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The Human Four

A Clever Detective Story

Stephen Pryde, with five hundred pounds in the bank, started life afresh. He began by returning to his regular routine, temporarily interfered with by the loss of his money. He played golf on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, fenced on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and played auction bridge during those afternoons at his club. On Saturdays he took a holiday. After about a month, however, he became conscious of a distinct slackening of interest in these pursuits. His late plunge into the more adventurous life had unsettled him. He began to hang about the police courts, to scrape acquaintance with the smaller fry among the detectives. He developed theories of his own about criminology. He visited prisons and talked with suspected men. He became a voluminous reader of a certain type of literature. He even haunted the neighborhood in which famous crimes had been committed. He began, also, about the same time to haunt Grace Burton's rooms, but on the third occasion of his presenting himself there uninvited, she spoke to him very firmly and very plainly.

"I have no work to suggest to you just now, Mr. Pryde. I am engaged myself on a purely feminine and unimportant investigation. When anything turns up, I shall send for you at once."

"But I am bored to death," Pryde protested. "I am sick of golf and cricket and bridge. I can't settle down to anything."

"That," she answered composedly, "is without doubt the price which you must pay for having led an idle life."

"Come and dine with me somewhere this evening and do a theatre," he begged.

She looked at him with the faintest possible uplifting of her smooth young forehead. The brown eyes, too, seemed a little surprised. "Thank you, no," she replied coldly.

"Why not?" he persisted.

"Mr. Pryde," she said, "to be perfectly frank with you, you must not expect that sort of companionship from me."

Pryde felt unreasonably disappointed. He looked at her, for a moment, steadfastly. She had pushed her chair a little away from the desk and was leaning back in it. Her simple black dress was not even fashionably made. Her fluffy fair hair was brushed severely back. Her feet—and she had, without doubt, pretty feet—were encased in two-thick shoes. There was not a bow or ribbon anywhere about her.

"I don't see why you choose to keep to yourself so much," he continued, a little doggedly.

"You must let my wishes be sufficient reason," she declared. "I am accustomed to going about by myself. I prefer it."

"At any moment," he pointed out, "we might be working together. It would be an advantage to both of us to be better acquainted."

"That may come by degrees," she replied. "Excuse me now, please. I am busy."

Pryde went away, dissatisfied, and walked into the arms of adventure. He had barely issued from the doorway of the building in which he and Grace Burton both lived, before he was conscious that the street was in some sort of commotion. From out of sight around the corner of New Oxford Street he could hear the blowing of whistles, a hoarse tumult of voices. Along the main thoroughfare traffic had stopped. Everyone seemed to have come to a standstill in their places, watching. A taxi-driver had sprung from his cab and was running forward as though to intercept some one. Pryde saw him sent head over heels into the gutter by an unseen hand. Then round the corner appeared a man, running. He had left the more crowded thoroughfare with a sudden turn, and he came straight toward Pryde.

The man ran as one who runs for his life. He was about fifty yards away when he turned the corner, and he approached with incredible swiftness. As he drew nearer, Pryde gained a vivid but lightning-like impression of his appearance. His face was long, his cheek lean and narrow, his eyes protuberant. His mouth was open, the breath was coming in short, quick gasps between his teeth. His was hatless, but otherwise his attire seemed to be like that of a clerk or some person in a moderate position. Foremost among his pursuers, and gaining upon him rapidly, was a tall, fair-haired man. He, too, was hatless, and he had apparently thrown away his coat during the chase. A thin stream of blood was trickling down his face from a wound upon his forehead. His cheeks were deathly pale, his eyes were blazing. He had outstripped the policemen by several yards, and already his hand was stealing out as though to make a spring toward his quarry. Pryde had a matter of ten seconds during which to make up his mind as to his course of action. He was something of an athlete, and it would have been perfectly easy for him to have tripped or held up the flying man. To do so was his first impulse. He changed his

mind through some inexplicable instinct. He stepped backward, and the man fled past him. They were so close that the man's coat brushed his as he flashed by. Suddenly he was conscious that something heavy had been dropped into his overcoat pocket. It was all over in a moment. The chase was ended. Pursuer and pursued lay together upon the pavement. A dozen yards farther on, a man in a dark overcoat and bowler hat was looking, not at the tragedy at his feet, but at Pryde.

A crowd collected almost at once. Pryde, with his fingers clasped around something cold and strange and heavy in his pocket, remained upon the outskirts. The tall, fair man was with difficulty induced to release his clutch upon the other's throat. He was dragged away like a dog. The man upon whom he had sprung lay white and still. A policeman was kneeling by his side.

"Who are they? What's it all about?" Pryde asked a loiterer who was elbowing his way toward the front.

"Big jewelry robbery this afternoon in Hatton Gardens," the man replied. "They say this is one of the Human Four gang. The chap who caught him was robbed of fifteen thousand pounds' worth of jewels last year by them."

The figure on the pavement remained motionless. There was a little murmur. Soon an ambulance arrived. A whisper went round that he was dead. Pryde slowly backed out from the throng and re-entered the 'lock of buildings from which he had just issued. A man who had been standing within a few paces of him, followed. Pryde made his way up three flights of stairs and knocked at the door of Grace Burton's rooms. She moved away from the window as she saw him upon the threshold.

"You have been looking out, then?" he exclaimed. "You saw?"

She nodded. "I saw everything."

"Who are the Human Four?" he asked. "I've never heard of them."

"Just a gang of murderers," she told him. "They have terrorized half London by their melodramatic tricks. Was that man really one of them?"

"No one seemed to know for certain," Pryde replied. "They spoke of a big jewelry robbery in Hatton Gardens."

The girl listened for a moment. She held out her finger. Then with swift footsteps she crossed the room and softly turned the key in the lock.

"What is it?" he asked.

She came up to his side before she answered. "I think she whispered, 'that some one followed you up the stairs. I think that there is some one outside now. Tell me, what was it that that man slipped into your overcoat pocket as you stood down there?'"

He started. "You saw that?"

"I was at the window," she assented. "I heard the policemen's whistles."

He drew the object from his overcoat pocket. "My God!" he exclaimed. "Look! Look at it!"

The girl was silent. It seemed to be a little idol. He held it for a moment in his hand, and then set it down on the table opposite to them. It was the image of a man squatting upon the ground, a man with long, low forehead, small features, and great eyes. His lips were parted in a hideous smile. There was a strange leer upon his chiselled features.

"What a hateful-looking object!" Pryde muttered.

The girl's eyes were fixed steadily upon it. There was little expression in her face, but he could see that she was interested. "Look at its hand," she murmured. "See how he holds it out, four fingers in front of his face—the Human Four!"

Pryde shivered. "Beastly thing!" he muttered. "I never saw anything so repulsive."

Grace made no reply. She seemed, indeed, oblivious to his words. She was holding the idol as far as possible from her face, her eyes fixed upon it. Pryde was suddenly conscious of a vague, smoldering excitement in her manner. Her lips had parted, her brown eyes were glowing a slight flush of color had stolen through the transparency of her skin.

"This is their mascot," she whispered. "Can't you understand it? Criminals—men who plan crimes on a great scale—are nearly always superstitious."

"Then the sooner we get rid of the thing the better," Pryde decided.

She looked unwillingly away from the idol. Her lips had curled a little; there was a shade of contempt in her tone. "Get rid of the thing, indeed!" she repeated scornfully. "Can't you see that this is the chance of our lives? We will keep the idol and wait. They will find out where it is. They will try to get it back again. Don't you know that the police have been months searching for these men? We will succeed where they have failed. We have the lure here. Depend upon it, they will come."

Pryde made no effort to affect an enthusiasm which at that time he certainly

did not feel. "Frankly," he said, "I cannot conceive that the coming of any one of these gentlemen could possibly be an occasion for rejoicing. In the last six weeks alone, they have committed four murders. All their exploits are conducted in the same manner. The moment they are in the slightest danger, they shoot to kill."

"Are you afraid?" she asked calmly.

He shook his head. "Not on your life," he exclaimed. "If you want to invite these gentlemen to visit us, I am not going to object. I was only pointing out the possible result. Don't you value your own life?"

"I do," she admitted. "But somehow or other, I think you will find that the risk is not quite so great as it seems. Of course, my whole idea may be wrong. They may not come at all. On the other hand, I was looking out the window, and I saw at least three men who were waiting from different points, I believe, that they all know that the idol is here. I have an idea that they will risk everything to regain possession of it."

Pryde thrust his hands into his pockets and looked at the copper image. Even he could not get away from the idea of menace in that wicked face.

"If I had it," he declared heartily, "I should either beat it to pieces with a poker or take it out and throw it into the Serpentine. For sheer and brutal vicious ugliness, I never in my whole life—"

She laid her hand upon his arm. They both turned quickly around. There was a short but instant knocking upon the door.

"Already!" she murmured. "Open the door."

Pryde, with the faintest possible shrug of the shoulders, turned away. The girl watched him as he crossed the room. He walked unflinching, and her eyes filled with an appreciation which it would have done him good to see. He opened the door. The man was standing there whom he had seen a short time ago in the street below, an inoffensive-looking person with pale, rather narrow face, a fair mustache, and hair turning gray at the extremities. He wore a black-bowler hat and a long overcoat. He remained for a moment without speech.

"What do you want?" Pryde inquired.

"A word with you, sir, if you please," the stranger replied.

He came inside without waiting for an invitation. Pryde ushered him a little farther into the room. Grace, who had been standing by the desk, softly past them on her way to the door. She tried the catch and, finding it secure, returned to her place.

"What can I do for you?" Pryde asked. The newcomer did not answer for a moment. His eyes were fixed upon the little idol. His lips were parted. He seemed to have forgotten for a moment where he was. He pointed toward it.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"I brought it home from Africa," Pryde asserted coolly. "I collect curios of that sort."

The man never withdrew his eyes from their intent gaze. "I, too, am a collector," he said. "Is that image for sale?"

Pryde shook his head. "I never sell my curios."

There was a brief silence. The newcomer looked away at last from the object which seemed to have so greatly fascinated him. His eyes fell upon Grace. She had moved and was sitting before her typewriter, with her shoulder turned toward the two men.

"The young lady is to be trusted?" he asked quietly.

"Without a doubt," Pryde assured him. "May I add that it is almost time that you explained the real object of your visit?"

"I am prepared to do so," the newcomer declared. "I was standing below when I saw the man who has just been picked up dead thrust something into your overcoat pocket. I have no doubt that his eyesight was blurred. He failed to recognize you. There were several of his friends about, I among others. He mistook you for me. That idol is my property."

"Then who are you?" Pryde asked.

"It is a foolish question," the other replied. "If you knew who I was— He stopped short. "We waste time," he continued. "I recognize the rights of possession. I will give you two hundred pounds for that little figure."

Pryde shook his head.

"Three—Five—"

Pryde continued to shake his head.

"Five hundred pounds," his visitor said slowly, "is all the money I have with me. You naturally would not trust me, and I wish to take the idol away. Five hundred pounds, therefore, is my last offer."

"The idol," Pryde declared, "is not for sale."

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There was a curious light in the man's eyes. "Do not be foolish," he advised softly. "Believe me, I have not risked my life for nothing. I have the money here—five hundred pounds. You can take it safely. No one but me and my friends will know that you have had the image in your possession, even for a moment."

"The idol is not for sale," Pryde repeated.

A sudden fierceness blazed in the man's face, trembled in his tone. "Then I shall take it!" he cried. "You have brought this upon yourself."

His hand went into the pocket of his overcoat. Pryde, who was unarmed, was already poised on his left foot, ready to spring. Then they heard Grace Burton's voice from her seat before the typewriter. She had swung round in her chair.

"You need not trouble to feel in your overcoat pocket," she said calmly. "I took your pistol away as you entered. It was spoiling the fit of your coat."

The man turned sharply round. He looked into the barrel of his own pistol, held with remarkably steady fingers by Miss Grace Burton.

"We are much obliged to you," she remarked, "for giving us an idea of the

value of this little curiosity. Have you anything more to say about it?"

The man glanced from one to the other. His face had become whiter, his eyes shone. "What is the meaning of all this?" he demanded fiercely. "Who are you both? What do you want?"

"Neither you nor your money," Grace replied. "You can go as soon as you please."

The man hesitated. He looked at the idol, and again he hesitated. The girl's finger remained upon the trigger.

"If you do not go," she said softly, "if you make a single movement toward the image, you will see that I am in earnest."

He looked around him with the air of a hunted man. His sense of uneasiness was growing. "It is a trap, this?" he muttered.

"You may find it one," she answered, "if you stay here any longer."

(To be continued.)

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