

IF WINTER COMES

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BY A. S. M. HUTCHINSON

"Holiday!" cries Humpo. "Do you tell me holiday, sir? Holiday! I thank you for that word. We will examine it in a moment. This was at Brighton, then. The business of the witness whom we have recently seen in the box was to serve the papers on you and on the deceased. Now come back a little. Let me ask you to carry back your mind to the summer of 1915— and with his wagging forefinger, and his sloshing tongue, and his mopping at his face, and his throwing back of his mane as though it were a cloak from under which he kept rushing in to stab home another knife, he takes the unhappy man through all the stuff he had got out of old Bright—Sabre's apparently uncalled-for interest in the girl, first getting her from her father's house to the neighbourhood of his own, then under his own roof, and all the rest of the unholy chain of it. Then he has a chat with Twynning, then mops himself dry, and then huris in again. "Now, sir, this holiday. This pleasant holiday by the sea! Did you make any preparations for it, any little purchases?" "No. Purchases? No. Look here—" "Never mind about 'Look here,' sir. No purchases? Did you hear the evidence of the witness—the Alton chemist who declared on oath that you made a purchase in his shop on the very day before you started, a purchase you have admitted? Remembering that, do you still say you made no purchases for your holiday?" "Nothing to do with it. Nothing—" "Nothing to do with it? Well, sir, we will accept that for a moment. Do you often go shopping in Alton?" "The poor beggar shook his head. No voice in his throat. "Do you shop there once in a month, once in six months?" "Shook again. "Are there chemists in the Garden House, in Tidborough, in Chovensbury?" "Nods. "Are you known in all these places I have mentioned?" "Nods. "Are you known in Alton?" "Shakes. "Are all these places nearer to you than Alton?" "Nods. "Humpo's finger shoots out about two yards long; dashes back his mane with his other hand; rushes in from under it. "Then, sir, will you tell the jury why, to make this purchase of oxalic acid on the day before you leave home, why you go to a place in which you are unknown and to a place farther away from you than three other centres, one at you very door?" "Sabre sees like a bit in the face this new thing that's coming to him. Gasps. Puts up his hand to that choked throat of his. "Struggles out, 'Look here—" "Answer the question, sir." "Stammers out like a cheap orange. "Walk. Walk. Wanted a walk. Wanted to get out. Wanted to get away from it." "Dith goes the same and in again like a flash: 'Ah, you wanted to get out of it? The house with its inmates was becoming insupportable to you?' "Look here—" "I am giving your own words, sir. Do you tell us that, although you were leaving—for a holiday—on the very next day still, even on the afternoon before, you felt you must get out of it? Is that right, sir?" "Look here—" "Very well. Let us leave that, sir. We seem to be compelled to leave a great deal, but the jury will acquit me of fault in the matter. Let us come to the purpose of this oxalic acid purchase. Nothing to do with your holiday, you say. With what then? For what purpose?" "Long pause. Frightful pause. Hours whole court holding its breath. Pause like a chunk of eternity. Silent as that. Empty as that. What the devil was he thinking of? Had he forgotten? Was he awake now to the frightful places he kept getting into and wondering if this was another and where exactly it lay? Appalling pause. Dashed woman somewhere in the court goes off into hysterics and dragged out. He didn't hear a scream of it, that poor baited chap in the box. Just stood there. Grey as a raked-out fire. Pace twitching. Awful. I tell you, awful. Nearly went into hysterics myself. Humpo slopping his tongue round his jaws, watching him like a dog watching its dinner being cut up. After about two years, slaps in his tongue and demands, 'Come sir, for what purpose did you buy this oxalic acid?' "Sabre gives his first clear, calculated words since he had got up there. I guess he had been pulling himself together to look for a trap. He said very slowly, trying each word, like a chap feeling along on this ice; he said, 'Effie—asked me to—get it—to—clean—my—straw—hat—for—me—for—Brighton.' "That Humpo! Very gently, very quietly, like a rescuer pushing onto a ladder to the man on the ice, 'The deceased asked you to get it to clean

your straw hat for you for Brighton— And then like a trap being sprung he snapped and threw Sabre clean off the balance he was getting. 'Then it was obtained for the purpose of your holiday?' "Look here—' All at sea again, d' you see? And the end was quicker than nothing. Twynning pulls Humpo's coat and points at Sabre's hat, soft hat, on the ledge before him. Humpo nods, delighted. "And did she carry out her intention, sir? Did she clean your straw hat for you?" "Nods. "You don't appear to be wearing it?" "Shakes. "Pray, where, then, is this straw hat to clean—which you obtained the oxalic acid?' Is it at your house?" "Shakes. "Not at your house! Odd. Where, then?" "Look here—" "Where then?" "Look here—" "Answer the question, sir. Where is this straw hat?" "Look here—' Gulps. 'Look here—' Gulps again. 'Look here. I lost it in the sea at Brighton.' "Humpo draws in his breath. Stares at him for two solid minutes without speaking. Then say, like one speaking to a ghost. 'You lost it in the sea at Brighton! You lost it in the sea at Brighton! Has an inspiration. Inspired in hell. Turns like a flash to the coroner. 'I have done with this witness, sir.' Sits down. Plump. Court lets go its breath like the four winds round a chimney. Sabre staggers out of the box. Falls across into his seat. "Too much for me, old man. I bawled out, people in front of me nearly jumping out of their skins with the start, I bawled out, 'Mr. Coroner, I saw the witness at Brighton, and he told me he'd lost his hat in the sea.' "Buddha, like a talking idol discovering an infidel in his temple, 'Who are you, sir?' "I'm a solicitor. I'm Mr. Sabre's solicitor. "Buddha to Sabre. 'Have you a solicitor in the court, Sabre?' "No! No! Get away! Get out of it! Get away from me!" "You have no standing in this court, sir," says Buddha. "Awful. Nothing to be done. Sorry I'd spoken. After all, telling me about his hat, what did it prove? Nothing. If anything easily could be twisted into cunning preparation of his plan beforehand. Useless. Futile. "Case went on. Presently Twynning in the box. Last witness—put up to screw down the lid on Sabre's coffin, to polish up the argument before it went to the jury. Stood there with the venom brothing at the corners of his mouth, stood there a man straight out of the loins of Judas Iscariot, stood there making his testimony more damn ing a thousand times by pretending it was being dragged out of him, reluctant to give away his business companion. Told a positively damning story about meeting Sabre at the station on his departure from leave a day after the girl was sacked. Noticed how strange his manner was; noticed he didn't like being asked about circumstances of her dismissal; noticed his wife hadn't come to see him off. Yes, thought it odd. Sabre had explained wife had a cold, but saw Mrs. Sabre in Tidborough very next day. Yes, thought the whole thing funny because he had frequently seen Sabre and the girl together during Sabre's leave. Any particular occasion? Well, did it really matter? Must he really answer? Yes, notably in the Cloister tea rooms late one evening. Well, yes, had thought their behavior odd, secretive. Sabre's position in the office? Well, was it really necessary to go into that? Well, had to admit Sabre was no longer a member of the firm. Had been suspended during intimacy with the deceased, now dismissed consequent upon this grave development. Had he ever had occasion in the past, in earlier days, to reconnoitre with Sabre concerning attitude towards girl? Well, scarcely like to say so, hated to say so, but certainly there had been such occasions. Yes, had spoken seriously to Sabre about it. "There ripped across the court as he said that, old man, a woman's voice from the back. 'It's a lie. It's an abominable lie. And you know it's a lie!' "By Jove, I tell you! I nearly swallowed my back teeth with the effect of the thing. Give you my word I thought for a minute it was the girl come to life and walked in out of her coffin. That voice! High and clear and fine and true as an Angelus bell across a harvest field. It's a lie. It's an abominable lie; and you know it's a lie!" "Eh? Terrific? I tell you terrific isn't the word. It was the Fairfax business at the trial of King Charles over again. It absolutely was. Buddha nearly had a fit: 'Silence! How dare you, madam! Turn out that woman! Who is that?' "Commotion—A woman pressed-out

from the mob behind and walked up the court like a goddess, like Portia, by Jove, like Euphrosyne. 'Let no one dare to touch me,' she said. 'I am Lady Tybar. Every one knows me here. I've just come in. Just heard. This shameful business. All of you killing him between you. She pointed a hand at Twynning. 'And you, I tell you before all this court, and you may take what steps you like, I tell you that you are a liar, an experienced and calculating liar. And she went with that to old Sabre and stooped over him and touched him with both her hands and said, 'Marko, Marko.' "You know she'd got that blooming court stiff and cold. The suddenness and the decision and the arrogance of the thing took 'em all ends up and had 'em speechless. She was there by Sabre and stooping over him, mothering him, before Buddha or any of 'em could have found the wits to say what his own name was. Let alone the Iscariot. "Matter of fact Sabre was the first one to speak. He threw up his arm from where he'd been covering his face, just as he'd thrown it up when I called out and swung her hands aside and called out, 'Don't touch me. Let me alone—Leave me alone.' "She motioned to the man beside him, and the chap got up as if her motion had been Circe's and disappeared. Through the roof or somewhere. I don't know. Anyway, he vanished. And she took his place and sat down beside Sabre and poor old Sabre crouched away from her as if he was stung, and old Buddha, reaching out for his dignity, said, 'You may remain there, madam, if you do not interrupt the court.' "There wasn't much more to interrupt. Twynning had had about as much as he wanted; he'd done what he was out to do, anyway. The case finished. The coroner had a go at the jury. They went out. I suppose they were

gone ten minutes. Shuffled in again. Gave their verdict. I was watching Sabre. He took down his hands from his face and stared with all the world's agony in his face, straining himself forward to hear. Verdict. They found suicide while temporarily insane and added their most severe censure of the conduct of the witness Sabre. He jumped up and flung out his hands. 'Look here—Look here—Censure! Censure! Cens—" "Dropped back on his seat like he was shot. Twisted himself up. Sat rock ing. "Court cleared in less than no time. Me left in my corner. This Lady Tybar. Sabre, twisted up. Bobby or two. I began to come forward. Sabre looks up. Looks round. Get his hat. Collects his old stick. Starts to hobble out. "This Lady Tybar gets in front of him, me alongside of her, by then. 'Marko, Marko.' (That was what she called him.) He sort of parries at her; and at me: 'Let me alone. Let me alone. Get right away from me.' Hobbles away down the room. "A bobby stops him. 'Better go this way, sir. Rough lot of people out there.' Leads him to a side door. "We followed him up, she and I. Door gave on to a lane running up into the Penny Green road. She tried at him again, gently, very tenderly,

'Marko, Marko, dear.' Would have made your heart squirm. I tried at him: 'Now then, old man.' Swung round on us. 'Let me alone. Get away. Get right away from me!' "Followed him, the pair of us, up to the main road. She tried again. I tried. He swung round and faced us. 'Let me alone. Won't any one let me alone? Get right away from me. Look here—Look here. If you want to do anything for me, get right away from me and leave me alone. Leave me alone. Do you hear? Leave me alone!' "Hobbled away out towards Penny Green, bobbing along on his stick (ast as he could go. "She said to me, 'Oh, Oh—' and began to cry. I said I thought the best thing was to leave him for a bit and that I'd go over, or she could, or both of us, a bit later. Clear we were only driving him mad by following him now. There was a cab came prowling by. I gave the chap a pound note and told him to follow Sabre.—'Get up just alongside and keep there,' I said. 'He'll likely get in. Get him in and take him up to Crawshaws, Penny Green, and come back to me at the Royal Hotel and there's another quid for y'."

"Old man, I went along to the Royal with this Lady Tybar. Told her who I was and what I knew. Ordered some tea there (which we didn't touch) and she began to talk to me. Talk to me. I tell you what I thought about that woman while she talked. I thought, leaving out limelight beauty, and classic beauty and all the beauty you can see in a frame presented as such: leaving out that, because it wasn't there, I thought she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Yes, and I told my wife so. That shows you! You couldn't say where it was or how it was. You could only say that beauty abode in her face as the scent in the rose. It's there and it's exquisite: that's all you can say. If he'd been talking to me in the dark I could have

felt that she was beautiful. "What did she tell me? She talked about herself and Sabre. What did she say? No, you'll have to let that go, old man. It was more what I read in to what she said. I'll keep it—for a bit, anyway. "There's else to tell than that. That cabman I'd got hold of sent in awhile after to see me. Said he'd picked up Sabre a mile along and taken him home. Stopped a bit to patch up some harness or something and 'All of a heap' (as he expressed it) Sabre had come flying out of the house again into the cab and told him to drive like hell and all to the office—to Fortune, East and Sabre's. Said Sabre behaved all the way like as if he was mad— shouting to him to hurry and carrying on inside the cab so the old man was terrified. "I said, 'To the office! What the devil now?' I ran into Lady Tybar and we hurried round. We were scared for him, I tell you. And we'd reason to be—when we got there and found him." CHAPTER VII. "When that cab which Haggood had despatched after Sabre from the coroner's court overtook its guest, the driver put himself abreast of the distracted figure furiously hobbling along the road, and, his second pound note in view, began, in a fat and comfortable voice, a beguiling monologue of 'Keb, sir? Keb? Keb? Keb, sir?'" Sabre at first gave no attention. Farther along he once angrily waved his stick in signal of dismissal. About a mile along his disabled knee, and all his much overwrought body refused longer to be the flogged slave of his tumultuous mind. He stopped in physical exhaustion and rested upon his stick. The cabman also stopped and turned afresh his enticing and restful rhythm: "Keb, sir? Keb, Keb? Keb, sir?" He got in. He did not think to give a direction, but the driver had his directions; not, when he was set down at his house, to make payment; but payment had been made. The driver assisted him from the cab and into his door—and he needed assistance—and being off his box set himself to the adjustment of a buckle, repair of which he had deferred through the day until (being a man economical of effort) some other circumstance should necessitate his coming to earth. (To be Continued.)

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