

THE BLIND BARBER

A DR. GIDEON FELL MYSTERY



JOHN
DICKSON
CARR



~~PRAISE FOR THE WRITING OF JOHN DICKSON CARR~~

“Very few detective stories baffle me, but Mr. Carr’s always do.” —*Agatha Christie*

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A Dr. Gideon Fell Mystery

John Dickson Carr



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THIS BOOK IS A farce about murder.

I feel I should give you fair warning, because this sort of thing hasn't been common lately. But your instant reaction is shocked withdrawal, please pause a moment and hear me out.

If I have one major complaint about the 300-odd mysteries that I read each year as a reviewer, it is that none of them are funny. Oh, I admit Richard S. Prather or Carter Brown can be amusing, but only in the trimmings: it's the writing that's funny, rather than the story.

And I long for the days of Craig Rice and Alice Tilton and Richard Shattuck and Jonathan Latimer when there was a wild cockeyed preposterousness in the events surrounding murder and even in murder itself—and not just in the style of the narrator.

I suppose this longing dates me. It's a 1930ish attitude. There was a fine film late in the Depression, starring Carole Lombard and written by Ben Hecht, called *Nothing Sacred*. It was a rowdy comedy about a (supposed) cancer victim. The “nothing-sacred” approach seems out of place today, now we take things more seriously, especially death.

But death and laughter are old friends. The medieval *Totentanz* is comic; and the macabre poet Thomas Lovell Beddoes christened his major tragedy *Death's Jest Book*. As Duncan sinks in his gory, the drunken porter rises with merry and improper quips. And the murders of real life seldom lack the element of comedy. One of the most terrible days in the annals of American murder opened on a scorching morning with a man named John Vinnicum Morse eating warmed-over mutton soup for breakfast.

I suspect that many readers—particularly the new young readers of mysteries—may relish a more generous ration of comedy-in-murder than publishers have been giving them; this series hopes to bring you, from time to time, Alan Green, Richard Shattuck and other prime practitioners of the criminally absurd, starting now with John Dickson Carr.

There's a strong comic element in many of Carr's books. It's most prevalent in the cases of Sam Henry Merivale, by “Carter Dickson” (and I realize with a sudden shock that it's almost ten years since H. M. has appeared in a new book); but it turns up frequently in Dr. Gideon Fell's cases, too—in the noble drinking sequences in *The Case of the Constant Suicides*.

But these are intrusions, like the porter. Just once did Carr set himself to write an all-out farce (with murder as the intrusion). And, being the incomparable technician that he is, he produced something unique.

Wisely, he kept Dr. Fell out of the merry maelstrom and made him act, for once, as a pure armchair detective, in the manner of the Baroness Orczy's Old Man in the Corner. Then he threaded through his fantastic plot a careful set of clues for a faultless formal problem in detection.

Unlike almost all other comedies of terrors, *The Blind Barber* is a detective story, in the strictest sense. But never was a reader more bedeviled with distractions from detection. Who observes clues while he's wiping his laughter-streaming eyes?

I hope you enjoy the challenge ... and the fun.

ANTHONY BOUCHA

Strange Cargo

WHEN THE LINER *QUEEN Victoria* left New York bound for Southampton and Cherbourg, it was said that two fairly well-known people were aboard, and it was whispered that a highly notorious third person was aboard also. Moreover, there was a fourth—but inconspicuous—person who will take rather a large part in this rowdy and topsy-turvy chronicle. Although he did not know it, this young man had in his luggage something more valuable than the marionettes of M. Fortinbras or the emerald elephant Lord Sturton, which partly explains why there were puzzles and high carnival in the sedate bosom of the *Queen Victoria*, and monkey business not altogether according to the customary pattern.

No more dignified ship than the *Queen Victoria* flies the house-flag of any British line. She is what is sometimes described as a “family” boat: which means that no hilarity is permitted in her stateroom after 11 P.M., and all the cross-ocean changes in time are punctiliously observed—so that the boat always closes three-quarters of an hour before you expect it, and makes you swear. Melancholy passengers sit in her glazed writing-room and seem to be composing letters to the relatives of the recently deceased. In the heavily-ornamented lounge there is soft conversation, not so loud as the creaking of the woodwork when the green swell lifts and glitters past the portholes; and knitting is in progress before some electric lights arranged to represent a fire. There is a semblance of gaiety when a serious-minded orchestra plays in the gallery of the dining-saloon at lunch and dinner. But there was one east-bound crossing, in the spring of last year, which Commander Sir Hector Whistler will never forget. Under his professional bluff *camaraderie* Captain Whistler possesses the most pyrotechnic temper of any skipper who had forsaken sail for steam, and the richness of his language is the admiration of junior officers. When, therefore—

The *Queen Victoria* was to dock at Southampton on the afternoon of May 18th, after the weirdest voyage she had ever made. On the morning of the next day Mr. Henry Morgan was ringing the bell at Dr. Fell’s new house at No. 1 Adelphi Terrace. Henry Morgan, it may be remembered, was the eminent writer of detective stories who took his own profession with unbecoming levity, and who had made Dr. Fell’s acquaintance during the case of the Eight of Swords. On this particular morning—when there was a smokey sun on the river and the quiet gardens below Adelphi Terrace—Morgan’s long, bespectacled, deceptively-melancholy face wore an expression which might have been anger or amusement. But he certainly looked like a man who had been through much; as he had.

Dr. Fell boomed a welcome, greeted him warmly, and pressed upon him a tankard of beer. The doctor, his guest saw, was stouter and more red-faced than ever. He bulged out over a deep chair in the embrasure of one of the tall windows overlooking the river. The high room, with its Adam fireplace

had been set to rights since Morgan had seen it some months before, when Dr. and Mrs. Fell moved in. It was still untidy, for that was the doctor's way; but the five-thousand-odd books had been crammed somehow into their oak shelves, and the litter of junk had found place in corners and nooks. Dr. Fell has an old-fashioned weakness for junk, especially for bright pictures of the hunting-print or Dicker variety, and scenes showing people getting out of stage-coaches and holding up mugs of beer before country inns. He also likes carved porcelain tankards with pewter lids, curious book-ends, ash-trays filched from pubs, statuettes of monk or devil, and other childish things which, nevertheless—in the sombre room with the oak bookshelves, with the frayed carpet on the floor—formed a fitting background for his Gargantuan presence. He sat in his chair in the window embrasure, before a broad study table littered with books and papers; there was a grin under his bandit's moustache, and a twinkle in his eye as he blinked at his visitor over eyeglasses on a broad black ribbon. And when the cigars had been lighted Dr. Fell said:

“I may be mistaken, my boy, but I seem to detect a professional gleam in your eye.” He wheezed and folded his big hands on the table. “Is there anything on your mind, hey?”

“There is,” said Morgan grimly. “I have to unfold just about the rummiest story you've ever listened to, if you've got time to hear it. It's rather a long one, but I don't think it'll bore you. And—you want any corroboration—I've taken the liberty of asking Curt Warren to come round here ...”

“Heh!” said Dr. Fell, rubbing his hands delightedly. “Heh-heh-hehe! This is like old times. Of course I've got time. And bring round anybody you like. Replenish that glass again and let's have the details.”

Morgan took a deep drink and a deep breath.

“First,” he said, in the manner of one commencing lecture, “I would direct your attention to a group of people sitting at the captain's table on the good ship *Queen Victoria*. Among whom, fortunately or unfortunately, I was one.

“From the beginning I thought it would be a dull crossing; everybody seemed to be injected with virtue like embalming fluid, and half an hour after the bar had opened there were only two people in the saloon, not counting myself. That was how I made the acquaintance of Valvick and Warren.

“Captain Thomassen Valvick was a Norwegian ex-skipper who used to command cargo and passenger boats on the North Atlantic route; now retired, and living in a cottage in Baltimore with his wife, a Ford, and nine children. He was as big as a prizefighter, with a sandy moustache, a lot of massive gestures, and a habit of snorting through his nose before he laughed. And he was the most genial soul who ever sat up all night telling incredible yarns, which were all the funnier in his strong squarehead accent, and he never minded if you called him a liar. He had twinkling, pale-blue eyes, half-shut up in a lot of wrinkles and a sandy, wrinkled face, and absolutely no sense of dignity. I could see it was going to be an uncomfortable voyage for Captain Sir Hector Whistler.

“Because, you see, Captain Valvick had known the skipper of the *Queen Victoria* in the old days.

before Whistler became the stuffed and stern professional gentleman at the head of the table. The was Whistler—growing stout, with his jaw drawn in like his shoulders, strung with gold braid like Christmas tree there was Whistler, his eye always on Valvick. He watched Valvick exactly as you watch a plate of soup at a ship's table in heavy weather; but it never kept the old squarehead quiet or muzzled his stories.

“At first it didn't matter greatly. We ran into heavy weather immediately and unexpectedly; rain squalls, and a dizzying combination of pitch-and-roll that drove almost all the passengers to the state-rooms. Those polished lounges and saloons were deserted to the point of ghostliness; the passages creaked like wickerwork being ripped apart, the sea went past with a dip and roar that slung against the bulkhead or pitched you forward on the rise, and navigating a staircase was an adventure. Personally, I like bad weather. I like the wind tearing in when you open a door; I like the smell of white paint and polished brass, which they say is what brings the sea-sickness, when a corridor writhing and dropping like a lift. But some people don't care for it. As a result, there were only six of us at the captain's table: Whistler, Valvick, Margaret Glenn, Warren, Dr. Kyle, and myself. The two near-celebrities we wanted to see were both represented by vacant chairs ... They were old Fortinbras who runs what has become a very swank marionette-theatre, and the Viscount Sturton. Know either one of them?”

Dr. Fell rumpled his big mop of grey-streaked hair.

“Fortinbras!” he rumbled. “Haven't I seen something about it recently in the highbrow magazines? It's a theatre somewhere in London where the marionettes are nearly life-size and as heavy as real people; he stages classic French drama or something—?”

“Right,” said Morgan, nodding, “He's been doing that to amuse himself, or out of a mystic sense of preserving the Higher Arts, for the past ten or twelve years; he's got a little box of a theatre with bare benches, seating about fifty people, somewhere in Soho. Nobody ever used to go there but all the kids in the foreign colony, who were wild about it. Old Fortinbras's *pièce de résistance* was his dramatisation of 'The Song of Roland,' in French blank verse. I got all this from Peggy Glenn. She says he took most of the parts himself, thundering out the noble lines from back-stage, while he and an assistant worked the figures. The marionettes' weight—nearly eight stone, each of 'em stuffed with sawdust and with all the armour, swords and trappings—was supported by a trolley on which the figures were run along, and a complicated set of wires worked their arms and legs. That was very necessary, because what they did mostly was fight; and the kids in the audience would hop up and down and cheer themselves hoarse.

“The kids, you see, never paid any attention to the lofty sentiments. They probably didn't even hear them or understand what it was all about. All they knew was that out would stagger the Emperor Charlemagne on the stage, in gold armour and a scarlet cloak, with a sword in one hand and a battle-axe in the other. After him would come bumping and reeling all the nobles of his court, with equal

bright clothes and equally lethal weapons. From the other side would come in the Emperor of the Moors and *his* gang, armed to the eyebrows. Then all the puppets would lean against the air in various overbalanced positions while Charlemagne, with a voice of thunder said, ‘Pry, thee, friend, gadzooks gramercy, what ho, sirrah!’, and made a blank-verse speech lasting nearly twenty minutes. It was to the effect that the Moors had no business in France, and had better get to hell out of there—or else. The Emperor of the Moors lifted his sword and replied with a fifteen-minute address whose purpose was, ‘Says you!’ And Charlemagne, whooping out his war-cry, up and dots him one with the battle-axe.

“That was the real beginning, you see. The puppets rose from the stage and sailed at each other like fowls across a cockpit, thrashing their swords and kicking up a battle that nearly brought down the roof. Every so often one of them would be released from the trolley as dead, and would crash down on the stage and raise a fog of dust. In the fog the battle kept on whirling and clashing, and old Fortinbras rushed behind the scenes screaming himself hoarse with noble speeches, until the kids were delirious with excitement. Then down would tumble the curtain; and out would come old Fortinbras, bowing and puffing and wiping the sweat off his face, supremely happy at the cheers of the audience; and he would make a speech about the glory of France which they applauded just as loudly without knowing what he was talking about ... He was a happy artist; an appreciated artist.

“Well, the thing was inevitable. Sooner or later the high-brows would ‘discover’ him, and his art and somebody did. He became famous overnight, a misunderstood genius whom the British public had shamefully neglected. No kids could get into the place now; it was all top-hats and people who wanted to discuss Corneille and Racine. I gather that the old boy was rather puzzled. Anyhow, he got a thumping offer to exhibit his various classic dramas in America, and it was one long triumphal tour ...”

Morgan drew a deep breath.

“All this, as I say, I got from Miss Glenn, who is—and has been long before the thing grew popular—a sort of secretary and general manager for the foggy old boy. She’s some sort of relation of his on her mother’s side. Her father was a country parson or schoolmaster or something; and when he died, she came to London and nearly starved until old Jules took her in. She’s devilish good-looking and seems prim and stiffish until you realise how much devilment there is in her, or until she’s had a few drinks; then she’s a glittering holy terror.

“Peggy Glenn, then, made the next member of our group, and was closely followed by my friend Curtis Warren.

“You’ll like Curt. He’s a harum-scarum sort, the favourite nephew of a certain Great Personage in the present American Government ...”

“What personage?” inquired Dr. Fell. “I don’t know of any Warren who is—”

Morgan coughed.

“It’s on his mother’s side,” he replied. “That has a good deal to do with my story; so we’ll say for the moment only a Great Personage, not far from F. D. himself. This Great Personage, by the way, is the most dignified and pompous figure in politics; the glossiest Top-Hat, the neatest Trouser-Press, the prince of unsplit infinitives and undamaged etiquette ... Anyhow, he pulled some wires (you’re not supposed to be able to do this) and landed Curt a berth in the Consular Service. It isn’t a very good berth; some God-forsaken hole out in Palestine or somewhere, but Curt was coming over for a holiday round Europe before he took over the heavy labour of stamping invoices or what-not. His hobby, by the way, is the making of amateur moving-pictures. He’s wealthy, and I gather he’s got not only a full-sized camera, but also a sound apparatus of the sort the news-reel men carry.

“But, speaking of Great Personages, we now come to the other celebrity aboard the *Queen Victoria*, also paralysed with sea-sickness. This was none other than Lord Sturton—you know—the one they call the Hermit of Jermyn Street. He’ll see nobody; he has no friends; all he does is collect bits of rare jewellery ... ”

Dr. Fell took the pipe out of his mouth and blinked.

“Look here,” he said suspiciously, “there’s something I want to know before you go on. Is this by any chance the familiar chestnut about the fabulous diamond known as the Lake of Light, or some such term, which was pinched out of the left eye of an idol at Burma, and is being stalked by a sinister stranger in a turban? Because, if it is, I’ll be damned if I listen to you ... ”

Morgan wrinkled his forehead sardonically.

“No,” he said. “I told you it was a rummy thing; it’s much queerer than that. But I’m bound to confess that a jewel *does* figure in the story—it was what tangled us up and raised all the hell when the wires got crossed—but nobody ever intended it to figure at all.”

“H’m!” said Dr. Fell, peering at him.

“And also I am bound to admit that the jewel got stolen—”

“By whom?”

“By me,” said Morgan unexpectedly. He shifted. “Or by several of us, to be exact. I tell you it was a nightmare. The thing was an emerald elephant, a big pendant thing of no historical interest but of enormous intrinsic value. It was a curiosity, a rarity; that’s why Sturton went after it. It was an open secret that he had been negotiating to buy it from one of the busted millionaires in New York. Well, he’d got it right enough; I had that from Curt Warren. The Great Personage, Curt’s uncle, is a friend of Sturton’s, and Curt’s uncle told him all about it just before Curt sailed. Probably half the people on the boat heard the rumour. I know we were all waiting to catch a glimpse of him when he came aboard—queer, sandy old chap with ancient side-whiskers and a hanging jaw; only attendant a secretary. He popped up the gangway all swathed round in checked comforters, and cursed everybody in reach.

“Now it’s a very odd thing, for a variety of reasons, that you should have mentioned the old familiar story about the fabulous jewel. Because, on the afternoon when all the trouble started—it was

the late afternoon of the fourth day out, and we were to dock three days later—Peggy Glenn and Skipper Valvick and I had been discussing this emerald elephant, in the way you do when you're lying back in a deck-chair with a robe across your knees, and nothing much to think about except when the bugle will blow for tea. We discussed whether it was in Lord Sturton's possession or locked in the captain's safe, and, in either case, how you could steal it. Peggy, I know, had evolved a very complicated and ingenious plan; but I wasn't listening closely. We had all got to know one another pretty well in those four days, and we stood on very little ceremony.

“As a matter of fact,” said Morgan, “I was more than half-asleep. Then—”

Indiscretions of Uncle Warpus

LOW ALONG THE SKY there was a liquid yellow brightness, but twilight had begun to come down, and the grey sea wore changing lights on its white-caps when the *Queen Victoria* shouldered down against a heavy swell. The skyline tilted and rose above a boiling hiss; there was a stiff breeze along the almost deserted promenade-deck. Lying back drowsily in a deck-chair, well wrapped against the cold, Morgan was in that lethargic frame of mind when the booming sea-noises are as comfortable as a fire. He reflected that shortly lights would go on along the ship; tea would be set out in the lounge while the orchestra played. Both his companions were momentarily silent, and he glanced at them.

Margaret Glenn had dropped her book in her lap; she was lying back in the deck-chair with eyes half-closed. Her rather thin, pretty, impish face—which ordinarily wore such a deceptive look of schoolmistress primness—now seemed puzzled and disturbed. She swung shell-rimmed reading glasses by one ear-piece, and there was a wrinkle above her hazel eyes. She was muffled in a fur coat with a wildly-blowing batik scarf; and from under her little brown hat a tendril of black hair danced above the windy deck.

She observed: “I say, what can be keeping Curt? It’s nearly tea-time, and he promised to be here long ago; then we were going to round you two up for cocktails ...” She shifted, and her earnest eyes peered round at the porthole behind as though she expected to see Warren there.

“I know,” said Morgan lazily. “It’s that bouncing little blonde from Nashville; you know, the one who’s going to Paris for the first time and says she wants to gain experiences for her soul.”

Turning a wind-flushed face, the girl was about to rise to the remark when she saw his expression, and stuck out her tongue at him instead.

“Bah!” she said, without heat. “That little faker; I know her type. Dresses like a trollop and won’t let a man get within a yard of her. You take my advice,” said Miss Glenn, nodding and winking wisely. “You stay clear of women who want to gain deep experience for the soul. All that means is that they don’t want to employ the body in doing it.” She frowned. “But I say, what *can* have happened to Curt? I mean, even with the notorious unpunctuality of American men—”

“Ha-ha-ha!” said Captain Thomassen Valvick, with an air of inspiration. “I tell you, maybe. Maybe it is like de horse.”

“What horse?” asked Morgan.

Captain Valvick uttered one of his amiable snorts and bent his big shoulders. Even though the deck was rolling and pitching in a way that made the deck-chairs slide into each other, he stood upright without difficulty. His long sandy-reddish face was etched out in wrinkles of enjoyment, and

behind very small gilt-rimmed spectacles his pale-blue eyes had an almost unholy twinkle. He wrinkled them up; he snorted again, hoarsely, through his sandy moustache, pulled down his large tweed cap over one ear, and made a massive gesture that would have been as heavy as a smaller man's blow.

“Ha-ha-HA!” thundered Captain Valvick. “Ay tell you. In my country, in Norway, we haff custom. When you wont to make a horse stop, you say, ‘Whoa!’ But we don’t. We say ‘*Brubublubuoooo-bloooo!*’”

Shaking his jowls and lifting his head like Tarzan over a fresh kill, Captain Valvick here uttered the most extraordinary noise Morgan had ever heard. It cannot be reproduced into phonetic sounds and so loses its beauty and poignancy. It was something like the noise of water running out of a bathtub, but rising on a triumphant note like a battle-cry, and trembling on in shadings of defective drains and broken water-pipes; as though Mr. Paul Whiteman (say) had built a symphony round it, and come out strongly with his horns and strings.

“*Bru-bloo-bulooooluloo-buloooooo!*” crowed Captain Valvick, starting low with his shakings of head and jowl, and then rearing up his head at the climax.

“Isn’t that a lot of trouble?” inquired Morgan.

“Oh, no! Ay do it easy,” scoffed the other, nodding complacently. “But ay was going to tell you de first time I try it on a English-speaking ’orse, de ’orse didn’t understand me. Ay tell you how was. At dat time, when I was young, I was courting a girl who lived in Vermont, where it always snow like Norway. So ay t’ink ay take her out for a sleigh-ride, all nice and fine. I hire de best horse and sleigh dey got, I tell de girl to be ready at two o’clock in de afternoon, and I come for her. So of course I want to make a good impression on my girl, and I come dashing up de road to her house, and I see her standing on de porch, waiting for me. So ay t’ink it be fine ting to make de grand entrance, and ay say, ‘*Brubu-bluooo-bloo!*’ fine and strong to de ’orse so ay can turn in de gates. But he don’t stop. And ay t’ink, ‘Coroosh! What is wrong wit’ de goddam ’orse?’” Here Captain Valvick made a dramatic gesture, “So I shout, ‘*Brubu-bloooo-bloooo!*’ and lean over de footboard and say it again. And dis time de ’orse turn its head round to look at me. But it don’t stop, you bet. It keep right on going, straight past de house where de girl is standing, and it only gallop faster when I keep saying, ‘*Brubublubuoooo-bl-oooo!*’ And my girl open her eyes at me and look fonna, but de ’orse fly straight on up de road; and all I can do is stand up in de sleigh and keep taking off my hat and bowing to her w’ile a de time ay go farder and farder away from her; and still ay am doing dat we’en we go round a bend and ay can’t see her no more ...”

All this was recited with much pantomime and urging the reins of an imaginary horse. With a sigh expiring Captain Valvick shook his head in a melancholy fashion, and then twinkled benevolently.

“Ay could never get dat girl to go out again. Ha-ha-ha!”

“But I don’t see the point,” protested Peggy Glenn, who was regarding him in some perplexity.
“How is that like Curt Warren?”

“Ay don’t know,” admitted the other, scratching his head. “Ay jüst wanted to tell de story, a guess ... Maybe he is sea-sick, eh? Ha-ha-ha! Ah! Dat remind me. Haff ay ever told you de story abo de mutiny ay ’ave when de cook always eat all de peas out of de soup and—”

“Sea-sick?” the girl exclaimed indignantly. “Bosh! At least—poor old fellow, I hope not. My uncle is having a terrible time of it, and he’s suffering worse because he’s promised to give performance of his marionettes at the ship’s concert ... Do you think we’d better go and see what wrong with Curt?”

She paused as a white-coated steward struggled out of a door near by and peered round in the darkening light. Morgan recognised him as his own cabin steward—a cheerful-faced young man with flat black hair and a long jaw. He had, now, a rather conspiratorial manner. Sliding down the gush of deck, he beckoned towards Morgan and raised his voice above the crash and hiss of water.

“Sir,” he said, “it’s Mr. Warren, sir. ’Is compliments, and ’e’d like to see you. And ’is friends to ...”

Peggy Glenn sat up. “There’s nothing wrong, is there? Where is he? What’s the matter?”

The steward looked dubious, and then reassuring, “Oh no, miss! Nothing wrong. Only I think somebody’s ’it him.”

“What?”

“Hin the eye, miss. And on the back of th ’ead. But ’e’s not a bit upset, miss, not ’im. I left ’im sitting on the floor in the cabin,” said the steward, rather admiringly, “with a towel to ’is ’ead and a piece of movie film in ’is ’and, swearing something ’andsome. And ’e’d taken a nasty knock, miss, that’s a fact.”

They stared at each other, and then they all hurried after the steward. Captain Valvick, puffing and snorting through his moustache, threatened dire things. Tearing open one of the doors, they were kicked by its recoil in the wind into the warm, paint-and-rubbery odour of the corridor. Warren’s cabin, a large double which he occupied alone, was an outside one on C deck, starboard side. They descended heaving stairs, struck off past the gloomy staircase to the dining-room, and knocked at the door of C 91.

Mr. Curtis G. Warren’s ordinarily lazy and good-humoured face was now malevolent. The odour of recent profanity hung about him like garlic. Round his head a wet towel had been wound like a turban; there was a slight cut of somebody’s knuckles. Mr. Warren’s greenish eyes regarded them bitterly out of a lean, newly-scrubbed face; his hair, over the bandage, stuck up like a goblin’s; and in his hand he had a strip of what resembled motion-picture film with perforations for sound, torn at one end. He sat on the edge of his berth, faintly visible in the yellowish twilight through the porthole, and the whole cabin was wildly disarranged.

“Come in,” said Mr. Warren. Then he exploded. “When I catch,” he announced, drawing a deep breath like one who begins an oration, and spacing his words carefully—“when I catch the white-livered, greenly empurpled so-and-so who tried to get away with this—when I get one look at the ugly mug of the lascivious-habited son of a bachelor who runs around beaming people with a black-jack—

Peggy Glenn wailed, “Curt!” and rushed over to examine his head, which she turned to one side and the other as though she were looking behind his ears. Warren broke off and said, “Ow!”

“But, my dear, what happened?” the girl demanded. “Oh, why do you *let* things like this happen? Are you hurt?”

“Baby,” said Warren in a tone of dignity, “I can tell you that it is not alone my dignity which has suffered. By the time they have finished stitching up my head, I shall probably resemble a baseball. As to my deliberately encouraging all this to happen ... Boys,” he said, appealing moodily to Morgan and the captain, “I need help. I’m in a jam, and that’s no lie.”

“Ha!” growled Valvick, rubbing a large hand down across his moustache. “You yust tell me who smack you, eh? Ha! Den ay take him and—”

“I don’t know who did it. That’s the point.”

“But why ... ?” asked Morgan, who was surveying the litter in the cabin; and the other grinned sourly.

“This, old son,” Warren told him, “is right in your line. Do you know if there are any international crooks on board? The Prince or Princess Somebody kind, who always hang out at Monte Carlo? Because an important State document has been pinched ... No, I’m not kidding. I didn’t know I had the damned thing; never occurred to me; I thought it had been destroyed ... I tell you I’m in big trouble, and it’s not funny. Sit down somewhere and I’ll tell you about it.”

“You go straight to the doctor!” Peggy Glenn said, warmly. “If you think I’m going to have you laid up with amnesia or something—”

“Baby, listen,” the other begged, with a sort of wild patience; “you don’t seem to get it yet. This is dynamite. It’s—well, it’s like one of Hank’s spy stories, only it’s something new along that line now that I come to think of it ... Look here. You see this film?”

He handed it to Morgan, who held it up for examination against the fading light through the porthole. The pictures were all of a portly, white-haired gentleman in evening clothes, who had one fist lifted as though making a speech and whose mouth was split wide as though it were a very explosive speech. There was, moreover, a very curious, bleary look about the dignified person; his torso was skewered under one ear, and over his head and shoulders had been sprinkled what Morgan at first presumed to be snow. It was, in fact, confetti.

And the face was vaguely familiar. Morgan stared at it for some time before he realised that it was none other than a certain Great Personage, the most pompous starched-shirt of the Administration, the potent rain-maker and high priest of quackdoodle. His cheerful, soothing voice

over the radio had inspired millions of Americans with dreams of a fresh, effulgent era of national prosperity in which there should be instalment plans without ever any payments demanded, and similar American conceptions of the millennium. His dignity, his scholarship, his courtly manners—

“Yes, you’re right,” Warren said wryly. “It’s my uncle. Now I’ll tell you about it ... and don’t laugh, because it’s absolutely serious.

“He’s a very good fellow, Uncle Warpus is; you’ve got to understand that. He got into the position through the ordinary, human behaviour that might happen to anybody, but others mightn’t think so. All politicians ought to have a chance every once in a while to blow off steam. Otherwise they’re apt to go mad and chew off an ambassador’s ear, or something. With the whole country in a mix-up, and everything going wrong, and wooden-heads trying to block every reasonable measure, there are times when they explode. Especially if they’re in congenial company and have a social highball or two.

“Well—my hobby is the taking of amateur moving-pictures, with, Lord help me, sound. So about a week before I was to sail I was due to visit Uncle Warpus in Washington for a good-by call.” Warren put his chin in his hands and looked sardonically on the others, who had moved backwards to find seats. “I couldn’t take my movie apparatus abroad with me; it was much too elaborate. Uncle Warpus suggested that I should leave it with him. He was interested in such things; he thought he might get some pleasure in tinkering with it, and I should show him how to work everything ...

“On the first night I got there,” pursued Warren, taking a deep breath, “there was a very large, very dignified party at Uncle Warpus’s. But he and a few of his Cabinet and senatorial cronies had sneaked away from the dancing; they were upstairs in the library, playing poker and drinking whisky. When I arrived they thought it would be an excellent idea if I arranged my apparatus, and we took a few friendly talking-pictures there in the library. It took me some time, with the assistance of the butler, to get it all arranged. Meanwhile, they were having a few friendly drinks. Some of ’em were a good deal the strong, silent, rough-diamond administrators from the prairies; and even Uncle Warpus was relaxing considerably.”

Warren blinked with reminiscent pleasure at the ceiling.

“It all began with much seriousness and formality. The butler was camera man, and I recorded the sound. First the Honourable William T. Pinkis recited Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. *That* was a very powerful piece of acting, with a bottle of gin as the dagger. One thing led to another. Senator Borax sang ‘Annie Laurie,’ and then they got up a quartet to render ‘Where is my Wandering Boy Tonight?’ and ‘Put on Your Old Grey Bonnet.’ ...”

Sitting back in the berth with her back against the wall, Peggy Glenn was regarding him with a shocked expression. Her pink lips were open, her eyebrows raised.

“Oh, I say!” she protested. “Curt, you’re pulling our legs. I mean to say, just fancy our House o

Commons ... ”

Warren raised his hand fervently. “Baby, as Heaven is my witness, that is precisely—” He broke off to scowl as Morgan began laughing. “I tell you, Hank, this is serious!”

“I know it,” agreed Morgan, growing thoughtful. “I think I begin to see what’s coming. Go on.”

“Ay t’ank dey did right,” said Captain Valvick, nodding vigorously and approvingly. “Ay haf always wanted to try one of dem t’ings too. Den ay giff my imitation of de two cargo-boats in de fo It is very good, dat one. I show you. Ha-ha-ha!”

Warren brooded.

“Well, as I say, one little thing led to another. The signal for the fireworks was when one Cabin member, who had been chuckling to himself for some time, recounted a spirited story about the travelling salesman and the farmer’s daughter. And then came the highlight of the whole evening. My uncle Warpus had been sitting by himself—you could almost see his mind going round *click-click-click*—and he was weighed down by a sense of injustice. He said he was going to make a speech. He did. He got in front of the microphone, cleared his throat, squared his shoulders, and then the cataract came down at Lodore.

“In some ways,” said Warren, rather admiringly, “it was the funniest thing I ever heard. Uncle Warpus had had to repress his sense of humour for some time. But I happened to know of his talent for making burlesque political speeches ... Wow! What he did was to give his free, ornamental, and uncensored opinion of the ways of government, the people in the government, and everything connected with it. Then he went on to discuss foreign policy and armaments. He addressed the heads of Germany, Italy, and France, explaining exactly what he thought of their parentage and alleged social pastimes, and indicating where they could thrust their battleships with the greatest possible effect ... ” Warren wiped his forehead rather dazedly. “You see, it was all done in the form of a burlesque flag-waving speech, with plenty of weird references to Washington and Jefferson and the faith of the fathers ... Well, the other eminent soaks caught on and were cheering and applauding. Senator Borax got hold of a little American flag, and every time Uncle Warpus made a particularly telling point, Senator Borax would stick his head out in front of the camera, and wave the flag for a second, and say, ‘Hooray!’ ... Boys, it was hair-raising. As an oratorical effort I have never heard surpassed. But I know two or three newspapers in New York that would give a cool million dollars for sixty feet of that film.”

Peggy Glenn, struggling between laughter and incredulity, sat forward, with her bright hazel eyes fixed on him; she seemed annoyed. “But I tell you,” she protested again, “it’s absurd! It—it isn’t *nic* you know ... ”

“You’re telling me,” said Warren, grimly.

“ ... and all those awfully nice high-minded people; it’s disgusting! You can’t really tell me! . Oh, it’s absurd! I don’t believe it.”

“Baby,” said Warren gently, “that’s because you’re British. You don’t understand American character. It’s not in the least unreasonable; it’s simply one of those scandals that sometimes happen and have to be hushed up somehow. Only this one is a scandal of such enormous, dizzying proportions that—Look here. We’ll say nothing of the explosion it would cause at home. It would ruin Uncle Warpus, and a lot of others with him. But can you imagine the effect of those pronouncements on, say, certain dignitaries in Italy and Germany? They wouldn’t see anything funny about it in the least. They didn’t jump up and down, tearing out handfuls of hair, and rush out and declare war immediately. It would be because somebody had the forethought to sit on their heads ... Whoosh! T.N.T.? T.N.T. as mild as a firecracker compared with it.”

It was growing dark in the cabin. Heavy clouds had massed up; there was a tremble through the ship above the dull beat of her screws, and a deeper thunder and swish of water as she pitched. Glasses and water-bottle were rattling in the rack above the washstand. Morgan reached up to switch on the light. He said:

“And someone stole it from you?”

“Half of it, yes ... Let me tell you what happened.

“The morning after that little carnival, Uncle Warpus woke up with a realisation of what he’d done. He came rushing into my room, and it appears he’d been bombarded with phone-calls from other offenders since seven o’clock. Fortunately, I was able to reassure him—as I thought, anyhow. What with other difficulties, I’d taken in all only two reels. Each reel was packed into a container like this ... ”

Reaching down under his berth, Warren pulled out a large oblong box, bound in steel, with a handle like a suitcase. It was unlocked, and he opened the snap-catch. Packed inside were a number of flat circular tins measuring about ten inches in diameter painted black, and scrawled with cryptic markings in white chalk. One of these had its lid off. Inside had been jammed a tangled and disarranged spool of film from which a good length seemed to have been torn off.

Warren tapped the tin. “I was taking some of my better efforts with me,” he explained. “I’ve got a little projector, and I thought they might amuse people on the other side ...

“On the night of Uncle Warpus’s eloquence, I was a little tight myself. The packing up I left to the butler, and I showed him how to do the marking. What must have happened—I can see it now—was that he got the notations mixed. I carefully destroyed two reels that I thought were the right ones. But, like an imbecile”—Warren got out a pack of cigarettes and stuck one askew into his mouth—“like an imbecile, I only examined one of the reels with any care. So I destroyed the Gettysburg Address, the Dagger Scene, and the singing of ‘Annie Laurie.’ But the rest of it ... well, I can figure it out now. What I got rid of were some swell shots of the Bronx Park Zoo.”

“And the rest of it?”

Warren pointed to the floor.

“In my luggage, without my knowing it. Never a suspicion, you see, until this afternoon. Ga what a situation. Well, you see, I had an urgent radiogram I had to send off to somebody at home—”

“Oh?” said Miss Glenn, sitting up and eyeing him suspiciously.

“Yes. To my old man. So I went up to the wireless-room. The operator said he’d just received message for me. He also said, ‘This looks like code. Will you check it over and make sure it’s a right?’ Code. Ho-ho! I glanced over it, and it seemed so queer that I read it aloud. You must remember, what with the excitement of going away and things on board here and all, I’d forgotten the little performance entirely. Besides, the radiogram was unsigned; I suppose Uncle Warpus didn’t dare ...” Warren shook his head sadly, a weird turbaned figure with the cigarette hanging from one corner of his mouth and his face scrubbed like a schoolboy’s. Then he took the cable from his pocket. “I said, ‘*found traces in sweeping out. Hiller—*’ that’s his butler; old family retainer; wouldn’t squeal. Uncle Warpus pinched the silver out of the White House—‘*Hiller nervous. They look like bears. this real reel. Urgent no hitch in sarcasm effaced. Advise about bears.*’”

“Eh?” demanded Captain Valvick, who was puffing slowly.

“That’s the closest he could take a chance on coming to it,” Warren explained. “Bears in the zoo. But it’s not the sort of thing that makes much sense when it’s sprung on you unexpectedly. I argued it out with the wireless operator, and it wasn’t until ten minutes later that it struck me—how the devil was I to know Uncle Warpus had sent it? So I couldn’t connect up the words; then suddenly it hit me.

“Well, I rushed down here to my cabin. It was getting dark, and besides, the curtain was drawn over the porthole ... but there was somebody in here.”

“And of course,” said Morgan, “you didn’t see who it was?”

“When I get that low-down”—snarled Warren, going off at a tangent and glaring murderously at the water-bottle—“when I find—no, damn it! All I knew was that it was a man. He had my film-box over in the corner, half the tins with their lids off (I found this later) and had the right roll in his hands. I dived for him, and he let go a hard one at my face. When I grabbed him I grabbed a piece of the film. He cracked out again—there isn’t much space in here, and the boat was pitching pretty heavily—then we staggered over against the washstand while I tried to slam him against the wall. I didn’t dare let go of the film. The next thing I knew the whole cabin went up like a flashlight powder that was his blackjack on the back of my head. I didn’t quite lose consciousness, but the place was going round in sparks; I slugged him again, and I was bent over the part of the film I had. Then I yanked the door open and got out somehow. I must have been knocked out for a few minutes there. When I came to, I rang for the steward, sloshed some water on my head, and discovered—” With his foot Warren raised the tangle of film on the floor.

“But didn’t you see him?” asked the girl, in her fluttering concern, again taking hold of his hand and causing an agonised “Ow!” She jumped. “I mean, old boy, that, after all, you were fighting with him ...”

“No, I didn’t see him, I tell you! It might have been anybody ... But the question is, what’s to be done? I’m appealing to you for help. We’ve got to get that piece of film back. He got—maybe fifty feet of it. And that’s as dangerous as though he’d got all of it.”

Trap for a Film Thief

“WELL,” MORGAN OBSERVED THOUGHTFULLY, “I admit this is the rummiest kind of secret-service mission that a self-respecting hero was ever called on to undertake. It rouses my professional instincts.”

He felt a glow of pleasurable excitement. Here was he, an eminent writer of detective stories involved in one of those complicated spy plots to recover a stolen document and preserve the honor of a great Personage. It was the sort of thing that would have been nuts to Mr. Oppenheim; and Morgan reflected, he himself had often used the background of a luxurious ocean liner, sweeping its lighted decks through waters floored with stars—full of monocled crooks sipping champagne; of pale long-necked Ladies with a Purpose who are not interested in love-making; and of dirty work in general. (The women in a secret-service story seldom *are* interested in love-making; that is the trouble with it.) Although the *Queen Victoria* was scarcely the boat for such goings-on, Morgan considered the idea and found it good. Outside, it had begun to rain. The liner was bumping like a tub against the crash of the swell, and Morgan lurched a little as he stalked up and down the narrow cabin, revolving plans, pushing his glasses up and down his nose, becoming each second more excited with the prospect.

“Well?” demanded Peggy Glenn. “Say something, Hank! Of course we help him, don’t we?”

She still seemed hurt by the behaviour of the eminent soaks; but her protective instincts had been aroused and her small jaw was very square. She had even put on her shell-rimmed reading-glasses which lent a look of unwonted sombreness (or flippant make-believe, if you like) to the thin face. And she had removed her hat, to show a mop of black bobbed hair. Sitting with one leg curled under her she regarded Morgan almost fiercely. He said:

“My girl, I wouldn’t miss it for—well, for a good deal. Ha! It is obvious,” he continued, with relish, and hoped it was true, “that there is aboard a wily and clever international crook who has determined to secure that film for purposes of his own. Very good. We therefore form a Defensive Alliance ...”

“Thanks,” said Warren, in some relief. “God knows I need help and—you see, you were the only people I could trust. Well, then?”

“Right. You and I, Curt, will be the Brains. Peggy will be the Siren, if we need one. Captain Valvick will be the Brawn—”

“Hah!” snorted the captain, nodding vigorously and lifting his shoulders with approval. He twinkled down on them, and raised his arm with terrific gusto. “For God! For de cause! For c

Church! For de laws,” he thundered unexpectedly. ““For Charles, King of England, and Rupert off Rhine!’ Ha-ha-ha.”

“What the devil’s that?” demanded Morgan.

“Ay dunno yust what it mean,” admitted the captain, blinking on them rather sheepishly. “Ay read it in a book once, and ay t’ink it iss fine. If ay ever get stirred up in de heart—hoooo-o!—Ay sa it.” He shook his head. “But ay got to be careful wit’ de books. When ay finish reading one, ay got be careful to write its name down so I don’t forget and go back and read it all over again.”

He looked on them with great amiability, rubbing his nose, and inquired, “But what iss dere yo want me to do?”

“First,” said Morgan, “it’s agreed that you don’t want official steps taken, Curt? I mean, yo could tell Captain Whistler—?”

“Lord, no!” the other said violently. “I can’t do that, don’t you see? If we get this back at all, it got to be under the strictest cover. And that’s where it’s going to be difficult. Out of the whole passenger-list of this boat, how are we going to pick out the person who might want to steal the thing? Besides, how did the fellow know I had that film, if I didn’t know it myself?”

Morgan reflected. “That wireless message—” he said, and stopped. “Look here, you said you read it aloud, and it was only a very short time afterwards that the chap tried to burgle this cabin. It seem too much to be a coincidence ... Was there anybody who might have overheard you?”

The other made scoffing noises. In the pure absorption of the debate he had absent-mindedly fished out a bottle of whisky from one of his suit-cases. “Bunk!” said Warren. “Suppose there were a crook of some description aboard. What would that cock-eyed message mean to him? It took some time for *me* to figure it out.”

“All right. All right, then! It’s got to mean this. The thief was somebody who already knew about the film; that is, that there had been one made ... That’s possible, isn’t it?”

Warren hesitated, knocking his knuckles against his turbaned forehead.

“Ye-es, I suppose it is,” he admitted. “There were all sorts of rumours afloat next day; you know how it is. But we were in the library with the door locked, and naturally it can’t be any of the people who were in the game ... I told you there was a reception downstairs, but how anybody down there could have known—”

“Well, evidently somebody *did* know,” Morgan argued. “And it’s at a crush of a reception like that, at the home of some big pot, where you’d expect to find a specimen of the gentry we’re looking for ... Put it this way, just for a starter.” He meditated, pulling at his ear-lobe. “The thief—we’ll call him, say, Film-Flam—gets wind of your important document. But he thinks it’s been destroyed and abandons any idea of pinching it. Still, he is travelling abroad on the *Queen Victoria*—”

“Why?” inquired Miss Glenn practically.

“How should I know?” Morgan demanded, with some asperity. His imagination had been working

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