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Chapter 13 - A Cockney Conspirator

"The bar closes in ten minutes, sir!" the smoking room steward announced.

The young man who had been the subject of Wingrave's remarks hastily ordered another drink, although he had an only half-emptied tumbler in front of him. Presently he stumbled out on to the deck. It was a dark night, and a strong head wind was blowing. He groped his way to the railing and leaned over, with his head half buried in his hands. Below, the black tossing sea was churned into phosphorescent spray, as the steamer drove onwards into the night.

Was it he indeed--George Richardson? He doubted it. The world of tape measures and calico counters seemed so far away; the interior of his quondam lodgings in a by-street of Islington, so unfamiliar and impossible. He felt himself swallowed up in this new and bewildering existence, of which he was so insignificant an atom, the existence where tragedy reared her gloomy head, and the shadows of great things loomed around him. Down there in the cold restless waste of black waters--what was it that he saw? The sweat broke out upon his forehead, the blood seemed turned to ice in his veins. He knew very well that his fancy mocked him, that it was not indeed a man's white face gleaming on the crest of the waves. But none the less he was terrified.

Mr. Richardson was certainly nervous. Not all the brandy he had drunk--and he had never drunk half as much before in his life--afforded him the least protection from these ghastly fancies. The step of a sailor on the deck made him shiver; the thought of his empty state room was a horror. He tried to think of the woman at whose bidding he had left behind him Islington and the things that belonged to Islington! He tried to recall her soft suggestive whispers, the glances which promised more even than her spoken words, all the perfume and mystery of her wonderful presence. Her very name was an allurements. Mademoiselle Violet! How softly it fell from the lips! . . . God in heaven, what was that! He started round, trembling in every limb. It was nothing more than the closing of the smoking room door behind him. Sailors with buckets and mops were already beginning their nightly tasks. He must go to his stateroom! Somehow or other, he must get through the night . . .

He did it, but he was not a very prepossessing looking object when he staggered out on deck twelve hours later, into the noon sunshine. The chair towards which he looked so eagerly was occupied. He scarcely knew himself whether that little gulp of acute feeling, which shot through his veins, was of relief or disappointment. While he hesitated, Wingrave raised his head.

Wingrave did not, as a rule, speak to his fellow passengers. Of Richardson, he had not hitherto taken the slightest notice. Yet this morning, of all others, he addressed him.

"I believe," he said, holding it out towards him, "that this envelope is yours. I found it under your chair."

Richardson muttered something inarticulate, and almost snatched it away. It was the envelope of the fatal letter which Mademoiselle Violet had written him to Queenstown.

"Sit down, Mr. Richardson, if you are not in a hurry," Wingrave continued calmly. "I was hoping that I might see you this morning. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

Richardson subsided into his chair. His heart was thumping against his ribs. Wingrave's voice sounded to him like a far-off thing.

"The handwriting upon that envelope which I have just restored to you, Mr. Richardson, is well known to me," Wingrave continued, gazing steadfastly at the young man whom he was addressing.

"The envelope! The handwriting!" Richardson faltered. "I--it was from--"

An instant's pause. Wingrave raised his eyebrows.

"Ah!" he said. "We need not mention the lady's name. That she should be a correspondent of yours, however, helps me to understand better several matters which have somewhat puzzled me lately. No! Don't go, my dear sir. We must really have this affair straightened out."

"What affair?" Richardson demanded, with a very weak attempt at bluster. "I don't understand you--don't understand you at all."

Wingrave leaned a little forward in his chair. His eyebrows were drawn close together; his gaze was entirely merciless.

"You are not well this morning," he remarked. "A little headache perhaps! Won't you try one of these phenacetine lozenges--excellent things for a headache, I believe? Warranted, in fact, to cure all bodily ailments for ever! What! You don't like the look of them?"

The young man cowered back in his chair. He was gripping the sides tightly with both hands, and the pallor of a ghastly fear had spread over his face.

"I--don't know what you mean," he faltered. "I haven't a headache!"

Wingrave looked thoughtfully at the box between his fingers.

"If you took one of these, Mr. Richardson," he said, "you would never have another, at any rate. Now, tell me, sir, how you came by them!"

"I know nothing about--" the young man began.

"Don't lie to me, sir," Wingrave said sharply. "I have been wondering what the --- you meant by hanging around after me, giving the deck steward five shillings to put your

chair next mine, and pretending to read, while all the time you were trying to overhear any scraps of conversation between my secretary and myself. I thought you were simply guilty of impertinent curiosity. This, however, rather alters the look of affairs."

"What does?" Richardson asked faintly. "That box ain't mine."

"Perhaps not," Wingrave answered, "but you found it in my state room and filled it up with its present contents. My servant saw you coming out, and immediately went in to see what you had stolen, and report you. He found nothing missing, but he found this box full of lozenges, which he knows quite well was half full before you went in. Now, what was your object, Mr. Richardson, in tampering with that box upon my shelf?"

"I have--I have never seen it before," Richardson declared. "I have never been in your state room!"

The deck steward was passing. Wingrave summoned him.

"I wish you would ask my servant to step this way," he said. "You will find him in my state room."

The man disappeared through the companion way. Richardson rose to his feet.

"I'm not going to stay here to be bullied and cross examined," he declared. "I'm off!"

"One moment," Wingrave said. "If you leave me now, I shall ask the captain to place you under arrest."

Richardson looked half fearfully around.

"What for?"

"Attempted murder! Very clumsily attempted, but attempted murder none the less."

The young man collapsed. Wingrave's servant came down the deck.

"You sent for me, sir?" he inquired respectfully.

Wingrave pointed towards his companion.

"Was that the person whom you saw coming out of my state room?" he asked.

"Yes sir," the man replied at once.

"You could swear to him, if necessary?"

"Certainly, sir."

"That will do, Morrison."

The man withdrew. Wingrave turned to his victim. "A few weeks ago," he remarked, "I had a visit from the lady whose handwriting is upon that envelope. I had on the table before me a box of phenacetine lozenges. She naturally concluded that I was in the habit of using them. That lady has unfortunately cause to consider me, if not an enemy, something very much like it. You are in correspondence with her. Only last night you placed in my box of these lozenges some others, closely resembling them, but fortunately a little different in shape. Mine were harmless--as a matter of fact, a single one of yours would kill a man in ten minutes. Now, Mr. Richardson, what have you to say about all this? Why should I not send for the captain, and have you locked up till we arrive at New York?"

Richardson drew his handkerchief across his damp forehead.

"You can't prove nothing," he muttered.

"I am afraid that I must differ from you," Wingrave answered. "We will see what the captain has to say."

He leaned forward in his chair, to attract the attention of a seaman.

Richardson interposed.

"All right," he said thickly. "Suppose I own up! What then?"

"A few questions--nothing terrifying. I am not very frightened of you."

"Go on!"

"How did you become acquainted with the writer of that letter?"

Richardson hesitated.

"She came to a dancing class at Islington," he said.

Wingrave's face was expressionless, but his tone betrayed his incredulity.

"A dancing class at Islington! Nonsense!"

"Mind," the young man asserted, "it was her mistress who put her up to this! It was nothing to do with her. It was for her mistress's sake."

"Do you know the mistress?" Wingrave asked.

"No; I don't know her name even. Never heard it."

"Your letter, then, was from the maid?"

"Of course, it was," Richardson answered. "If you recognize the writing, you must know that yourself."

Wingrave looked reflectively seaward. The matter was not entirely clear to him. Yet he was sure that this young man was telling the truth, so far as he could divine it.

"Well," he said, "you have made your attempt and failed. If fortune had favored you, you might at this moment have been a murderer. I might have warned you, by the bye, that I am an exceedingly hard man to kill."

Richardson looked uneasily around.

"I ain't admitting anything, you know," he said.

"Precisely! Well, what are you going to do now? Are you satisfied with your first reverse, or are you going to renew the experiment?"

"I've had enough," was the dogged answer. "I've been made a fool of. I can see that. I shall return home by the next steamer. I never ought to have got mixed up in this."

"I am inclined to agree with you," Wingrave remarked calmly. "Do I understand that if I choose to forget this little episode, you will return to England by the next steamer?"

"I swear it," Richardson declared.

"And in the meantime, that you make no further attempt of a similar nature?"

"Not I!" he answered with emphasis. "I've had enough."

"Then," Wingrave said, "we need not prolong this conversation. Forgive my suggesting, Mr. Richardson, that whilst I am on deck, the other side of the ship should prove more convenient for you!"

The young man rose, and without a word staggered off. Wingrave watched him through half-closed eyes, until he disappeared.

"It was worth trying," he said softly to himself. "A very clever woman that! She looks forward through the years, and she sees the clouds gathering. It was a little risky, and the means were very crude. But it was worth trying!"