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The Green Seal

By CHARLES EDMONDS WALK

Author of "The Silver Blade," "The Paternoster Ruby," "The Time Lock," etc.

CHAPTER V.—(Cont'd).

The whole proceeding was, in truth, singular; of a nature to render one vexed with impatience because curiosity was raised to a high pitch only to be—wilfully, it seemed—disappointed and unsatisfied. A man will not journey half-way round the world to interview a comparatively obscure young lady stenographer, whom he has never seen, unless the motive impelling him to do so is extremely potent.

Then, to keep the long trail blazed, as it were, with letters and a telegram, only to have the traveler vanish at the journey's end, had the effect of plunging an already mysterious episode into yet greater mystery. There was something positively uncanny about it.

"Anyway," I reflected aloud after this unique correspondence had been considered at length, "either your quasi-confirmation of Strang's belief about the tattoo-mark, or else some factor in your letters to him, not obvious but immanent—what he read between the lines, possibly—hastened his determination to come to America. Did you show these letters to your Aunt Lois?"

"Yes. But they only puzzled her and excited her curiosity as much as they did me. She never heard of any James Strang.

"They frightened her, too, I believe. She was obstinate—refused to supply me with the information that might have enabled me to answer all his questions more fully. Aunt Lois warned me repeatedly to be careful lest something terrible come out of it. But I couldn't see any possible cause for alarm. I was not deaf to the underlying note of sincerity that marks all the letters, and I don't think I did anything either rash or unbecoming in answering them—do you?"

Most emphatically, I did not. And I was saying so when Stub knocked and entered. His eyes were shining with suppressed excitement, but before giving him my attention I supplemented to Miss Fox:

"If you don't mind, I'll keep these letters for a while; I should like to study them over at leisure. It may be advisable to report the matter to the police; Strang—whoever he is—may have met with foul play. I'll gladly take the matter off your hands."

Stub could restrain himself no longer.

"Boss," he interrupted in an excited undertone, "there's a gum-shoe out in the office right now wanting to see you."

Miss Fox and I both fixed upon him a blank stare.

"Gum-shoe!" I echoed. "What on earth do you mean?"

The imp fairly writhed with vexation over my obtuseness.

"Elbow—bull—sleut'—detective," he rattled off. "It's Heinie Struber. He's dead anxious to see you, too, boss."

Miss Fox rose hastily, as if to retire.

"Wait," I charged her. "This might have to do with the very thing we have been discussing. I can't imagine otherwise why a detective should favor me with a call."

She moved over to a window, turning her back to the room, and at a nod from me Stub sprang at the door and had it invitingly open all in one motion.

So promptly as to suggest that he had been waiting not far away, a hatchet-faced man entered. He winked covertly and knowingly at Stub, darted a sharp glance at Miss Fox's back, and then smiled ingratiatingly at me. He was holding something in his hand.

"Sorry to bother yuh, Mr. Ferris," he began, "but I want to ask yuh a few questions on an important matter. I'm a city detective; Struber's my name."

"Without waiting for my consent, he advanced and laid upon my blotting-pad the object he was carrying. It was a small, right-angled strip of white pasteboard—that is, it was shaped like a carpenter's square.

"Can you identify that?" he asked, regarding me shrewdly.

For the life of me, I could not restrain a start. Right at the angle, in small type that was unmistakably familiar, appeared my office telephone number. On the instant I knew what this fragment of pasteboard meant.

It was the remainder of the card from which had been cut the address on the parcel enclosing the diamond.

CHAPTER VI.

I glanced up from the bit of card and into the eyes of Mr. Struber. What I saw there warned me that, officer of the law or not, he was no proper person in whom to confide a matter so weighty as the diamond. Behind his deferential—I might almost say cringing—mein, I saw slyness and cynical distrust; it would have required no great temptation, I fancied, to kindle cupidity in his heart.

Lest, however, I excite his suspicions it behooved me to say something, and by way of answer I reached into a drawer of my desk and brought forth one of my professional cards. I placed this beside the trimmed border, and beheld Mr. Struber give a slight nod of satisfaction.

"Just as I thought," said he. "Now then, the question is to learn who it was cut one of your cards like that, and why he did it." And then, in the most matter-of-fact tone, as if he were uttering the veriest commonplace, he added: "You know Steve Willets, I s'pose—"

Mr. Struber got thus far, and stopped. With the mention of the name Miss Fox uttered a little cry and wheeled from the window. Tense and frightened, she stood staring at the detective. Stub was so electrified with mingled emotions of rapture and anticipation, that I curbed an impulse to send him from the room, which just then would have been an act of sheer cruelty.

After a brief questioning regard of the startled girl, Mr. Struber turned to me again and completed what he had started to say:

"Was he ever a client of yours?"

I refused to be surprised. Indeed, I felt I had passed the stage where anything that might have happened would appear unusual or strange. If Mr. Struber had suddenly been transformed into a monkey and gone capering and chattering around the room, I believe I would have regarded it unmoved as a part of the crazy situation in which I was so confusedly groping. So I replied calmly:

"My practice does not extend to the criminal branch of the law. It would be impossible for me to name everybody who might have access to my cards. They are for the accommodation of any one likely to have business with me."

A disappointed expression overspread Mr. Struber's lean, twisted expression.

"Just so," he complained, darting a furtive glance at Miss Fox, who had not stirred again. "I looked for somethin' o' the kind."

"Perhaps," I offered, "if you tell me why you mentioned Willets in connection with this fragment of card, and tell me under what circumstances it came into your possession, I may be able to give you some information."

The man drew a long breath, and his regard, taking on a doubtful expression, shifted from Miss Fox to Stub. She moved over to a chair, upon which she leaned, watching the detective intently.

"Might as well, I s'pose," he said hesitantly; "but it ain't a matter to pass round too freely."

I acknowledged both look and hint by banishing Stub.

"Miss Fox," I explained, "is as much interested as I am. Anyway she is in my confidence."

Mr. Struber helped himself to the chair facing me, and sat holding his derby hat against his bosom while he talked.

"Well, it's quite a little story—a blamed funny one, too. This morning Billy Hatfield sends word to headquarters that something queer's on at the Republic Hotel, where Billy's chief clerk. The Republic, y' understand, ain't what yuh'd call a swell hotel, and queer things is pulled off there every once in a while. So Billy an' me's pretty good friends.

"'What's on?' says I when I see Billy. And he tells me this:

"Some time Saturday afternoon a guy registered at the Republic. He signs his name 'S. Willets,' just like that—'S. Willets.' He writes down after it 'Johore Bahru' as the place he hails from."

At this point I stole a glance at Miss Fox; but the name manifestly was unfamiliar to her, and her pretty countenance was not altered from its look of deep interest.

"The Old Man," Mr. Struber pursued, "he looks up this Johore Bahru place, an' finds it's a tank town in the Malay Peninsula, where one brand o' Chinks comes from."

Here the girl grew more alert; she had herself too well in hand now, however, to betray her profound concern by another sign.

"When Billy sees 'S. Willets' on his register he thinks it's just a josh an' lets it go at that. People don't always give their real names, y' know, at joints like the Republic, an' Billy he's not the kind o' guy what butts in where he ain't got no business to. He's a pretty good scout, Billy is, an' he notices that this Willets is nervous an' fidgety, like somethin' don't set well on his chest. That ought to a-put Billy next that the guy wasn't in no frame o' mind to be handin' out any kind o' josh just at that time; but somehow Billy doesn't notice, or think about it.

"Well, sir, this Willets is shown a room, an' he must a-went out somewheres soon after, for he don't show up any more till 'way after supper. Then he breezes in an' proceeds to bawl out Mr. Corrigan—Billy Hatfield's off duty then, an' Corrigan's the manager—swearing somebody's broke into his room and gone through his baggage. There was signs all right that this Willets guy was telling the truth; but there wasn't nothing missing. Corrigan makes him turn out everything and check up his belongings, but he admits nothing is gone.

"Yet that doesn't quiet him, and he seems kind o' frightened till Corrigan gives him a room on another floor. This all happens Saturday night.

"They leaves the guy in his new room—424 it was; fourth floor, looking out on Spring Street—and that's the last anybody about the hotel ever see of him. That's why Billy telephones in to headquarters this morning and wants to see me."

"But my card," I took advantage of this pause to inquire, "where does it come in?"

"I'm just ready for that. First thing after hearing what Billy and Corrigan and all the rest has to say, I took a slant at the inside of 424. The only things that look like a clue I find on a dinky little table. There was some wrapping-paper there, like as if he'd done up a package; then the table was scratched where he'd been cutting something with a pocket-knife. The edge of card shows what that was, and Central give me the name belonging to the telephone number."

Up to this stage I had formed no very high opinion of Mr. Struber's astuteness; now, without the slightest warning, he gave me a genuine jolt of surprise. In the same colorless tone that marked the balance of his recital, he asked:

"Who is this guy, Mr. Ferris? What was it he sent you?"

"I haven't the least idea who the man can be," I assured him. "And what in the world makes you think he sent me something?"

Mr. Struber's regard roamed over me in a speculative way.

"Why," he returned, coughing deprecatingly behind his hat, "what else could he a-been doin' if he didn't wrap up a package? An' then, who else was it for, seein' he pastes one o' your own cards on for a label? Must a-been a small package, too, or he wouldn't a-had to trim the card."

I contemplated the detective narrowly, even with a twinge of apprehension. It was beginning to dawn in my mind that the appearance of the man might be deceptive in more ways than one; certainly he was shrewder than a casual glance at his twisted features, totally wanting any force of character, or his shabby clothing, indicated. His maladroitness was disarming; yet his quick deductions were taking my breath away with their undeniably plausibility. If I were not watchful he would have me talking about the diamond despite myself.

"I can only repeat," said I, "that I can not imagine who the man is. As to your conclusion that he sent me a parcel of any description, you are mistaken."

Mr. Struber's ferret eyes narrowed as they again surveyed me. I had an uncomfortable feeling that he was checking off the details of my appearance. In a bit his long knuckly fingers began drumming absently upon the crown of his hat, and he appeared to be pondering. Presently he said, without addressing anybody in particular:

"Funny thing. D' yuh know, this guy what signs his name 'S. Willets' answers Steve's description to a dot. When Billy describes him to me I shows him Steve's gallery picture. Billy says: 'Put a ragged gray moustache on that fella'—meaning Steve—'an' give him a mop o' gray hair, an' he's the man'—meanin' the guy what's disappeared."

All at once his glance, concentrating in a keen, penetrating look, traveled to Miss Fox.

"What do you know 'bout Steve Willets, Miss?" he politely asked.

Taken thus off her guard, Miss Fox paled and drew back with a little gasp of dismay.

"I?" she exclaimed. But before she had time to reply further, I sharply interfered.

"Here, Struber, a joke's a joke. But you will please leave Miss Fox out of this discussion. I am very busy, and I've given you a good bit of my time; I'm sorry I could be of no more assistance."

In the face of this curt hint Mr. Struber could scarcely do less than take his leave, which he did at once, mumbling unintelligible apologies.

The instant the door closed behind him Miss Fox hastened to my desk and dropped into her accustomed place. Her face was pale, her eyes were enormous with anxiety and trepidation.

(To be continued.)

If singleness is bliss, it is folly to marry.

The United Kingdom produces only one-fifth of the wheat which it consumes.

Sir Hiram Maxim's many inventions include roundabouts and mousetraps.

It has been estimated that [illegible] inhabitant of Engla[illegible] [illegible]ety bricks a year.

Blondes should avoid the lighter shades of blue, which gives an ashy appearance to the complexion.

The greatest known age attained by an insect was that of a queen ant, which Sir J. Lubbeck kept alive for nearly fifteen years.

The necklaces worn by the native women of the Congo are large metal collars, weighing as much as thirty pounds.

A witty clergyman awakened his rather drowsy congregation by saying, "My dear friends, I have come here to preach a sermon, not to referee a sleeping match."

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For the BOYS & GIRLS

Chester's Speech.

Chester Thompson did not like to "speak pieces." There are few boys who really enjoy declamation in school, but for Chester the day was particularly full of terrors. He was not shy or sensitive among his mates, but when he faced an audience, even though it was made up wholly of those same school friends, he promptly forgot what he had learned, and felt as if he were walking off a high cliff into space.

Chester felt ashamed of this weakness and tried hard to overcome it, but with poor success. Now he was face to face with something far worse than speaking in school. In only two days more he must stand in the village square, beside the new drinking fountain, and deliver an address before all the people gathered there. How could he ever do it?

Several years earlier, Chester had joined the Band of Mercy, and his love for pets and all animals had led him to remain a member when many of the boys of his age had dropped out. Now he was its president, and this was why they had selected him to speak at the dedication of the beautiful drinking fountain that had been given to the village. His pride would not let him evade the task, but how he dreaded it! With the help of his teacher he had prepared a brief address, and as he said it over and over, he was rather proud of it; but he felt absolutely sure that every word of it would fly from his mind in the panic of the moment.

That is what Chester was thinking of one day while he was walking along the road just outside the village. He stopped to watch two men who were loading a cart with gravel. When the men had filled the cart, one of them spoke sharply to the horses and they plunged forward; but the rear wheels were deep in the ditch and the horses could not start the heavy load. The driver again called loudly to them, and struck them with his whip. As the willing span strained again at the tugs, one of them slipped and fell on its side.

Perhaps the horse was discouraged. Perhaps it was entangled in the harness. Anyway, it lay there with quivering sides while the driver leaped forward and struck it again with his whip. It was a cruel thing and a foolish thing to do, and the sight was more than Chester could bear in silence. Indignation boiled within him, and before he really knew what he was doing, he found himself beside the angry driver and speaking to him with a great earnestness that caused the man to turn in amazement.

Chester could never remember just what he said. Fragments of things that he had learned at the Band of Mercy meetings and snatches of his carefully prepared address for the dedication of the drinking fountain mingled with the simple and commonsense plea that he made for kinder treatment for the fallen horse.

The anger left the driver's eye and he flushed under his tanned skin. "Well, you are right, young man," he said. "And how you can talk—for a little fellow.

Chester and the driver helped the horse to its feet, patted its nose, and removed a little of the load, and then the man drove away with no more loud words or use of the whip.

Chester said nothing about what had happened until after the dedication exercises at the new fountain were over. When his teacher, among many others, congratulated him and told him how splendidly he had done, he told her briefly about the driver and the fallen horse.

"I knew I could do it after that," he said. "It wasn't simply that I found I could forget myself and talk when I had something to say, but it gave a wholly new meaning to the address that you helped me prepare."

"That is the only way that anyone can speak well in public," said his teacher; "that is, to have something to say that is worth saying, and to put the whole heart into it."—Youth's Companion.

A Careful Dealer.

A dejected, sallow, friendless-looking, low-spirited man walked into the grocery store:

"I want some clothesline," he said.

"Whatcher yant it for?" asked the man behind the counter.

"To hang clothes on—the old lady's washing to-day."

"She is, heh?" said the shopkeeper, giving his customer the once over from head to foot. "Well, you go back and tell her to come down here and get it herself. The only way a fellow looking like you do can buy rope from me is on a prescription."

The "Hohenzollern Luck" is a plain gold ring, with a black stone, in the possession of the Kaiser. Frederick the Great received it from his father with a note, declaring that so long as it remained in the family the race would prosper.

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