but, by heaven! if it were not so, and I were free to handle this affair in the manner that suited me best, do you fancy you would be able to play with me like you did at the auction mart in Covent Garden, that I would walk meekly out of your shop after I had been kicked and buffeted and imprisoned, and that I would come here almost immediately afterwards and let you do your level best to jeer at me and sneer at me and treat me as a dolt or a child? No!" I thundered, "ten thousand thousand times no!"

"Luckily," I went on in a more subdued voice, "fate has given me a share in this mystery, and as soon as I am free of all the honourable obligations which I have undertaken you may be sure I shall be here to be reckoned with. Sooner or later I will make you bitterly regret this cheap scoffing of yours at my qualifications as a professional detective. I know that wonderful secrets about buried treasures and compacts between states and churches and individuals, lie hidden in those old manuscript deeds that are often left kicking about as so much idle lumber in garret and cellar and office. Nobody in London, indeed, knows better; and I will track this precious secret of yours down –"

"Enough," struck in Cooper-Nassington in his most terrible tones. "You, Glynn, have now justified yourself. It's the hunchback's turn. Once again I demand of him: What has he deciphered from those three queer-looking manuscripts which he purchased this afternoon?"

Peter Zouche faltered; to my astonishment I saw that he had been conquered.

“You know well enough what they contain,” he snarled, “or you would not be here at this hour, and in this mood!”

“And so do you, you wicked old cripple,” roared my friend, “or you would never have spent all that money on packing that auction mart with your gang of foreign mercenaries to effect a knock-out of the manuscripts; you are not the kind of philanthropist who throws away two or three thousand pounds on the relatives of a poor Spanish priest whom you have never set eyes on. So speak out without any more fuss. Are they what I have been led to expect?”

“They are,” the hunchback muttered, licking his dry and feverish lips; “but it will take me two or three weeks to decode them. I was looking at them when you came and knocked at the door with that cursed all-compelling signal of yours. Why the deuce didn’t you leave me in peace for a time?”

“Because I wanted to be sure I had been correctly informed, of course,” retorted the Member of Parliament gaily, rising and brushing the cigar ash off his waistcoat. “In fact, in a word, I shall assume now that you have got possession of the documents that give the key to the position and the drainage of the Lake of Sacred Treasure in Tangikano, which was for centuries the depository of the treasures of the original tribes of Mexico, and which has been believed always, upon quite credible evidence, to contain gold and precious stones to the amount of many millions sterling.”

“Yes; that is so,” conceded Zouche, with a sigh.

“What!” I cried, unable to stifle my excitement at hearing this extraordinary piece of news. “Do you mean to say there has been discovered at last that wonderful Mexican lake over which England nearly went to war with Spain in the days of Elizabeth, a secret that was supposed to be known only to the Jesuits, who lost in some miraculous fashion all the documents bearing on the subject nearly three hundred years ago?”

“I do,” replied the hunchback. “What did you think when I took such extraordinary precautions at the auction this afternoon? – that I was simply playing up for some quaint and curious cryptogram? Bah! men of my reputation don’t fling one thousand eight hundred pounds about for childish puzzles like those.”

“So I might have guessed,” I added to myself a little bitterly. “I ought to have realised something of the sort was afoot, but, as you know, we collectors of manuscripts have known so long about these wonderful missing records that we have actually grown tired of looking out for them, and some of the best and wisest of us have gone so far as to doubt their very existence.”

“Well, you need not,” observed the Member of Parliament genially, fixing his hat upon his head firmly. “Prescott, in his ‘Conquest of Mexico,’ sets out the facts about the Lake of Sacred Treasure in Tangikano with great clearness. I remember, very well, he explains that it must be somewhere about the centre of the uninhabited portion of Mexico and that its dimensions are not too formidable to tackle for unwatering, being about only one thousand two hundred feet long by one thousand feet wide on the surface, but the greatest depth has not been fathomed. It is known to stand at a height of about ten thousand feet above sea level. Indeed, its depths are reputed to have been regarded as sacred to their gods by a numerous aboriginal population long before the appearance of the Jesuits in that part of the world.”

“But why,” I queried, “is the value of its treasure always so firmly insisted on?”

“Because,” replied he, “in connection with their religious rites the aboriginals habitually made offerings to the deities of the lake in the form of gold dust, golden images, and emeralds, the most famous emerald mines of the world being situated in the heart of Mexico. Indeed, Prescott says that this particular gem was held as sacred by the early tribes inhabiting Mexico as being the emblem of the sun, they themselves being sun-worshippers. More than that, their king, who was also their pontiff, was in the habit of being completely covered with gold dust so applied as to cause him to shine with great lustre like the rays of the sun. In brief, he was the real ‘El Dorado’ of whom we have heard so much and seen so little; and, as his principal religious ceremony, he was wont to perform his ablutions from a raft in the centre of the lake, until the whole of the precious metal was washed

away. This accomplished, the king, and the chiefs who were with him, made a rule of throwing costly offerings into the water.”

“Better than that,” struck in the hunchback, almost with enthusiasm, “I have just been turning over an article in the *South American Journal* on this very subject, and I read there that the multitude of worshippers, thereupon, likewise cast in their humbler contributions in the midst of singing and dancing and to the sound of such musical instruments as were available. When the ‘bearded men’ reached the country it is stated that the Indians, to put their treasure beyond the power of the ruthless invaders, threw it into the waters of the lake to a vast value; and, indeed, an attempt was made by the Spaniards to unwater it, so as to get at the submerged accumulation of gold dust and precious stones. They were not able to reach the bottom, but succeeded in lowering the water to such an extent as to expose a portion of the margins of the lake, whence they obtained sufficient to pay to the Spanish Government one hundred and seventy thousand dollars, equivalent to three per cent, on a total recovered of five millions six hundred thousand dollars. There were also emeralds, one of which realised seventy thousand dollars in Madrid. Further progress was arrested by the sides of the cutting on the lip of the lake-cup falling in with a tremendous crash. The water poured into the mouth of an adjacent volcano, and a terrible earthquake resulted, before which the Spaniards and their Jesuit friends fled in terror. A proper record was, however, made later on of the exact position of the lake, but, as Mr Cooper-Nassington explained, it was lost.”

“And you have recovered it,” I burst out.

“That is so; but although repeated expeditions were made to the district, which is largely of volcanic origin, to discover it without the key I possess, they all failed; and as the years slipped on they grew fewer and fewer in number until, as you have heard for yourself, the whole thing has just become a will-o’-the-wisp of the manuscript hunter who, of course, has mostly grown to feel he is as likely to discover the missing documents as he is to find the title-deeds of the temple of David.

“But,” said the hunchback, suddenly changing his tone and confronting my companion with an angry look, “none of this is to the point. It is, in a way, all so much ancient history and as familiar to men like yourself, who rule Mexico through the Stock Exchange or our British Foreign Office, as your alphabet. What I want to know is: What business is it of yours what I have bought and what I have discovered? You have no share in this find. You have no right to information. By what right do you come here demanding to know what I have learned, and shall learn, with infinite patience, expense, and labour?”

“All that in good time, my dear sir,” calmly returned Cooper-Nassington. “For the present it must be sufficient for you that I have a very real and vital stake in what you have found, and you had better treat me well over the business when I come to you again after you have deciphered the manuscripts, or you’ll live to regret the day I was born.”

For a second the two men stood glaring at each other in angry defiance, but again I saw that the millionaire won. Whatever was the mysterious hold he had over the hunchback there was no doubt but that it was a very potent and a very effective one, and that, however much Zouche might kick and threaten, in the end he was bound to come to the other’s heel.

“All right. Come to me in a fortnight’s time,” he growled, “and I’ll see then what can be done. Don’t fancy, though, that this business is simply fitting out a yacht with a party of Cornish miners and engineers and going to take possession of the loot.”

“I don’t,” said the Member of Parliament coolly; “there are the Jesuits to reckon with.”

“Yes; but that’s not the worst,” retorted Zouche; “there are others.”

“Others!” cried the man in astonishment. “What do you mean?”

“Well, first, who was the man that put you on the track of my discovery, eh? What, for instance, is the name or position of Mr Glynn’s employer?”

In spite of myself I flushed and started. Should I now hear who Don José Casteno really was, if he were really a friend of Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, and why he was a resident at that home of mystery, St. Bruno's. Alas! no. I was doomed to disappointment.

"We decline to tell you," said my companion with great firmness.

"I shall find out for myself," roared the dwarf.

"Do, if you can," returned the man coolly. "For the present, stick to the point we are discussing. Who else have we to fear?"

"The cut-throats who did this," snarled the hunchback, stepping quickly across the room and taking down a cloak from the walls. Then he spread the garment out on the table and indicated certain bullet holes in the back. "They did this to me this afternoon as I walked homeward," he added. "The shots came just as I was crossing Westminster Bridge. I searched everywhere for a sight of the man, who must have done it with some new-fangled air-gun. I could find none at all.

"Nor is that all," he proceeded the next moment; "just cast a glance in this direction, will you?" He stumbled across the parlour to a point where stood an old oaken chest about two feet high, the lid of which he threw back with a bang. "Do you see that fine mastiff in there?" pointing to the shadowy form of a huge dog in the depths of the chest. "Well, an hour ago he was poisoned. By whom? For what? I have lived here in this house, in this neighbourhood, for five and forty years and nothing of the sort has ever occurred before.

"Ten minutes before your carriage rattled up I had another weird experience. Explain it if you can – I can't. I was seated at this very table poring over one of those precious manuscripts, which I hide in a place practically inaccessible to anybody except myself, when I became conscious I was not alone. Somebody, I felt certain, had come mysteriously on the scene and was watching me intently. I glanced up suddenly, and found there, at that small casement window which opens on the street, and which is usually guarded by the shutter you now see placed in position, the face of a man. 'What do you want?' I cried angrily, and darted across the room to fling the shutter back into position with all the force I could exert. But he was much too swift for me. With incredible rapidity he flung an envelope through the opening and darted off, and the shutter and window slammed together, as I intended, but with an empty bang. The scoundrel had escaped!

"Well, by that time I was accustomed to surprises, and so I took up the envelope, which was of a cheap, inferior make, similar to those sold by small stationers in poor districts. It had no address upon it, but it was sealed. I tore it open, and found inside a piece of paper bearing this message." After fumbling behind an ornament on the mantelpiece he produced a slip that had been evidently torn out of some child's exercise book, and upon which was written in feigned handwriting to resemble a schoolboy's:

"Your secret is known. At the right moment I shall come to you and claim it for its lawful owner. Meanwhile, breathe not a word to a soul as you value your property and your life."

"Of course," added the hunchback, with a shrug of the shoulders, "all this sounds the merest melodrama, and so it may be. But you and I know quite enough of the importance of those manuscripts to understand how many rich and extraordinary personages in England, in Spain, in Mexico have the keenest interest in their contents, their recovery, and their translation. Your Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, for one," shot out Zouche, glancing at the millionaire with eyes full of meaning, yet bright with the springs of his own hidden resentment.

The Member of Parliament bit his lip. "Maybe, maybe," he said, but I could see the shot went home and that inwardly he was much perturbed. "Still, you must do your best, that's all. Personally, I should say it is your friend, Lord Fotheringay, who feels he can't trust you, but, really, it is your lookout. Come along, Glynn." And he led the way impatiently down the passage, and, before the dwarf could say another word, he had hurried me out into Tufton Street, which seemed still to be as deserted as the grave.

As we stepped out we heard the door close behind us; and, remembering the mysterious letter which Don José had instructed me to hand to Lord Cuthbertson in the case of certain eventualities, I resolved on a bold step of my own.

“Why,” said I suddenly to my companion, “do you fear the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs getting wind of this discovery of yours?”

Never shall I forget the effect of this apparently innocent question of mine!

Never!

Chapter Seven. In Stanton Street

“Why am I afraid that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs may get wind of the discovery of those manuscripts which locate the exact whereabouts of the Lake of Sacred Treasure in Mexico?” repeated the Member of Parliament fiercely; and he came to a dead stop at the corner of the turning into Peter Street.

“For the best of all reasons,” he snapped. “He is the one man in the world I hate with all the force I am capable of. He has proved himself my evil genius. In politics, in preferment, in marriage he has beaten me every time we have come into conflict; and if he could only recover this possession for England – for, as you will find, this lake really belongs to this country and not to Mexico or to Spain or to the Jesuits – he would make himself that great, popular hero he is ever striving to become. How? you ask. In the most simple fashion. He would merely use all those millions that are to be recovered from its depths as baits for the electors, baits for payers of income-tax, men who drink spirits, enthusiasts about old-age pensions, better houses for the poor. Indeed, there is no end to the crazy ambition of this pinchbeck Napoleon. He lives simply to become the idol of the mob in such a way as England’s history with all her Gladstones, her Beaconsfields, and other political leaders of real note, has never known – never. Even the popularity of the throne is not safe with so terrible a pride as his! He cares nothing for any personage or any institution. His one colossal lust is to lift himself so high that no man shall be his equal, but that his word shall travel through the Empire with a power which Bismarck never aimed at and even the German Emperor has never felt competent to aspire to.

“I know the man like nobody else does in the House. Once we were friends – before appeared the inevitable woman. I was his one confidant. We occupied the same house; we sat side by side, night after night, over the dinner-table, building the same castles in the air; but, as we laid our plans, and he waxed strong, the power to will and to achieve in this muddy, political life of England came also to me. Hence, while we quarrelled and hated like only one-time bosom companions can, we have ever carried on a terrific underground fight which has been all the more deadly because it was hidden. Few expected it; and none of the fools around me ever realised that a humble, insignificant member like myself was hugging the idea of the eventual overthrow of this wonderful strong man, who had risen up, phoenix-like, from the ashes of a dismembered and distrusted party in the State and had brought back to Parliament the misty legend of a leader who directed the attack by the sheer magic of his own inherent will.

“But there!” added Mr Cooper-Nassington, suddenly changing his tone as, away in the distance, he caught the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. “I am sure I don’t know why I ramble on like this – to you. After all, those manuscripts are the real object of our expedition, aren’t they? and in regard to them I suppose we have done the best that could be done in such a bewildering set of circumstances. You had better return now to the man who sent you and report to him all that has transpired since you fetched me out of the House. He will understand, particularly if you add two words to your narrative.”

“Yes,” said I eagerly; “and what must those be?”

“In reparation,” he returned, “in reparation.” And, signalling to a belated hansom, he held out his hand to me.

“Good-night, Mr Glynn,” he said; “I have trusted you to-night more than anybody else in my life. I can’t tell you why, but I have, and I am sure you will not make use of anything I have said to my disadvantage. Doubtless, we shall meet again over this strange, wild quest. If we do – nay, whatever happens – remember I am your friend; but for your actual employer I repeat I have only

one message, 'in reparation!'" And, squeezing my hand, he sprang into the cab, crying to the driver: "Ashley Gardens." The next instant the cab had gone and I had started to find my way home on foot.

Unfortunately, that was not destined to be the last of my adventures that night, although I was tired and worn by the stirring scenes I had passed through. I don't think Mr Cooper-Nassington had left me a minute before I was conscious of that ugly sensation of being followed. At first I tried to believe it was a mere phantom of my imagination – that my nerves had got a trifle upset by the things which the hunchback had shown to us in the way of tricks that had been played upon him since he had obtained those manuscripts.

Thus I didn't attempt to look behind me, but went on my way whistling merrily, making the pavements re-echo with my noisy steps, for by that time the streets were practically empty. All the same, I couldn't rid myself of my suspicion that I was being shadowed, and, finally, feeling that the chase was getting intolerable, I decided on a rather curious ruse. I had reached Westminster Bridge, and, walk to near the centre, suddenly stopped and turned my face towards the swirling waters that were eddying past the buttresses beneath.

Next instant I staggered back in the fickle light of the lamp, and, throwing my coat off my shoulders, cried in a muffled, stifled kind of voice: "Ah! I can bear it no longer. I must do it. Good-bye, good-bye." And with a frantic bound I leaped on to the parapet by the aid of a lamp-post and threw my arms upward with a wild, convulsive movement, as though the next second must be my last, and that I had but to take one downward glance to hurl myself into the turgid torrent beneath.

Just as I expected, my pursuer rushed pell-mell into the trap that I had baited for him. No sooner did he catch a glimpse of what he thought were my preparations for a sudden and effective suicide than he instantly abandoned all pretence of concealing his presence, darted out of the shadows in which he had been lurking, and raced as swiftly as a greyhound towards me and caught me by the sleeve and dragged me backward.

"You fool," he cried, "what are you up to now?" And in a flash I recognised who it was – Detective-Inspector Naylor.

With a quick spring I reached the pavement again and turned a face full of merriment towards the officer.

"Ah," said I, picking up my coat, "so it was you who was stalking me, was it? I thought my little trick would fetch you much more rapidly and effectively than if I had turned round and tried to pick you up. Now, what's your game dogging my footsteps, eh? You don't think I'm a young monk who has got spoiled in the making, do you? No; you've some deeper, deadlier design than that, so you might as well own up at once."

"I can't," he returned, and his face, now he realised how I had duped him, was a study in rage and mortification. "I – I am out on business just as much as you are. You play your hand, I'll play mine. Only take care what you are up to – that's all. When we at Scotland Yard take up a case we usually make some inquiries into the good faith and past history of our clients. It's a pity you don't do the same. Good-night." And with a nod full of meaning he strolled off towards the embankment, leaving me to digest his enigmatic remark in silence and alone.

With a good-humoured laugh I took my way homeward and tried to shake off the effects of his ominous words, which, I own, caused me a certain amount of disquietude, for, after all, I hadn't a ghost of an idea then as to the real identity or object of Don José Casteno. For a time, I own, I felt rather fearful. But first one thing and then another engaged my attention. For instance, I had to find out whether I was still being followed. I decided I was not. I had also to dodge the human night-bird of London intent on rows or alms. Finally, by the time I had reached Trafalgar Square the ill effects of the detective's warning had quite disappeared. All I thought of was a good night's rest, to be followed by another ride on my motor car to Hampstead, and another entrance to that mysterious home of the Order of St. Bruno.

When, however, I reached the street in which my offices were situate I was surprised to see the thoroughfare presented anything but its usual drab and sombre appearance. Something extraordinary was certainly in progress therein. Instead of the place being deserted and silent like the neighbouring streets, no fewer than three carriages with flashing lamps and horses in glittering harness were drawn up by one side of the curb, and near a door stood quite a group of footmen, and loafers and policemen drawn thither by the unusual assemblage.

As I got nearer I was even more surprised to find that this strange gathering was centred round the door of my own offices, which I was stupefied to see were brilliantly lit up. "What on earth can have happened?" I gasped, and, quickening my steps, I half ran towards the tiny crowd gathered round the door, which seemed somehow to be expecting me, and gave way instinctively at my approach.

Another moment and I had thrust open my office door. The place was half filled by tobacco smoke, but through the mist I was astounded to see three persons had calmly seated themselves in my room to await my return – Lord Fotheringay, Colonel Napier, and a stranger who, as he turned his determined but forbidding looking features upon me, I recognised instantly as Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

"You must excuse us, Glynn," Fotheringay began almost at once. "I own I had no right to come here at all at this hour and open your office. Most of all, I oughtn't to have put on your hearth two friends without your consent. Only, as perhaps you guessed from the scene at the auction, we live in rather stirring times just now, and we had no margin left in which we could observe the ordinary courtesies. With Colonel Napier you are, of course, well acquainted. Let me introduce to you another distinguished man." And he made a movement in the direction of Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, who rose and bowed.

"Pray be seated," I hastened to exclaim as I took the chair at my desk and faced the trio. "I mustn't say, of course, I expected this honour, because, after the way Fotheringay sprang at me in the auction market, I certainly got the impression he had no particular friendliness for me left – but –"

"But that is precisely what we have come about," interposed the earl eagerly. "Those three old manuscripts which we made so terrific a fight over –"

My lips closed, and a new look of resolution came into my face.

"I see," I replied. "Then, as it is a matter of business, I beg you tell me what you desire in a plain, business-like fashion."

There was an awkward pause; and then Lord Cyril began: "I understand, Mr Glynn," he said in his most seductive tones, "from no less an authority than the earl here, that you have been retained to get possession of three historical documents that were found among the effects of a certain dead refugee priest who called himself Alphonse Calasanctius. Now, are you aware to what those deeds relate?"

I nodded, and the two men exchanged a quick look of intelligence. "That being so," proceeded Lord Cuthbertson, "you will doubtless realise how important it is that His Majesty's Government, and not an enemy of this country, should obtain possession of them."

"Quite," I returned, determining to meet the statesman's strategy with diplomacy as far-reaching as his own.

"And may I take it that you are prepared, as far as lies in your power, to assist His Majesty's Government in this direction?"

"That is hardly necessary," I said, with a smile. "I have not got the documents at all. They are in the hands of a man with whom I am but little acquainted – Mr Zouche. Wouldn't it be better if pressure were placed on him?"

"I can hardly agree in that," said the Foreign Secretary softly, and I saw I had countered but not defeated him. "In the first place, Mr Zouche is not an English subject, like yourself. He is Spanish, with all the absurd notions of the average Spaniard as to the future glories and magnificence of Spain. In the second place, he and Lord Fotheringay have had this very point over between them, and the

hunchback has absolutely refused to assist us or the earl, who really put him on the track of the documents, and who is now trying, in vain, unfortunately, to frighten him out of them.”

“In other words,” I remarked sternly, “Lord Fotheringay first of all threw in his lot with the hunchback, who went off with the plunder, and won’t divide it. Thereupon he bethought himself of his patriotism, and has said to you: ‘Here is a matter of the honour and fair fame and fortune of England. Come, let us sink all our personal greed and differences and recover those deeds in the name and for the sake of our common brotherhood of kin and blood.’ My lord, it won’t answer with me. When I wanted help Fotheringay would not raise a finger for me, but rather studied how he could throw me back. Now he’s in trouble, let him get out of it; but let him be a man over it, and don’t let him bleat about the needs of England when he really means his own greed.”

“There’s a good deal in what you say,” remarked Lord Cuthbertson, “but not everything. Bear with me a minute, and I will explain. I have no doubt you are under the impression that when Fotheringay went to Mexico he went simply because he’d got a lot of spare cash, and wanted a change, and to bag some big game. As a matter of fact, he had no thought of the sort. He went as a special and a private spy of the Foreign Office; and his business was, under the harmless guise of an enthusiastic sportsman, to investigate certain rumours we had heard as to the discovery of these Jesuit plans of the sacred Lake of Treasure which really belongs to England. Well, he did so, and so cleverly did he manage that he penetrated the very monastery in which they were hidden, and he got at the very prior of the Order – a member of which had held them in his possession. A certain bargain was struck between the prior and himself, but before the Foreign Office could send the big sum of money required to ratify it this Father Alphonse Calasanctius ran away with the documents to England, but was, we have reason to believe, poisoned on his arrival by some compatriot or relative who knew nothing of the value of the manuscripts, and thought only of the forced sale of the goods which you and the earl attended. Therefore I beg you don’t judge your old companion unfairly and harshly. We all of us do many things for England in our public capacity that we should not dare, or even wish, to do for ourselves in our own private business. His sole blunder was to get Zouche to help him, because Zouche is really a villain who would dare any crime or fraud to help his country, Spain. So it, of course, has happened as might have been expected. Zouche has repudiated the earl, and unless you can give us a hand England is going to lose this sacred lake and its millions and Zouche.”

“He may not necessarily triumph,” I answered.

“There are probably other people hot on the track of those manuscripts. To-day there have been one or two attempts to make Zouche disgorge from a source which is truly bold and daring and resourceful; I’ll assume, after what you say, it is the earl. Well, let the earl continue his pressure. He may frighten him out of them, but I doubt it – I doubt it very much. Then there is my employer.”

“You must give that man up, Hugh,” cut in Colonel Napier, who had not hitherto spoken. “He’s a scoundrel of the first water. I know all about him. He escaped from that Mexican monastery at the same time as Father Alphonse Calasanctius, but not before he killed Earl Fotheringay’s companion, young Sutton.”

“That is false,” suddenly interrupted a strange voice, “and the police of London and Mexico know it, for the deed was done by Calasanctius himself, and not by the novice at all.” And to everybody’s astonishment the doors of my big cupboard were flung open, and there stepped therefrom no less a personage than Don José Casteno himself.

Chapter Eight. Some Grave Suspicions

For a moment all was confusion. Colonel Napier sprang to his feet with an angry gesture, and even Lord Cyril Cuthbertson rose and crossed over to the place where Fotheringay was sitting near the fire, and consulted him in low and anxious tones.

Curiously enough, Casteno appeared to be the least perturbed of any of us, although he had made such a dramatic entry. Somehow he seemed to take his position in that conference as a matter of right, and when he saw that none of the others were prepared to talk to him on any terms, but were determined to treat him as a bold, impertinent interloper, he swung round from them and stepped up to my desk, where I sat idly playing with a pen.

“It is not true that I am the wretch whom Colonel Napier has spoken of,” he said to me very simply, looking me straight in the eyes. “It is not true that I am an enemy of England, such as Lord Cuthbertson has suggested. It is not true that I am engaged in any dishonourable or unpatriotic enterprise; nor was it begun, as they pretend, by my flight from a monastery in Mexico coincident with the disappearance of Father Calasanctius; nor did it include in its train the killing of that exceedingly foolish and indiscreet personage, Sutton. On the contrary, I assert here that all and each of those allegations are false; and what is perhaps the more intolerable is the fact that Lord Cyril knows it, has on his file at the Foreign Office a full report of the affair, coupled with a diplomatic request that the man should be found and returned to his friends.”

And he turned and faced the Secretary for Foreign Affairs with a striking look of defiance; but that nobleman would not take up his challenge. He merely drew a little closer to the earl, who was now standing listening to him with an expression of the most grave concern, and the shot went wide.

In no sense disconcerted, however, Don José confronted me again.

“You see,” he said significantly, “Lord Cuthbertson’s striking change of manner when I am here to face him out. I repeat to you that he dare not deny what I have just told you, although it suited his purpose well enough to blacken my name when I was not here to speak up for myself. The point for you now to consider,” he went on in a lower tone, “is, as a man of honour, not whether you can take up the cause of Lord Cuthbertson but if you can throw me over on such flimsy, unsubstantial talk as this has been.”

“If he doesn’t, Doris shall never speak to him again,” cut in Colonel Napier, who was an old Anglo-Indian, and nothing if not a most persistent fire-eater.

Don José turned as swiftly as though he had been stung by a snake. “Colonel, that is not worthy of you,” he cried. “I beg you withdraw it for your own sake, for I warn you most solemnly that before a day has gone you will regret it.”

“And I, as an Englishman, jealous of my country’s success, refuse,” thundered the old soldier. “Let it be enough that I have spoken. Mr Glynn can make his own choice.” And throwing back his shoulders he stalked impressively out of the room.

Almost unobserved, too, the Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Earl Fotheringay had also manoeuvred their steps towards the doorway; and now, when Casteno tried to speak with them, they took advantage of a pause created by the sudden rattle of the colonel’s carriage as he drove towards the Strand to slip out of the room. A minute later there arose the sound of a loud commotion, as of doors banged and of horses urged to a gallop, and both of their broughams followed hard in the old soldier’s wake.

“You see,” said Don José to me, with a little bitterness, “they are not men big enough to face me out over this matter. They prefer to fling their poisoned darts at me and to leave them to work their own mischief, whilst they scuttle off like naughty children who have thrown some stones through a

window and are quite content with the sight of the damage they have done, without a thought of the anguish of the householder. Well, well! all this is the trouble which you will no doubt remember that I, at least, expected and warned you against when I asked you to join forces with me. I must not now rail against my own fate, but I do appeal to you – give me a fair chance, do not desert me.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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