

# Mr. Blunt's Three Clients

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A SMALL and impromptu deputation met Richard Blunt in the entrance-hall of a block of buildings situated somewhere between the Strand and the Adelphi Gardens. A tall and melancholy-looking gentleman, dressed in somewhat rusty black, constituted himself spokesman.

“Mr. Richard Blunt, I believe?” he ventured.

The man addressed paused and acknowledged the fact. He was of slightly more than medium height, well but unobtrusively dressed, slim but of wiry build. His face was almost Semitic in its pallor and the darkness of his eyes, but a touch of the foreigner was suggested by his olive complexion, his well-shaped nose, and his firm yet unusual mouth.

“My name is Heslop, barrister-at-law,” the speaker continued. “You see my name on the board there. This is Mr. Edwards,” he went on, pointing to his

neighbour. "There's his name, you see—'Charles E. Edwards, Solicitor.' And this gentleman," indicating the third bystander, "is Mr. McKay, European agent for the Almighty Cinema Company."

"I am glad to know you, gentlemen," Mr. Blunt said. "It appears that we are neighbours."

Mr. Heslop coughed. He tapped with his forefinger the mahogany board upon which were painted the names and professions of those having offices in the building.

"We were discussing this little announcement of yours, Mr. Blunt," he confessed, reading it aloud: "*Richard Blunt, Detective.*"

"You have, perhaps, some business to place before me," Mr. Blunt suggested.

"No, no," the other assured him hastily; "it isn't that at all. It's the—er—wording of your announcement—"

"It seems to leave little enough to the imagination," was the quiet observation.

"On the contrary," Mr. Heslop objected gravely, "it seems to us to leave a good deal. I am not mistaken, I think, when I say that the business of a private detective is usually carried on among a certain class of people—men who want their wives watched—"

"Is shopping or bridge responsible for the wife's absence from home?" Mr. Edwards interrupted softly.

"Is it business alone which keeps the husband in the city, night after night?" Mr. McKay murmured.

Their spokesman waved his hand.

"Broadly speaking, Mr. Blunt," he said, "the question which has arisen among us is whether, for a person in your profession, these are altogether suitable offices. My own connection is old-established and almost traditional. Mr. Edwards, here, carries on the same business as his father before him. The other occupants of the building are mostly engaged in the serious professions."

"I am sorry if you feel that I am an intruder," Mr. Blunt regretted. "I chose these premises because the locality suited me, and because I was able to turn the two rooms at the top of the house into residential chambers. For my work, it is necessary, as you may surmise, to be on the spot night and day."

"We quite understand," Mr. Heslop assented gravely. "Having made your choice of habitation, Mr. Blunt, we could not, of course, expect you to be influenced by our prejudices. It is the baldness of your announcement here which we were discussing."

"What would you like me to call myself?" Richard Blunt inquired. "Criminologist, or something of that sort?"

"Without venturing to suggest a term," the barrister-at-law replied, "there are many professions which it is possible to conceal by the apt use of some non-committal designation."

"A betting man, for instance," Mr. Edwards pointed out, "calls himself a commission agent."

"Our friend here," Mr. McKay put in, indicating a name lower down on the list, "is a music-hall agent. You will see that he calls his office a 'College of Dramatic Art.'"

"I see," Richard Blunt murmured. "Do you know, that seems to me rather like bunkum."

"No offence, I trust," Mr. Heslop concluded, as he turned away.

"None at all," was the prompt reply. "If I knew of any other adequate term for my profession, I would substitute it. As I do not, I am afraid that my announcement must remain."

The two legal luminaries and the cinema-man ascended the stairs together.

"Seems a harmless sort of fellow," the barrister-at-law remarked tentatively.

"Might almost be a gentleman," the solicitor agreed.

"A clever face," the cinema-man observed, as he paused to light a cigarette, "and he seems amiable enough. All the same, I don't think you'll get him to alter his name-plate."

Richard Blunt lingered for a few moments below, studying the board which hung upon the right-hand side of the entrance-hall. He was suddenly aware that another man, who had come in toward the end of his conversation with his neighbours, was lingering about as though with the intention of speaking to him. This intention he presently carried into effect.

"You are Mr. Blunt, eh?"

"I am," the latter admitted. "You another of my neighbours in this building?"

"That's so."

Richard Blunt consulted the board.

"You are probably," he hazarded, "either Mr. Phineas Winfield, commission agent, or Sidney Pennifold, director of the College of Dramatic Art."

"I am Sid Pennifold," was the somewhat brusque admission, "and you're Richard Blunt, eh? Detective, you call yourself. You track down people and discover things. That's the game, isn't it?"

"Sometimes," Blunt retorted, "I discover people."

Mr. Sidney Pennifold appeared a little startled. He was a large and florid man, flashily but untidily dressed, with high complexion and watery eyes. His blue-serge suit was ill brushed and streaked with cigar-ash. His shirt and collar were of yesterday, or even the day before. His patent-leather boots with the soiled cloth-tops were sadly in need of cleaning.

"*Discover people*, eh?" he observed. "Got many clients?"

"You will be my first," was the suave confession. "I only took possession of my office yesterday."

Mr. Pennifold twisted the extinct stump of a cigar round between his teeth.

"How do you know I want to consult you?" he asked suspiciously.

"The indications are only too obvious," Blunt replied, leading the way toward the stairs. "My office is nearly opposite yours, isn't it? You had better come in for a few moments."

The two men mounted the stairs in silence. On the third floor, exactly opposite the flamboyant sign of the College of Dramatic Art, Richard Blunt opened with his latch-key a door on which his name only was engraved upon a small brass plate. The apartment was plainly furnished, and a fire was burning in the grate. Mr. Pennifold glanced round him.

"No clerk, eh?" he remarked.

"I seldom share my confidences," was the quiet reply. "My office is kept clean and in order by my servant up-stairs."

Mr. Pennifold nodded. He threw away the stump of his cigar, and, seated in the client's chair, where a stream of faint and watery sunlight shone upon his dissipated face, the difference between the two men became more than ever noticeable. Mr. Richard Blunt's linen, his studs, his carefully arranged tie were all immaculate. Notwithstanding his pallor, the clarity of his complexion, the keenness of his eyes bespoke a careful life. Metaphorically speaking, Mr. Sidney Pennifold gathered himself together. He leaned toward the desk, upon which he had rested his clenched fist, and he peered eagerly into his companion's eyes.

"Look here," he began: "It's your notice that attracted me—RICHARD BLUNT, DETECTIVE—just plain and businesslike. You're on your own, eh? Nothing to do with Scotland Yard? Nothing to do with the law?"

"You appear to understand my position correctly," the detective acknowledged.

"Then I take it," his prospective client continued, "that you are here to exercise your profession either way, eh? For the law—or against?"

"Except that I, of course, reserve to myself the privilege of refusing a case," the other assented.

"And what about confidence?" Mr. Pennifold demanded. "Supposing a man here in this chair told you of what the law would call a 'crime'—what about that, eh?"

"It is an unalterable part of my profession," Richard Blunt declared, "to receive confidences and to respect them."

Mr. Pennifold mopped his forehead with a handkerchief of gaudy hue. He glanced round the room anxiously.

"You haven't a drop of anything handy, I suppose?" he asked insinuatingly.

Richard Blunt shook his head gently. His client made a prodigious effort.

"I'm fairly up against it, then," he confessed, with a ghastly smile. "However, it's got to come. My lips have been locked since Tuesday," he went on, dropping his voice almost to a whisper. "It's a thing I never thought to say to any human being. The night before last it was. I killed a man—killed him!"

"You appear to have accomplished your task with discretion," Richard Blunt observed, "as you are still at liberty. You are, I presume, the man who murdered Eric Lyson?"

Mr. Pennifold began to shake. The pallor now had driven all the unhealthy, mottled colour from his face. His bloodshot eyes were set and strained.

"Who says I did?" he exclaimed. "What's that?"

Richard Blunt spoke to him as one might who was humouring a child.

"You told me that you committed a murder last Tuesday," he reminded him. "The only murder I know of committed on that day—and I follow these things fairly closely—was the murder of Eric Lyson, the musical-comedy star, in the front garden of Number Seventeen John Street, Maida Vale, a house tenanted by—"

"Sara Sinclair," Pennifold gasped.

"The lady known professionally under that name," Blunt continued quietly; "as a matter of fact, your wife, I believe."

Mr. Sidney Pennifold sat back in his chair as though stunned.

"Yes," he muttered; "my wife."

"I am not for a moment suggesting," his companion went on, "that you would take the trouble to come here and make such a statement unless it were true. At the same time, there is a very general impression that you are at the present time on your way home from America on a steamer which is not due to arrive in Liverpool until to-morrow."

Mr. Pennifold nodded.

"That's right," he admitted. "Before I go any further, I'll explain, if I may, the object of my coming to see you."

"If you please."

"I am not," Mr. Pennifold continued, rubbing his hands together a little nervously, "a professional criminal. So far as I know, I have never broken the laws of my country before. But since Tuesday night I have read every scrap I could get hold of as to criminals and their methods. I find that the most abstruse and complicated crimes have often been discovered through some slight thread of evidence left dangling by the criminal who has tried to cover up his traces. I am expressing myself badly," he went on, "but I dare say you understand me, Wainright, for instance. Some of the cleverest murderers in the world have planned out every detail of their crime, covering up their track: completely, and then they've forgotten just one little thing, or they've been guilty of one slight indiscretion—"

"What you say is, without doubt, true," his listener agreed.

"Now, I've been lucky and I've been careful," Mr. Pennifold went on. "I'll tell you how in a moment, but this morning as I stood looking at your announcement, I said to myself:

"Why not go to a professional? Why not put the case before him, tell him all that you've done, and ask him his advice?' I am ready to pay your fee, of course. If you are willing, I'd like to tell you just how I stand. You must think it out, step by step, and tell me whether I have left anything undone, whether I have left a clue anywhere. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"Is it in your line or isn't it?" Mr. Pennifold demanded.

"It is entirely in my line," was the prompt admission. "You had better tell me your story."

Mr. Pennifold disclosed an unexpected gift of conciseness. It was clear that the remains of a sound business man were concealed behind his present maudlin condition.

"I am a theatrical agent," he confided, "and I went over to America to book dates for my wife, Sara Sinclair. I had about filled my book when I got a cablegram from a pal. There was no misreading it—hard facts. I knew that Sara had always had a weakness for young Lyson, and, to tell you the truth, I'd postponed this journey to America because I hated to be out of the way. However, we are all fools alike when a woman promises, and I risked it—and lost. My passage home was taken on the HOLLONIA, and my trunk had already gone on board. She sailed in four days, and I was intending, in the meantime, to make a trip down to Philadelphia. When I got the cable, I drove down to the docks with my hand-bag, caught the PANNONIA to Plymouth, travelled up to London the night before last, had to walk from Paddington to St. John's Wood, hovered round my own house like a coward,

because there was a light in it, and saw Eric Lyson coming out at a quarter past three."

For the first time, the man paused. His hand played with his collar for a moment, as though he found it tight. He leaned across the table. His breath smelled of liquor. Richard Blunt, however, did not flinch. His whole attention seemed riveted upon this man's story of life and death.

"It was a foggy night," Pennifold proceeded. "Lyson couldn't see me behind the shrub. Just before he reached the gate, he stopped to light a cigarette. I saw his face by the light of the match, and that did it. I told myself," he went on thickly, "that I shouldn't have had the pluck to kill him any other way except by shooting, but, at that moment, I think I could have torn the life out of him. Anyway, I shot him through the heart—I wasn't a foot away—and walked into the fog."

"And since then?"

"I think I have been walking ever since, walking and drinking," was the dreary reply. "I haven't had my clothes off; I haven't been inside anything except a public-house, and I haven't opened my lips to a soul."

Richard Blunt reflected for a moment.

"A crime like yours," he said, "isn't an easy thing to carry about with you for the rest of your life. If you give yourself up, and the facts are as you state, with the help of good advice you will probably get off with ten or fifteen years' penal servitude."

"What use is that to me?" Pennifold demanded truculently. "I'm forty-nine now, and I haven't taken any particular care of myself. What would there be left for me in ten years' time?"

"A reasonable point of view," Blunt conceded. "Very well then—you want professional advice as to your course of action?"

"I do, and I am willing to pay for it," was the swift reply. "A tenner now, and fifty quid in three months' time, if the thing's blown Over."

His adviser nodded slightly.

"Does your wife believe that you are on board the HOLLONIA?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen a soul you know since you got back?"

"Not a soul."

"What about your voyage on the PANNONIA?"

"Never left my stateroom until after dark," Pennifold replied eagerly. "That cablegram had fairly knocked the stuffing out of me. I couldn't eat. I took on the drink."

"You travelled under your own name, I suppose?"

Pennifold shook his head.

"I knew I was going to make a brute of myself," he confessed, "and I had some dim idea of what would happen when I got to England. I called myself James Henderson."

"Written any letters during the last forty-eight hours?"

"Not one."

"When is the HOLLONIA due?"

"To-morrow morning at Liverpool."

Blunt sat for a moment, tapping the desk with his pencil.

"It appears to me," he pronounced at last, "that, unless you make a bad mistake, you ought to be able to see your way through this thing, provided you have a reasonable amount of luck."

"Luck?"

"Just to this extent: You have to get from here to Euston and up to Liverpool without being recognised. If you can do that, you ought to be able to face the music."

"Up to Liverpool?" Pennifold repeated. His companion nodded.

"Get a taxicab," he directed, "and drive to a ready-made clothing establishment. Buy yourself a new outfit, get a shave at Euston Station, make yourself as smart as you can, catch the night train to Liverpool, and keep off the drink. Sleep at some small place there, and get down on the docks when the HOLLONIA comes in. Your trunk will be put off with the rest. All you have to do is to clam it, drive off, and come post-haste to London.

"I see," Pennifold assented hopefully; "it seems simple enough."

"I wouldn't go home," Blunt continued. "The story, as it appears in the newspapers, would sufficiently account for that. What you want to do is to try and make yourself believe that the thing which you are going to make other people believe has happened is really true. You have come over on the HOLLONIA. You read the terrible details of what has occurred upon your arrival. You go to a hotel and send for a solicitor. Incidentally, you will also come here and consult me."

Mr. Pennifold drew two five-pound notes from his pocket and pushed them across the table. Then he rose to his feet.

"I think I have got the hang of it," he said. "It's all easy enough except—the keeping off the drink."

Richard Blunt's second client that morning arrived about a couple of hours later. He was conscious, for some moments, of her uneasy footsteps outside. Finally, she rang the bell which communicated both with the office in which he sat and with his rooms above. He rose at once and admitted her.

"You wish to see me?" he inquired. "I am Mr. Blunt."

She moved her head and passed into the room. She was a tall, slim woman, dressed in deep mourning, with a quantity of red-gold hair which appeared to be perfectly natural. Her complexion was pale; her eyes were a little narrow, her lips a shade too full. Nevertheless, in a sense, she was, without doubt, attractive.

"I should be glad to consult you, Mr. Blunt," she said, sinking into the chair which he offered to her. "My name is Mrs. Pennifold. You may know me better as Miss Sara Sinclair."

Richard Blunt bowed, but he showed no signs of surprise.

"I am at your service, madam," he assured her.

She leaned a little across the table. The ineradicable coquetry of the woman showed herself in her little gesture of ingenuous distress, the pleading for sympathy in her eyes.

"You may have read about me in the paper," she began. "I don't mean about my stage career; I mean about what happened on Tuesday night."

He nodded.

"Eric Lyson," he said, "was shot leaving your house—"

“Yes,” she faltered, raising her handkerchief to her eyes; “it was a brutal, barbarous crime. I want you to hunt down the murderer.”

“Have you any idea as to the guilty person?”

“I have more than an idea—I know who it was,” she replied calmly.

“Then why not go to Scotland Yard?” he asked, after a moment’s pause.

“Because the detective who came down,” she confided, “was a brute. He and the inspector who came afterward treated me as though I were a criminal myself. It isn’t so very terrible, is it, Mr. Blunt,” she asked, with the most effective little break in her tone, “to care for anyone, to have a dear friend to whom one gives—one’s affection?”

Richard Blunt ignored the question.

“Mr. Eric Lyson was this dear friend, I presume?”

“Yes,” she confessed. “You see, I am denying nothing.”

“You are married, I believe?”

“My husband,” she told him, “is on his way home from America. He is very much older than I am, and our marriage was never a complete success. What he will say when he knows, I cannot imagine,” she went on, with a little shiver of real fear in her tone. “He is a very violent man.”

“What made you come to consult me?”

“I came down to call at his office,” she replied. “It is just opposite here, on the other side of the corridor. I thought they might have heard something about Sid. I found it closed, however. Then I saw your name on the plate, and I don’t know what it was—some impulse made me come. Please be kind to me, Mr. Blunt. I am very miserable.”

Richard Blunt bowed, but there was little responsive sympathy in his face.

“If I can help you, I shall be glad,” he said simply “You made a statement which interested me, a few moments ago. You said that you knew who killed Eric Lyson.”

Illustration:

„You said that you knew who killed Eric Lyson”

“I do,” she confided. “I will tell you all about it. You must not think that this is vanity. You can be of no use to me unless I tell you everything. Before I was so successful—the *Pauline* song, you know, was what made me, in *The Laundry Girl*—I had a very great admirer. His name is Ernest Stahl, and he is the leader of the orchestra at my theatre. I used to go about with him now and then; but lately he has made himself a nuisance. You know, it is very hard for a girl,” she went on, looking at him appealingly. “I would like to give little fragments of my affection, if I could, to everyone who wanted them, and make everyone happy—but a woman can’t do that, can she, Mr. Blunt?”

“I should think it would be difficult,” he admitted.

“So you see it has been very awkward for me,” she went on. “Ernest Stahl has been wildly jealous of Eric Lyson. He has threatened him openly. I have a letter, which I can give you, in which he tells me that he will shoot Eric Lyson if he ever finds him with me. Ernest saw us leave the theatre together on Tuesday night. He followed us home. My last words to Eric were to tell him to look out. I am perfectly



certain of what happened. Ernest hid behind the big shrub which hangs over the wall in our little front garden, and when Eric came out he shot him.”

“Have you told the police your suspicions?” Blunt asked.

“I have told both of the detectives who came.”

“Then I do not understand why you have come to me.”

“But they are not doing anything,” she protested. “Ernest will escape. He used to be on the stage, and he is very clever at disguises.”

“How do you know they are doing nothing?”

“Because they haven’t arrested him,” she replied, with wide-open eyes.

“Aren’t you a little impatient?” Blunt observed.

Her face darkened. For the first time she was herself—a hard, unforgiving woman, robbed of something she valued.

“I want to see Ernest Stahl in the dock,” she declared. “I don’t want there to be the least chance of his getting away. I thought you might, at any rate, keep your eye on him while the police are making up their minds. I will pay you.”

“I am very sorry, Mrs. Pennifold,” Blunt said, rising slowly to his feet, “but your commission is not one which I can undertake. The case of Ernest Stahl is obviously one for the police. If you are convinced that he is the murderer, you have only to repeat just what you have said to me at Scotland Yard, hand them over the letter, and they will certainly not let him out of their sight.”

“You are really sure of that?” she insisted, as he conducted her toward the door.

“I am sure of it,” he answered.

She hesitated on the threshold and looked downward at the very handsome bag which she was carrying.

“There is no fee, Mrs. Pennifold,” he told her quietly. “I am sorry not to be able to be of assistance to you.”

She left him, a little puzzled by his attitude—she was so used to tracing the effect of her personality upon men with whom she talked. Richard Blunt walked back to the window and stood with a slight frown upon his face, gazing out upon the river.

“There only needs one thing more,” he murmured to himself.

Illustration:

She left him, a little puzzled by his attitude

The third thing came that afternoon in the shape of another client. Some instinct seemed to tell Richard Blunt who he was, even as the stranger entered the room. His white, nervous face, his curly black hair, his shabby and yet unusual clothes were all indicative of a profession in which the wearer has failed to achieve distinction.

“You are Mr. Blunt?” the newcomer asked, a little nervously. “My name is Ernest Stahl. I am a musician by profession. I wish to consult you.”

“Sit down,” Blunt replied. “You are the man, are you not, who is suspected of the murder of Eric Lyson?”

The newcomer’s discomfiture was obvious. It was little less than tragical.

“Already!” he muttered, pulling nervously at his little black moustache. “People are talking about me like that already?”

"That is not necessarily so," Blunt assured him. "As a matter of fact, I am in possession of rather special information. Why have you come to me?"

"Because I know I am a suspect," the other replied eagerly. "In a way, I deserve to be—and yet I am not guilty. I am afraid of being arrested any moment. I came to ask your advice. What is my best attitude?"

"You had better tell me the facts," Blunt suggested.

"They will sound simple enough to you," the musician said bitterly. "To me—well, they are just my life's tragedy. I have loved Sara Sinclair since the days when she was a rather clumsy chorus-girl earning twenty-five shillings a week. Sometimes she has been kind to me, sometimes unkind. She married a theatrical agent named Pennifold, simply because she was starving for the small comforts and luxuries which I could not give her, and which she saw no other way of attaining. Our friendship did not cease with her marriage, although it was a torment to me. It ceased with the coming of Eric Lyson."

"This man, Lyson," Blunt asked coldly, "was her lover, I presume?"

"Yes," was the shivering reply.

"Did you, at any time, make any display of your jealousy?"

"Often," Stahl confessed. "I am not of the order of those who find it easy to conceal their feelings. Everyone at the theatre knew that I hated Lyson. I have gone further than that. I have even threatened him before people. I was fool enough once to try to get him to fight a duel."

"And on the night of the murder, what were you doing?"

"Hanging round her house," the musician groaned. "I followed them home from the theatre. They both knew it."

"Did anyone see you in the vicinity of the house?"

"Yes," Stahl admitted. "Two of the orchestra who live out that way saw me walking up and down the street and tried to induce me to come home."

"Did you tell them what you were there for?"

"Yes," Stahl confessed grudgingly; "I told them that I was going to kill Lyson."

"Had you any weapon?"

"Yes."

"Did they know it?"

"Yes; I showed them an old revolver I had."

"And they left you there?"

"Yes."

"What happened then?"

"There seemed to be another man hanging about the place," Stahl replied. "I thought that he was a detective they had put on to watch me, and I determined to give it up for the night. I turned and walked straight away to Golder's Green. I didn't get back to my lodgings until five o'clock."

"What about your revolver?" Blunt asked. "Was it loaded?"

"Yes."

"Is it still loaded?"

"Not now. I took out the cartridges, and then I cleaned it."

Blunt looked across at his visitor for a moment curiously.

"Yours is a very singular instance," he observed, "of the subconscious actions of a guilty man. That is exactly what you would have done, you know, if you had discharged it."

"I suppose so," Stahl admitted. "Anyway, they are beginning to whisper things about me at the theatre, and I know that I am being watched. I expect to be arrested at any moment. I am not afraid of dying, but I do not wish to die for a crime I never committed."

"Naturally," Blunt assented. "Tell me," he went on, "assuming your innocence, as I am quite prepared to do, what other man do you suppose had a quarrel with Eric Lyson? Who do you suppose really committed the deed? Have you any idea?"

The young man's denial was emphatic and convincing.

"I have no more idea," he declared, "than the man in the moon. Of course, if Sid Pennifold had been in England—but he wasn't, and that's all there is about it. I've just been to his office, and it's still closed. That's how it was I saw your name-plate."

"Where is Mr. Pennifold?" Blunt inquired.

"On his way home from America. He is expected to land to-morrow."

Blunt was thoughtful for a few moments.

"Fate seems to have been a little unkind to you, Mr. Stahl," he observed presently. "You have inadvertently done everything possible to focus suspicion upon you. Of course, the evidence will be largely circumstantial, but you must admit that nine people out of ten, knowing what you have told me, would believe you guilty."

"Perhaps so," Stahl admitted; "but, as I am not, it seems to me that there must be some way out of it."

"There ought to be," Blunt agreed, "but at present I don't see it. Such details as the calibre of the revolver, the time of the happening, the footprints in the garden, impressions of which I believe have already been taken, will naturally either aid or do you injury if you should be brought to trial. I should only be wasting time if I inquired into these obvious matters. The only real assistance which anyone in the world could offer you would be to discover the real murderer."

Stahl felt for his pocketbook.

"Will you try and do that?" he begged. "I have very little money saved, but such as it is—"

Blunt stopped him.

"I do not require a fee from you," he said. "All I can promise is that if I find it possible to help you, I will."

Ernest Stahl descended the cold stone steps, which seemed, somehow, to convey fresh chill to his leaden heart, walked into the street, and, almost before he had started on his climb to the Strand, received that little tap upon the shoulder, that stealthy, authoritative summons, the thought of which had been his nightmare for many hours. Richard Blunt, ignorant of what had happened to his would-be client, closed his office and ascended to his bachelor apartments at the top of the stairs. He entered with a latch-key an apartment comfortably, even luxuriously furnished. The walls were of deep brown and hung with a few choice mezzotints. The furniture was of subdued green. One side of the room was lined

with bookcases. There was a pleasant fire upon the hearth and a tea-tray upon a round table. A manservant was busy arranging the latter.

Illustration:

Ernest Stahl received that little tap upon the shoulder

“Miss Harwood is not here yet, Robert?” his master inquired.

“Not yet, sir.”

Richard Blunt threw himself into the depths of a comfortable easy-chair and composed himself for reflection. In a few moments the visitor whom he was expecting arrived. A remarkably bright and intelligent-looking young woman, almost smothered in furs, came cheerfully into the room.

“Hello, Dick!” she exclaimed. “Am I late?”

“Nothing to speak of,” Richard Blunt replied, as Robert appeared with fresh tea and hot muffins. “I am glad to see you, though. Let me help you off with your cloak.”

The girl took her place at the tea-table, glancing round her with half-resentful appreciation.

“Much too comfortable,” she declared, “for a man struggling with a new profession! How we do live, Dick, nowadays I fancy my coming here to tea with you, without a chaperon and with a journalist’s notebook under my arm. By the by, I have just seen one of those little tragedies for which you, when you were content with writing novels, used to search the world.”

“Where?” Blunt asked, with sudden apprehension.

“At the corner of the street,” she went on, sprinkling some salt over her muffin. “I saw a man arrested by two plain-clothes detectives. Of course, I hung round while they got him into a taxi. They say that it was the musician who shot Eric Lyson.”

“A little copy for you,” he observed.

Margaret—her name was Margaret Harwood, and she was about as new to journalism as Richard Blunt was to his profession—shrugged her shoulders.

“Curiously enough, it didn’t interest me in the least,” she declared. “The whole affair is too sordid. Sara Sinclair was just that type of chorus-girl to whom lovers count for exactly what each one brings in the way of jewellery or emotions. Eric Lyson I always detested, both on the stage and off—an admirable type, I should consider, of the middle-class professional Lothario. And the woman’s husband, from all accounts, is a terrible person too. This young man looked a little more interesting, but, from what I hear, he is just one of the type of long-haired musicians who hang round Cambrino’s and only see life by squinting at it.”

Richard Blunt passed his cup for some tea.

“You dismiss them all very summarily, Margaret,” he remarked.

“They represent the rock upon which you and I split.” she said. “Personally, I consider that your intense interest in what you call *human nature* is little more than curiosity. You are perfectly happy poking about for jewels in a garbage-bed—jewels, whether of excitement or novelty or quality—which you will never find. Police-court curiosity, I call it.”

“You believe that what you say,” he asked, “applies to this present case?”

"I am sure of it," she replied confidently. "If you could see into the heart of each one of the three of these people, I don't think you would find even a single gleam of light, one impulse of real generous feeling."

Blunt looked away for a moment into the fire. "I wonder," he murmured.

Richard Blunt's first few words to his visitor, a week or so later, were of congratulation upon his altered appearance. Then there was a somewhat awkward silence.

"You saw, I presume," the former inquired, "the account of Stahl's arrest?"

"Yes; I saw it," was the somewhat dogged reply.

"You will forgive my asking you," Blunt continued, "whether your attitude in this matter will be affected by what has happened."

"The sooner we have an understanding about that the better," Pennifold declared. "If it wasn't Ernest Stahl, it would be me—that's how I look at it. I reckon my life's more valuable to me than Ernest Stahl's. He's a ne'er-do-well, and he's been hanging round Sara ever since I can remember. It isn't his fault that he isn't in Eric Lyson's place. Perhaps he deserves to be. I don't know. Anyway, when it comes to a choice between him and me, I choose myself."

"I see," Blunt remarked.

"Now, you are the only man," Pennifold continued, "who could give me away, and I am taking it for granted that you won't. I consulted you professionally, and you passed your word that all that I said was in confidence. Is that the truth?"

"It is," Blunt assented.

"Very well then," Pennifold went on; "here am I, sober, dean, a different person since I saw you last. I have followed out your suggestions implicitly, and everything has gone well with me. I found my trunk on the dock at Liverpool; I drove to the Adelphia Hotel, registered in my own name, talked about the voyage, let it be generally known that I'd been in my state-room since we left New York, made some friends, and came on to London. The revolver went down to the bottom of the Mersey, and not a soul except myself saw it go. As for the rest, look at me. Am I anything like the man who slunk into your office that first morning I came to visit you, eh?"

Blunt scrutinised his client. Pennifold was dressed in new and well-fitting clothes. His linen was spotless; his eyes were clear. He had shown, without doubt, marvellous powers of recuperation.

"I gather," Pennifold continued, "that Sara believes it was Stahl who did the trick. There isn't one of my friends I've seen up till now who doesn't take it for granted. They know I'm through with Sara—she knows it herself—and they are all on my side. And mark you this: There isn't a human being suspects that I didn't make my appearance in England on the HOLLONIA."

"Stahl," Blunt said quietly, "will probably be hanged."

"Then here's the truth, Mr. Blunt," Pennifold replied: "I am prepared to let him hang. I am not a sentimental man, or a tender-hearted one, and I wouldn't go a long way out of my way to save him if it didn't cost me anything. As it would cost me my life, my mind's made up. There's only you. Are you on the square with me?"

Blunt nodded meditatively.

“Whatever my feelings might be as to your course of action, Mr. Pennifold,” he declared, “you are quite right in what you assume. My lips are sealed.”

Pennifold took his departure, and Richard Blunt spent the next few days in trying to rearrange his perspective of this sordid drama. Events, as it chanced, moved quickly. Stahl had been committed for trial without hesitation, and, with the skilful handling of an accomplished K.C., the chain of evidence against him appeared irresistible. As the days drew near for his trial, Blunt became conscious of a queer uneasiness. He had always considered that his interest in the human race was entirely psychological. Yet he found himself sometimes, at night, contemplating and turning over in his mind the sensations of a man hanged by the neck for the crime of another. His own position worried him. He even went so far as to hint at the truth to Margaret Harwood, from whom, however, he met with scant sympathy. Finally, he began to show a curious partiality for Pennifold’s society. He found his way into the latter’s office one afternoon, a few days before the trial.

“I am feeling queer,” he said. “Let’s go out and get a drink.”

Pennifold hesitated.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “I’ve kept off it ever since I came to see you. I’ve taken my Bible oath I’ll keep off it until—afterward.”

“Just one wouldn’t do you much harm,” Blunt urged quietly.

Pennifold shut down his desk, took up his hat, and almost ran down the steps.

“Come on,” he said; “we’ll go to the saloon-bar at the Blue Lion.”

They sat in the stuffy, perfervid atmosphere of the public-house until nearly closing-time—until even Blunt, who had surreptitiously disposed of three-quarters of his drinks, was feeling uncomfortable. Pennifold had passed through all the stages of exhilaration, quarrelsomeness, and stupidity to a state of maudlin joviality. His companion deposited him at his lodgings that night and went back to his own apartments feeling like some unclean thing. Nevertheless, on the following morning, when Pennifold stumbled into his office at about eleven o’clock, red-eyed and unshaven, his greeting of the man was sympathetic. It had even a hollow ring of good-fellowship about it.

“Say,” Pennifold confessed, “I’m dying for just one drink.”

“Come along, then,” Blunt replied, reaching for his hat. “I’m feeling a little the same myself.”

That day was a repetition of the last, and the day following was, if possible, worse. On the morning of the trial, Blunt found his client waiting for him when he descended from his own apartments.

“For God’s sake, come out with me somewhere, Blunt!” he pleaded. “I drank a bottle of whisky before I went to bed last night, but it wouldn’t keep those black devils from dancing round my room. And, Blunt,” he went on, clutching at his companion’s sleeve, “every one of them had a face like that fellow Stahl’s.”

Illustration:

„For God’s sake, come out with me, Blunt”

“What you want is a drink,” the other declared coolly. “Come along.”

It was after their fourth whisky-and-soda that Blunt made his suggestion.

“Look here,” he said: “Let’s run down and see how things are going with Stahl. I’ve a friend, a barrister, who is keeping two seats for me.”

The language in which Pennifold’s refusal was couched was sufficiently lurid to evoke a request from the landlord that they immediately vacate his premises. Blunt hurried his charge into a taxi and drove to the Old Bailey.

“I’m not going in,” Pennifold growled, as they drew up.

“Don’t be a fool,” Blunt whispered. “Look at that policeman watching us. They’ll notice if you talk like that. There’s no harm in it. Be a man.”

Pennifold made a desperate effort to pull himself together.

“One more drink, then,” he begged. “There’s a place opposite.”

His companion humoured him, and a few moments later they crossed the street, Pennifold clutching tightly at Blunt’s arm. The latter, to whom the place seemed familiar, led the way down several corridors, receiving many salutes from attentive policemen, and finally pushed his charge through a jealously guarded door into the low, bare chamber, packed with people, where Stahl was being tried for his life. They entered without attracting notice, but, at the last moment, Blunt found that it required all his strength to steer the man by his side to his seat.

“My God,” the latter whispered, “let me get out of this, Blunt!”

Blunt’s only reply was a warning nudge. Perhaps it was by accident that a stalwart policeman was standing at the end of their row, and that they were almost wedged into their places. Little beads of perspiration stood out on Pennifold’s forehead. He made a stupendous effort.

“I can’t see,” he muttered. “It’s the fog!”

The fog from outside seemed indeed to have drifted in little patches into the room. Jets of yellow gaslight were flaring, however, and by degrees the whole scene became clear to Pennifold’s clouded vision. There was Stahl in the dock, clutching nervously at the bars, his face ghastly, his fingers and lips continually twitching. There was the judge, unmoved, sphinx-like, the row of barristers, the crowd of eager sightseers. And there was a man speaking—the counsel for the prosecution. Pennifold stirred uneasily in his place.

“My God!” he muttered. “He’s rubbing it in!”

The counsel in question, fully aware that he had an unanswerable case, was certainly unrolling it with pitiless precision. Very soon, Pennifold’s agitation became almost as great as Stahl’s. Blunt, who was watching the former very much as a physician might watch the subject on which he was experimenting, leaned forward and whispered in his ear:

“A clever fellow, that barrister! They’ll hang Stahl, and he knows it. Look at him!”

Pennifold’s blasphemous reply evoked a murmur from several of the people near. Blunt waited for some time before he spoke again.

“Poor chap!” he sighed. “They say that he hasn’t slept for nights, just sitting in his cell, thinking. It’s a horrible thought to have in one’s mind, Pennifold—to be led out in the morning along that dreary passage. He has a mother alive, too.”

This time it seemed as though Pennifold were going to strike his companion to the earth. The red light was back in his eyes. He looked almost like a madman.

Illustration:

Pennifold looked almost like a madman

“If you can’t keep your tongue still, I’ll kill you where you sit!”

“What would be the use of that?” Blunt retorted, under his breath. “It isn’t only to-day. You’ll remember all that you are feeling now as long as you live. You’ll see Stahl swinging—you’ll live through it all again, Pennifold, on your death-bed.”

There was a little gurgle in the tortured man’s throat, and, at first, Blunt was afraid that he was going to have a fit. He recovered himself, however, and sat staring at the man in the dock in strained, unnatural fashion. The counsel for the prosecution was concluding. The prisoner seemed to be sobbing quietly to himself, but in his eyes there was a quaint look of half-pitiful surprise. He gazed round the court as though eager to meet some familiar face, as though asking all the time what he had done that the truth should lie hidden. Blunt leaned toward the man by his side.

“Now’s your time, Pennifold,” he muttered; “you’ve got to go through with it.”

That was the end of the struggle. Pennifold stood up in court and his voice rang to its furthest corners.

“My lord, this trial must be stopped. I demand to be sworn. I am Sidney Pennifold, the husband of Sara Sinclair, and it was I who shot Eric Lyson.”

Tea was rather a silent festival that evening in Richard Blunt’s chambers. Blunt himself was a little exhausted, and Margaret had come in late. It was some time before either of them alluded to the events of the afternoon.

“So you found your gleam of light after all,” she said, at last.

He nodded.

“I had to dig,” he admitted, “but it was there all the time.”

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