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The White Hat

By Sax Rohmer

PART II.

Harley was quite unable to conceal his smiles as the excited old soldier dropped his conspicuous headgear on the floor and indulged in a vigorous pantomime designed to illustrate his statement.

"Most extraordinary," said Harley. "What did you do?"

"What did I do?" rared the major. "I gave him a crack on the head with my cane, and I said things to him which couldn't be repeated in court. I punched him and likewise hooped him, but the hat was completely done in. Damn crowd collected, hearin' me swearin' and bellowin'. Police and all that; names and addresses, and all that balderdash. Man lugged away to guardroom and me turnin' up at the club with no hat. Damn ridiculous spectacle at my time o' life."

"Quite so," said Harley soothingly; "I appreciate your annoyance, but I am utterly at a loss to understand why you have come here and what all this has to do with Mr. DeLana of the Stock Exchange."

"He fell out of the window!" shouted the major.

"Fell out of a window?"

"Out of a window, sir, a second floor window ten yards up a side street! Pitched on his skull—marvel he wasn't killed outright!"

A faint expression of interest began to creep into Harley's glance. "I understand you to mean, Major Ragstaff," he said deliberately, "that while your struggle with the drunken man was in progress Mr. De Lana fell out of a neighboring window into the street?"

"Right!" shouted the major. "Right, sir!"

"Do you know this Mr. De Lana?"

"Never heard of him in my life until the accident occurred. Seems to me the poor devil leaned out to see the fun and overbalanced. Felt responsible, only natural, and made inquiries. He died at 6 o'clock this evenin', sir."

"H'm," said Harley reflectively. "I still fail to see where I come in. From what window did he fall?"

"Window above a sort of tea shop, called Cafe Dame—silly name. Place on a corner. Don't know name of side street."

"H'm. You don't think he was pushed out, for instance?"

"Certainly not!" shouted the major; "he just fell out, but the point is, he's dead."

"My dear sir," said Harley patiently, "I don't dispute that point; but what on earth do you want of me?"

"I don't know what I want!" roared the major, beginning to walk up and down the room, "but I know I ain't satisfied, not easy in my mind."



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...sir. I wake up of a night hearin' the poor devil's yell as he crashed on the pavement. That's all wrong. I've heard hundreds of death yells, but— he took up his malacca cane and beat it loudly on the table—"I haven't woke up of a night dreamin' I heard 'em again."

"In a word, you suspect foul play?"

"I don't suspect anything!" cried the other excitedly, "but some one mentioned your name to me at the club—said you could see through concrete and all that—and here I am. There's something wrong, radically wrong. Find out what it is and send the bill to me. Then perhaps I'll be able to sleep in peace."

He paused and, again taking out the large silk handkerchief, blew his nose loudly. Harley glanced at me in rather an odd way. "There will be no bill, Major Ragstaff," he said; "but if I can see any possible line of inquiry I will pursue it and report the result to you."

"What do you make of it, Harley?" I asked.

Paul Harley returned a work of reference to its shelf and stood staring absently across the study. "Our late visitor's history does not help us much," he replied. "A somewhat distinguished army career, and so forth, and his only daughter, Sibyl Margaret, married the fifth Marquis of Ireton. She is, therefore, the noted society beauty, the Marchioness of Ireton. Does this suggest anything to your mind?"

"Nothing whatever," I said blankly. "Nor to mine," murmured Harley. The telephone bell rang.

"Hullo!" called Harley. "Yes. That you, Wessex? Have you got the address? Good. No, I shall remember it. Many thanks. Goodbye."

He turned to me. "I suggest, Knox," he said, "that we make our call and then proceed to dinner as arranged."

Since I was always glad of an opportunity of studying my friend's methods, I immediately agreed, and before long, leaving the lights of the two big hotels behind, our cab was gliding down the long slope which leads to Waterloo Station. Thence through crowded, slumish high-roads we made our way via Lambeth to that dismal thoroughfare, Westminster Bridge Road, with its forbidding, often windowless houses and its peculiar air of desolation.

The house for which we were bound was situated at no great distance from Kennington Park, and, telling the cabman to wait, Harley and I walked up a narrow, paved, path, mounted a flight of steps and rang the bell beside a somewhat time-worn door, above which was an old-fashioned fanlight dimly illuminated within.

A considerable interval elapsed before the door was opened by a marvelously untidy servant girl, who had apparently been interrupted in the act of blackleading her face. Partly opening the door, she stared at us agape, pushing back wisps of her hair from her eyes, and with every movement daubing more of some mysterious black substance upon her countenance.

"Is Mr. Bampton in?" asked Harley.

"Yus, just come in. I'm cooking his supper."

"Tell him that two friends of his have called on rather important business."

"All right," said the black-faced one. "What name is it?"

"No name. Just say two friends of his."

Treating us to a long, vacant stare and leaving us standing on the step, the maid (in whose hand I perceived a greasy fork) shuffled along the passage and began to mount the stairs. An unmistakable odor of frying sausages now reached my nostrils. Harley glanced at me quizzically, but said nothing until the Cinderella came stumbling downstairs again.

"Go up," she directed. "Second floor, front. Shut the door, one of yer."

She disappeared into gloomy depths below us as Harley and I, closing the door behind us, proceeded to avail ourselves of the invitation. There was very little light upon the staircase, but we managed to find our way to a poorly furnished bedroom where a

small table was spread for a meal. Beside the table, in a chintz covered armchair, a thick-set young man was seated smoking a cigarette, a copy of The Daily Telegraph upon his knee.

He was a very typical lower middle class, nothing in particular young man, but there was a certain truculence indicated by his square jaw, and that sort of self-possession which sometimes accompanies physical strength, was evidenced in his manner as, tossing the paper aside, he stood up.

"Good evening, Mr. Bampton," said Harley genially. "I take it"—pointing to the newspaper—"that you are looking for a new job?"

Bampton stared, with a suspicion of anger in his eyes, then, meeting the amused glance of my friend, he broke into a smile very pleasing and humorous. He was a fresh colored young fellow, with hair inclined to redness, and smiling he looked very boyish indeed.

"I have no idea who you are," he said, speaking with a faint North Country accent, "but you evidently know who I am and what has happened to me."

"Got the boot?" asked Harley confidentially.

Bampton, tossing the end of his cigarette into the grate, nodded grimly. "You haven't told me your name," he said, "but I think I can tell your business." He ceased smiling. "Now, look here, I don't want any more publicity. If you think you are going to make a funny newspaper story out of me change your mind as quick as you like. I'll never get another job in London as it is. If you drag me any further into the limelight I'll never get another job in England."

"My dear fellow," replied Harley soothingly, at the same time extending his cigarette case, "you misapprehend the object of my call. I am not a reporter."

"What!" said Bampton, pausing in the act of taking a cigarette. "Then what the devil are you?"

"My name is Paul Harley, and I am a criminal investigator."

He spoke the words deliberately, his eyes fixed upon the other's face; but, although Bampton was palpably startled, there was no trace of fear in his straightforward glance. He took a cigarette from the case. "Thanks, Mr. Harley," he said. "I cannot imagine what business has brought you here."

"I have come to ask you two questions," Harley answered. "No. 1: Who paid you to smash Major Ragstaff's white hat? No. 2: How much did he pay you?"

To these questions I listened in amazement, and my amazement was evidently shared by Bampton. He had been in the act of lighting his cigarette, but he allowed the match to burn down nearly to his fingers and then dropped it, with a muttered exclamation, in the fire. "I don't know how you found out," he said, "but evidently you know the truth. Provided you assure me that you are not out to make a silly-season newspaper story, I'll tell you all I know."

Harley laid his card on the table. "Unless the ends of justice demand it," he said, "I give you my word that anything you care to say will go no further. You may speak freely before my friend Mr. Knox. Simply tell me in as few words as possible what led you to court arrest in that manner."

(Continued in next issue.)

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