NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 11204 5731

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

1. Fiction, English

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

NCW
Capes
Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

THE SKELETON KEY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

HISTORICAL ROMANCES

ADVENTURES OF THE COMTE DE LA MUETTE
OUR LADY OF DARKNESS
A CASTLE IN SPAIN
DIANA PLEASE
A JAY OF ITALY
A ROGUE'S TRAGEDY
THE POT OF BASIL
MOLL DAVIS
HISTORICAL VIGNETTES. 1st Series
" " 2nd "

ROMANCES

THE LAKE OF WINE
THE MYSTERIOUS SINGER
JOAN BROTHERHOOD
LOVE LIKE A GIPSY
THE SECRET IN THE HILL
THE GREEN PARROT
JEMMY ABERCRAW
THE LOVE STORY OF ST. BEL
THE STORY OF LOHENGRIN
THE HOUSE OF MANY VOICES
JESSIE BAZLEY
THE STORY OF FIFINE
IF AGE COULD
WHERE ENGLAND SETS HER FEET

TALES OF MYSTERY

THE GREAT SKENE MYSTERY
WHY DID HE DO IT?
THE WILL AND THE WAY
GILEAD BALM
THE SKELETON KEY

SHORT STORIES

FROM DOOR TO DOOR
AT A WINTER'S FIRE
PLOTS
LOAVES AND FISHES
BAG AND BAGGAGE
THE FABULISTS

POEMS

A FOOL'S PASSION AND OTHER POEMS
AMARANTHUS

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

THE SKELETON KEY

BY

BERNARD CAPES

LONDON: 48 PALL MALL
W. COLLINS SONS & CO. LTD.
GLASGOW MELBOURNE AUCKLAND

LC 19197
MRS

LC

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
74250B
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1919

Copyright

First Impression, April 1919
Second „ May 1919

...RARY
OF THE
NEW YORK
SOCIETY LIBRARY

Digitized by Google
Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

JUL 1919

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
	INTRODUCTION	vii
I.	MY FIRST MEETING WITH THE BARON	1
II.	MY SECOND MEETING WITH THE BARON	10
III.	WILDSHOTT	17
IV.	I AM INTERESTED IN THE BARON	28
V.	THE BARON CONTINUES TO INTEREST ME	38
VI.	THAT THUNDERS IN THE INDEX	47
VII.	THE BARON VISITS THE SCENE OF THE CRIME	64
VIII.	AN ENTR'ACTE	80
IX.	THE INQUEST	87
X.	AFTERWARDS	119
XI.	THE BARON DRIVES	127
XII.	THE BARON WALKS	140
XIII.	ACCUMULATING EVIDENCE	145
XIV.	THE EXPLOSION	155
XV.	THE FACE ON THE WALL	184
XVI.	THE BARON FINDS A CHAMPION	192
XVII.	AND AUDREY	207
XVIII.	THE BARON RETURNS	216
XIX.	THE DARK HORSE	225
XX.	THE BARON LAYS HIS CARDS ON THE TABLE	234
XXI.	A LAST WORD	272

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

INTRODUCTION

To introduce the last book by the late Bernard Capes is a sad sort of honour in more ways than one; for not only was his death untimely and unexpected, but he had a mind of that fertile type which must always leave behind it, with the finished life, a sense of unfinished labour. From the first his prose had a strong element of poetry, which an appreciative reader could feel even more, perhaps, when it refined a frankly modern and even melodramatic theme, like that of this mystery story, than when it gave dignity, as in *Our Lady of Darkness*, to more tragic or more historic things. It may seem a paradox to say that he was insufficiently appreciated because he did popular things well. But it is true to say that he always gave a touch of distinction to a detective story or a tale of adventure; and so gave it where it was not valued, because it was not expected. In a sense, in this department of his work at least, he carried on the tradition of the artistic conscience of Stevenson; the technical liberality of writing a penny-dreadful so as to make it worth a pound. In his short stories, as in his historical studies, he did indeed permit himself to be poetic in a more direct and serious fashion; but in his touch upon such tales as this the same truth may be traced. It is a good general rule that a poet can be known

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

not only in his poems, but in the very titles of his poems. In the case of many works of Bernard Capes, *The Lake of Wine*, for instance, the title is itself a poem. And that case would alone illustrate what I mean about a certain transforming individual magic, with which he touched the mere melodrama of mere modernity. Numberless novels of crime have been concerned with a lost or stolen jewel; and *The Lake of Wine* was merely the name of a ruby. Yet even the name is original, exactly in the detail that is hardly ever original. Hundreds of such precious stones have been scattered through sensational fiction; and hundreds of them have been called 'The Sun of the Sultan' or 'The Eye of Vishnu' or 'The Star of Bengal.' But even in such a trifle as the choice of the title, an indescribable and individual fancy is felt; a sub-conscious dream of some sea like a sunset, red as blood and intoxicant as wine. This is but a small example; but the same element clings, as if unconsciously, to the course of the same story. Many another eighteenth century hero has ridden on a long road to a lonely house; but Bernard Capes, by something fine and personal in the treatment, does succeed in suggesting that at least along that particular road, to that particular house, no man had ever ridden before. We might put this truth flippantly, and therefore falsely, by saying he put superior work into inferior works. I should not admit the distinction; for I deny that there is necessarily anything inferior in sensationalism, when it can

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

really awaken sensations. But the truer way of stating it would perhaps be this; that to a type of work which generally is, for him or anybody else, a work of invention, he always added at least one touch of imagination

The detective or mystery tale, in which this last book is an experiment, involves in itself a problem for the artist, as odd as any of the problems which it puts to the policeman. A detective story might well be in a special sense a spiritual tragedy; since it is a story in which even the moral sympathies may be in doubt. A police romance is almost the only romance in which the hero may turn out to be the villain, or the villain to be the hero. We know that Mr Osbaldistone's business has not been betrayed by his son Frank, though possibly by his nephew Rashleigh. We are quite sure that Colonel Newcome's company has not been conspired against by his son Clive, though possibly by his nephew Barnes. But there is a stage in a story like *The Moonstone*, when we are meant to suspect Franklin Blake the hero, as he is suspected by Rachel Verinder the heroine; there is a stage in Mr Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* when the figure of Mr Marlowe is as sinister as the figure of Mr Manderson. The obvious result of this technical trick is to make it impossible, or at least unfair, to comment, not only on the plot, but even on the characters; since each of the characters should be an unknown quantity. The Italians say that translation is treason; and here

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

at least is a case where criticism is treason. I have too great a love or lust for the *roman policier* to spoil sport in so unsportsmanlike a fashion; but I cannot forbear to comment on the ingenious inspiration by which in this story, one of the characters contrives to remain really an unknown quantity, by a trick of verbal evasion, which he himself defends, half convincingly, as a scruple of verbal veracity. That is the quality of Bernard Capes' romances that remains in my own memory; a quality, as it were, too subtle for its own subject. Men may well go back to find the poems thus embedded in his prose.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

MRS BERNARD CAPES wishes to express her gratitude to Mr Chesterton for his appreciative introduction to her husband's last work, and to Mr A. K. Cook for his invaluable assistance in preparing it for the press.

WINCHESTER.

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER I

MY FIRST MEETING WITH THE BARON

(*From the late Mr Bickerdike's 'Apologia'*[1])

SOME few years ago, in the month of September, I happened to be kicking my heels in Paris, awaiting the arrival there of my friend Hugo Kennett. We had both been due from the south, I from Vaucluse and Kennett from the Riviera, and the arrangement had been that we should meet together for a week in the capital before returning home. *Enfants perdus!* Kennett was never anything but unpunctual, and he failed to turn up to time, or anywhere near it, at the rendezvous. I was a trifle hipped, as I had come to the end of my circular notes, and had rather looked to him to help me through with a passing difficulty; but there was nothing for it but to wait philosophically on, and to get, pending his appearance, what enjoyment I could out of life. It was not very much. The Parisian may be a saving man, but Paris is no city to save in. It is surprising how dull an empty purse can make it. It had come to this after two days, either that I must shift my quarters from the Ritz into cheaper lodgings, or

[1] Found in manuscript.

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

abandon my engagement altogether and go back alone.

One afternoon, aimless and thirsty, I turned into the Café l'Univers in the Place du Palais Royal, and sat down at one of the little tables under the awning where was a vacant chair. This is a busy spot, upon which many streets converge, and one may rest there idly and study an infinite variety of human types. There was a man seated not far from me, against the glass side of the verandah whose occupation caught my attention. He was making very rapidly in a minute-book pencil notes of all the conspicuous ladies' hats that passed him. It was extraordinary to observe the speed and fidelity with which he secured his transcripts. A few, apparently random, sweeps of the pencil in his thin nervous fingers, and there, in the flitting of a figure, was some unconscious head ravished of its most individual idea. It reminded me of the 'wig-snatching' of the eighteenth century; yet I could not but admire the dexterity of the thief, as, sitting behind him, I followed his skilful movements.

'A clever dog that, sir,' said a throaty voice beside me.

It came from a near neighbour, whom I had not much observed until now—a large-faced, clean-shaved gentleman of a very full body and a comfortable complacent expression. He was dressed in a baggy light-grey suit, wore a loose Panama hat on his head, and smelt, pleasantly and cleanly, of snuff. On the table before him stood a tumbler of

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

grenadine and soda stuffed with lumps of ice, and with a couple of straws sticking from it.

'Most,' I answered. 'What would you take him to be?'

'Eh?' said the stranger. 'Without prejudice, now, a milliner's pander—will that do?'

I thought it an admissible term, and said so, adding, 'or a fashion-plate artist?'

'Surely,' replied the stranger. 'A distinction without a difference, is it not?'

No more was said for the moment, while I sat covertly studying the speaker. He reminded me a little of the portraits of Thiers, only without the spectacles. A placid, well-nourished benevolence had been his prominent feature, were it not somehow for the qualification of the eyes. Those were as perpetually alert, busy, observant, as the rest was seemingly supine. They appeared to 'peck' for interests among the moving throng, as a hen pecks for scattered grain.

'Wonderful hands,' he said suddenly, coming back to the artist. 'Do you notice anything characteristic about them now?'

'No,' I said. 'What?'

He did not answer, but applied for a refreshing moment or two to his grenadine.

'Ah!' he said, leaning back again, with a relishing motion of his lips. 'A comfortable seat and a cool glass, and we have here the best café-chantant in the world.'

'Well, it suits me,' I agreed—'to pass the time.'

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

'Ah!' he said, 'your friend is unpunctual?'

I yawned inexcusably.

'He always is. What would you think of an appointment, sir, three days overdue?'

'I should think of it with philosophy, having the Ritz cuisine and cellar to fall back upon.'

I turned to him interestedly, my hands behind my head.

'You have?'

'No, but you,' said he.

I was a bit puzzled and amused; but curious, too.

'You are not staying at the Ritz?' I asked. He shook his head good-humouredly. 'Then how do you know I am?'

'There is not much mystery in that,' said he. 'You happened to be standing on the steps when I happened to be passing. The rest you have admitted.'

'And among all these'—I waved my hand comprehensively—'you could remember me from that one glimpse?'

He laughed, but again ignored my question.

'How did you know,' I persisted, 'that my friend was a man?'

'You yourself,' said he, 'supplied the gender.'

'But not in the first instance.'

'No, not in the first instance,' he agreed, and said no more.

'You don't like the Ritz?' I asked after an interval, just to talk and be talked to. I was horribly bored, that is the truth, by my own society; and here was

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

at least a compatriot to share some of its burden with me.

'I never said so,' he answered. 'But I confess it is too sumptuous for me. I lodge at the Hôtel Montesquieu, if you would know.'

'Where is that, may I ask?'

'It is in the Rue Montesquieu, but a step from here.'

'I should like, if you don't mind, to hear something of it. I am at the Ritz, true, but in a furiously economical mood.'

'Certainly,' he answered, with perfect good-humour. 'It would not suit all people; it does not even figure in the guides; but for those of an unexacting disposition—well it might serve—to pass the time. You can have your good bedroom there and your adequate *petit déjeuner*—nothing more. For meals, there is a Duval's across the road, or, more particularly, the Restaurant au Bœuf à la mode in the Rue de Valois close by, where such delicacies may be tasted as *sole à la Russe*, or *noisettes d'agneau à la Réjane*. Try it.'

I was half thinking I would, and wondering how I could express my sense of obligation to my new acquaintance, when a sudden crash and scream in the road brought us both to our feet. The hat-sketcher, having finished with his task and gone, had stepped thoughtlessly off the kerb right under the shafts of a passing cab.

For a tranquil body, my companion showed the most curious excitement over the accident. Uttering

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

broken exclamations of reproof and concern, he hurried down, as fast as his bulk would permit him, to the scene of the mishap, about which a crowd was already swarming. I could see little of what followed; but, the press after a time dispersing, I made shift to inquire of an onlooker as to the nature of the victim's hurt, and was told that the man had been taken off to the St. Antoine Hospital in the very cab which had run him down, my friend of the Panama hat accompanying him. And so there for the moment our acquaintance ended.

But we met again at the Montesquieu—whither I had actually transferred my quarters in the interval—a day or two later. He came down into the hall just as I had entered it from the street, and greeted me and pressed my arm paternally.

'But this will not do at all,' he said. 'This will not do at all,' and summoned the hôtelier from his little dark room off the passage.

'I am sorry, Monsieur,' he said, when the bowing goodman appeared, 'to find such scant respect paid to my recommendation. If this is the treatment accorded to my patronage, I must convey it elsewhere.'

The proprietor was quite amazed, shocked, confounded. What had he done to merit this severe castigation from M. Le Sage ? If M. le Baron would but condescend to particularise his offence, the resources of his establishment were at M. le Baron's command to remedy it.

'That is easily specified,' was M. le Baron's

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

answer 'I sing the modest praises of your hotel to my friend, Mr Bickerdike; on the strength of these my friend decides to give you a trial. What is the result? You put him into number 19, where the aspect is gloomy, where the paper peels off the wall; where to my certain suspicion there are bugs.'

I laughed, not quite liking this appropriation, but the landlord was profuse in his apologies. Not for a moment had he guessed that I was a friend of M. le Baron Le Sage; I had not informed him of the fact; it was a mere question of expediency: Number 19 happened to be the only room vacant at the moment; but since—in short, I was transferred straightway to a very good *appartement* in the front, where were ample space and comfort, and a powder-closet to poke my head into if I wished, and invoke the ghosts of the dead lords of Montesquieu, whose Hôtel this had once been.

Now I should have been grateful for M. le Baron's friendly offices, and I hope I was, but with a dash of reservation. I did not know what to make of him, in fact, and the uncertainty kept me on my guard. Nor was I the more reassured upon his commiserating me presently on the fact of my friend, Mr Kennett, not having yet turned up. So he had found out my friend's name? That might be possible through an inquiry at the Ritz, where Kennett was expected. But why was he interested in inquiring at all? Then, as to my own name; he might have ascertained that, of course, of my present landlord—a pardonable curiosity, only somehow coloured by

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

his unauthorised examination of my room. What had he wanted in there in the first instance? On the other hand, he was evidently held, for whatever reason, in high respect by the proprietor; and if the reason itself was to seek for me, I had certainly no grounds for suspecting its adequate claims. He *appeared* to be a man of education and some distinction, not to speak of his title, which, however, might be territorial and of small account. And, assuredly, he did not seem French, unless by deliberate adoption. His speech, appearance, habit of mind, were all as English as the shoes he wore on his feet.

I asked him, on that day of his service to me, how it had gone with the poor hat-sketcher whom, I had understood, he had accompanied to the hospital. He seemed to regard my question as if for a moment it puzzled him, and then he answered :—

'O, the artist! O, yes, to be sure. I accompanied him, did I? Yes, yes. An old house this, Mr Bickerdike—a fragment of old Paris. If there is nothing more I can do for you, I think I will be going.'

So it always was on the few further occasions which brought us together. He could not, or would not, answer a direct question directly; he seemed to love secrecy and evasion for their own sake, and for the opportunity they gave him for springing some valueless surprises on the unsuspecting. Well, he should not have his little vanity for me. There is nothing so tiresome as that habit of meaningless

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

reserve, of hoarding information which there can be no possible objection to disseminating; but some people seem to have it. I responded by asking no more questions of M. le Baron, and I only hope my incuriosity disappointed him. The next day, or the day after, Kennett turned up, and I left the Montesquieu for my original quarters.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER II

MY SECOND MEETING WITH THE BARON

(From Mr Bickerdike's Manuscript)

It might have been somewhere near the anniversary of my first meeting with the Baron when I came upon him again—in London this time. I had been lunching at Simpson's in the Strand, and, my meal finished, had gone up into the smoking-room for a coffee and liqueur. This is a famous corner of a famous caravansary, being dedicate, like no other smoking-room I know, to the service of the most ancient and most royal game of chess, many of whose leading professors forgather therein, as it were, in an informal club, for the mixed purposes of sociability and play. There one may watch astounding mental conflicts which leave one's brain in a whirl; or, if one prefers it, may oneself join issue in a duel, whether for glory or profit; or, better still, like Gargantua, having a friend for adversary, for the mere serious diversion of the game, and for its capacity for giving a rare meditative flavour to one's tobacco. The room, too, for such a haunt of gravity, is a cheerful room, with its large window overlooking the Strand, and one may spend a postprandial hour

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

there very agreeably, and eke very gainfully if one takes an idler's interest in other people's problems. That I may confess I do, wherefore Simpson's is, or was, a fairly frequent resort of mine.

Now, on this occasion I had hardly entered the room when my eyes fell on the figure of M. le Baron sitting profoundly absorbed over a game with one in whom I recognised a leading master in the craft. I knew my friend at once, as how could I fail to, for he sat before me in every detail the stranger of the Café l'Univers—bland, roomy, self-possessed, and unchanged as to his garb. I would not venture to break into his preoccupation, but passed him by and took a convenient seat in the window.

'Stothard has found his match,' remarked a casual acquaintance who lounged near me, nodding his head towards the pair.

'Who is it?' I asked. 'Do you know?

'I know his name,' was the answer, 'Le Sage, an out-of-pocket French Baron; but that's all.'

'O! out of pocket, is he?'

'I've no right to say it, perhaps, but I only surmise—he'll play you for a half-crown at any time, if you're rash enough to venture. He plays a wonderful game.'

'Is he new to the place?'

O, no! I've seen him here frequently, though at long intervals.'

'Well, I think I'll go and watch them.'

Their table was against the wall, opposite the

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

window. One or two devotees were already established behind the players, mutely following the moves. I took up a position near Le Sage, but out of his range of vision. He had never, to my knowledge, so much as raised his face since I entered the room; intent on his game, he appeared oblivious to all about him. Yet the moment I came to a stand, his voice, and only his voice, accosted me,—

'Mr Bickerdike? How do you do, sir?'

I confess I was startled. After all, there *was* something disconcerting about this surprise trick of his. It was just a practised pose, of course; still, one could not help feeling, and resenting in it, that impression of the preternatural it was no doubt his desire to convey. I responded, with some commonplace acknowledgment, to the back of his head, and no more was spoken for the moment. Almost immediately the game came to an end. M. le Baron sat back in his chair with a 'My mate, I think?'—a claim in which his opponent acquiesced. Half the pieces were still on the board, but that made no difference. Your supreme chess expert will foresee, at a certain point in the contest, all the possible moves to come or to be countered, and will accept without dispute the inevitable issue. The great man Stothard was beaten, and acknowledged it.

M. le Baron rose from his seat, and turned on me with a beaming face.

'Happy to renew your acquaintance, Mr Bickerdike,' he said. 'You are a student of the game?'

Digitized by Google

Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

'Not much better, I think,' I answered. 'I am still in my novitiate.'

'You would not care——?'

'O, no, I thank you! I'm not gull enough to invite my own plucking.'

It was a verbal stumble rather than a designed impertinence on my part, and I winced over my own rudeness the moment it was uttered, the more so for the composure with which it was received.

'No, that would be foolish, indeed,' said M. le Baron.

I floundered in a silly attempt to right myself.

'I mean—I only meant I'm just a rotten muff at the game, while you——' I stuck, at a loss.

'While I,' he said with a smile, 'have just, like David, brought down the giant Stothard with a lucky shot.'

He touched my arm in token of the larger tolerance; and, in some confusion, I made a movement as of invitation, towards the table in the window.

'I am obliged,' he said, 'but I have this moment recalled an appointment.' 'So,' I thought, 'in inventing a pretext for declining, he administers a gentle rebuke to my cubbishness.' 'You found your friend, I hope,' he asked, 'when you left the Montesquieu on that occasion?'

'Kennett? Yes,' I answered; and added, moved to some expiatory frankness; 'it is odd, by the bye, M. le Baron, that our second meeting should associate itself with the same friend. I am going

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

down to-morrow, as it happens, on a visit to his people.'

'No,' he said: 'really? That is odd, indeed.'

He shook hands with me, and left the room. Standing at the window a moment after, I saw him going Citywards along the Strand, looking, with his short thick legs and tailed morning coat, for all the world like a fat jaunty turtle on its way to Birch's.

Now I fancied I *had* seen the last of the man; but I was curiously mistaken. When I arrived at Waterloo Station the next day, there, rather to my stupefaction, he stood as if awaiting me, and at the barrier—*my* barrier—leading to the platform for *my* train, the two o'clock Bournemouth express. We passed through almost together.

'Hullo!' I said. 'Going south?'

He nodded genially. 'I thought, with your permission, we might be travelling companions.'

'With pleasure, of course. But I go no further than the first stop—Winton.'

'Nor I.'

'O, indeed? A delectable old city. You are putting up there?'

'No, O no! My destination, like yours, is Wildshott.'

'Wildshott! You know the Kennetts then?'

'I know Sir Calvin. His son, your friend, I have never met. It is odd, as you said, that our visits should coincide.'

'But you must have known yesterday—if you did not know in Paris. Why in the name of goodness

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

did you not——' I began; and came to a rather petulant stop. This secrecy was simply intolerable. One was pulled up by it at every turn.

'Did I not?' he said blandly. 'No, now I come to think of it—— O, Louis, is that an empty compartment? Put the rugs in, then, and the papers.'

He addressed a little vivid-eyed French valet, who stood awaiting his coming at an opened door of a carriage. Le Sage climbed in with a breathing effort, and I followed sulkily. Who on earth, or what on earth, was the man? Nothing more nor less than what he appeared to be, he might have protested. After all, not himself, but common gossip, had charged him with necessitousness. He might be as rich as Crœsus, for all I knew or he was likely to say. Neediness was not wont to valet it, though insolvency very well might. But he was a friend of Sir Calvin, a most exclusive old Bashaw; and, again, he was said to play chess for half-crowns. O! it was no good worrying: I should find out all about him at Wildshott. With a grunt of resignation I sank into the cushions, and resolutely put the problem from me.

But the fellow was an engaging comrade for a journey—I will admit so much. He was observant, amusing, he had a fund of good tales at his command, and his voice, without unpleasant stress, was softly penetrative. Adapted to anecdote, moreover, his habit of secrecy, of non-committal, made for a sort of ghostly humour which was as titillating as

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

it was elusive; and the faint aroma of snuff, which was never absent from him, seemed somehow the appropriate atmosphere for such airy quibbles. It surrounded him like an aura—not disagreeably; was associated with him at all times—as one associates certain perfumes with certain women—a particular snuff, Macuba I think it is called, a very delicate brand. So he is always recalled to me, himself and his rappee inseparable.

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER III

WILDSHOTT

WILDSHOTT, the Hampshire seat of the Kennetts, stands off the Winton-Sarum road, at a distance of some six miles from the former, and some three and a half from the sporting town of Longbridge, on the way to the latter. The house is lonely situated in wild but beautiful country, lying as it does in the trough of the great downs whose summits hereabouts command some of the most spacious views in the County. A mile north-east, footing a gentle incline, shelters the village of Leighway; less than a mile away, in a hollow of the main road, stands a wayside tavern called the Bit and Halter; and, with these two exceptions, no nearer neighbour has Wildshott than the tiny Red Deer inn, which perches on a high lift of the downs a mile and a half distant, rising north.

The stately, wrought-iron gates of Wildshott open from the main road. Thence a drive of considerable extent reaches to the house, which is a rectangular red-brick Jacobean structure, with stone string-courses and a fine porch, having a great shell over it. There are good stables contiguous, and the grounds about are ample and well timbered—almost

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

too well timbered, it might be thought by some people, since the closeness of the foliage gives an effect of gloom and solemnity to a building which, amid freer surroundings, should have nothing but grace and frankness to recommend it. But settled as it is in the wash of the hills, with their moisture draining down upon it, growth and greenness have become a tradition of its life, and as such not to be irreverently handled by succeeding generations of Kennetts.

All down the west boundary of the upper estate—which, to its northernmost limit, breaks upon that bare hill on whose summit, at closer range now, the little Red Deer inn sits solitary—runs a wide fringe of beech-wood, which is continued to the high road, and thence, on the further side, dispersed among the miscellaneous plantations which are there situated. The highway itself roughly bisects the property—the best of whose grass and arable lands are contained in the southern division—and can be reached from the house, if one likes, through the long beech thicket by way of a narrow path, which, entering near the stables, runs as far as the containing hedge, in which, at some fifty yards from the main entrance, is a private wicket, leading down by a couple of steps to the road. This path is known, through some superstitious association, as the Bishop's Walk, and is little used at any time, the fact that it offers a short cut from the house to the lower estate being regarded, perhaps, as inadequate compensation for its solitariness, its dankness, and

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

the glooms of the packed foliage through which it penetrates. Opposite the wicket, across the road, an ordinary bar-gate gives upon a corresponding track, driven through the thick of a dense coppice, which, at a depth of some two hundred feet, ends in the open fields. It is useful to bear in mind these local features, in view of the event which came presently to give them a tragic notoriety.

At Winton a wagonette met the two gentlemen, and they were landed at Wildshott soon after four o'clock. Bickerdike was interested to discover that they were the only guests. He was not surprised for himself, since he and Hugo Kennett were on terms of unceremonial intimacy. He *did* wonder a little what qualities he and the Baron could be thought to possess in common that they should have been chosen together for so exclusive an invitation. But no doubt it was pure accident; and in any case there was his friend to explain. He was a bit down in the mouth, was Hugo—for any reason, or no reason, or the devil of a reason; never mind what—and old Viv was always a tower of strength to him in his moods—hence old Viv's citation to come and 'buck' his friend, and incidentally to enjoy a few days' shooting, which accounted for one half of the coincidence. Old Viv accepted his part philosophically; it was not the first time he had been called upon to play it with this up and down young officer, whose temporal senior he was by some six years, and whose elder, in all questions of sapience and self-sufficiency, he might have been by fifty. He did

Digitized by Google Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

not ask what was the matter, but he said 'all right,' as if all right were all reassurance, and gave a little nod to settle the matter. He had a well-looking, rather judicial face, clean shaven, a prim mouth, a somewhat naked head for a man of thirty, and he wore eyeglasses on a neatly turned nose, with a considerable prominence of the organ of eventuality above it. The complacent bachelor was writ plain in his every line. And then he inquired regarding the Baron.

'O! I know very little about him,' was young Kennett's answer. 'I believe the governor picked him up in Paris originally, but how or where I can't say. He's a marvel at chess; and you remember that's the old man's obsession. They're at it eternally while he's down here.'

'This isn't his first visit then?'

'No, I believe not; but it's the first time I've seen him. I'm quoting Audrey for the chess. Why, what's the matter? Is anything wrong with him?'

'There you go, you rabbit! Who said anything was wrong with him? I've met him before, that's all.'

'Have you? Where?'

'Why, in Paris. You remember the Montesquieu, and my French Baron?'

'I remember there *was* a Baron. I don't think you ever told me his name.'

'Well, it was Le Sage, and this is the man.'

'Is it? That's rather queer.'

'What is?'

Digitized by Google

Original from
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

'The coincidence of your meeting again like this.'

'O, as to that, coincidence, you know, is only queer till you have traced back its clues and found it inevitable.'

'Well, that's true. You can trace it in his case to the governor's being down with the gout again, and confined to the house, and wanting something and somebody to distract him.'

'There you are, you see. He thought of chess, and thought of this Le Sage, and wrote up to him on the chance. Your father probably knows more about his movements than we do. So we're both accounted for. No, what *is* queer to me is the man's confounded habit of secrecy. Why didn't he say, when I met him in Paris, that the friend I was waiting for was known to him? Why didn't he admit yesterday, admit until we actually met on the platform to-day, that we were bound for the same place? I hate a stupidly reticent man.'

Kennett laughed, and then frowned, and turned away to chalk his cue. The two men were in the billiard-room, playing a hundred up before dinner.

'Well,' he said, stooping to a losing hazard, 'I hope a fellow may be a good fellow, and yet not tell all that's in him.'

'Of course he may,' answered Bickerdike. 'Le Sage, I'm sure, is a very good fellow, a very decent old boy, and rare company when he chooses—I can answer for that. But there's a difference between telling all that's in one and not telling anything.'

'Well, perhaps he thinks,' said the other

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

impatiently, 'that if he once opened the sluice he'd drain the dammed river. Do let him alone and attend to the game.'

Bickerdike responded, unruffled. He had found his friend in a curiously touchy state—irritable, and nervous, and moody. He had known him to be so before, though never, perhaps, so conspicuously. Hugo was temperamentally high-strung, and always subject to alternations of excitement and despondence; but he had not yet exhibited so unbalanced a temper as he seemed inclined to display on this occasion. He was wild, reckless, dejected, but seldom normal, appearing possessed by a spirit which in turns exalted or depressed him. What was wrong with the boy? His friend, covertly pondering the handsome young figure, found sufficient solution in the commonplace. He was in one of his nervous phases, that was all. They would afflict men subject to them at any odd time, and without apparent provocation. It was one of the mysteries of our organic being—a question of misfit somewhere between spirit and matter. No one looking at the young soldier would have thought him anything but a typical example of his kind—constitutionally flawless, mentally insensitive. He belonged to a crack regiment, and was popular in it; was tall, shapely-built, attractive, with a rather girlish complexion and umber-gold hair—a ladies' man, a pattern military man, everything nice. And yet that demon of nerve worked in him to his perfection's undoing. Perhaps it was the prick of

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

conscience, like a shifting grit in one's shoe, now here, now there, now gone—for the boy had quite fine impulses for a spoilt boy, a spoilt child of Fortune—and spoilt, like Byron by his mother, in the ruinous way. His father, the General, alternately indulgent and tyrannical, was the worst of parents for him; he had lost his mother long ago; his one sister, flippant, independent—undervalued, it may be, and conscious of it—offered no adequate substitute for that departed influence. And so the good in Hugo was to his own credit, and stood perhaps for more than it might have in another man.

His father, Sir Calvin—he had got his K.C.B., by the way, after Tel-el-Kebir in '82, in reward for some signal feat of arms, and at the expense of his trigger-finger—was as proud as sin of his comely lad, and blind to all faults in him which did not turn upon opposition to himself. He designed great connexions for the young man, and humoured his own selfishness in the prospect. He was a martinet of fifty-five, with a fine surface polish and a heart of teak beneath it, a patrician of the Claudian breed, irascible, much subject to gout for his past misdeeds, and an ardent devotee of the game of chess, at which he could hold his own with some of the professed masters. It was that devotion which had brought him fortuitously acquainted with the French Baron—a sort of technical friendship, it might be called—and which had procured the latter an occasional invitation of late to Wildshott. Le Sage came for chess, but he proved very welcome for himself.

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

There was a sort of soothing tolerance about him, the well-informed urbanity of a polished man of the world, which was as good as a lenitive to the splenetic invalid. But nobody, unless it were Sir Calvin himself, appeared to know anything concerning him; whether he were rich or indigent; what, if dependent on his wits, he did for a living; what was the meaning or value of his title in an Englishman, if English he were; whether, in short, he were a shady Baron of the *chevalier d'industrie* order, or a reputable Baron, with only some eccentricities to mark him out from the common. One of these, not necessarily questionable, was his sly incommunicativeness; another was his fondness for half-crowns. He invariably, whether with Sir Calvin or others, made that stake, no more and no less, a condition of his playing at all, and for the most part he carried it off. Vivian Bickerdike soon learned all that there was to be told about him, and he was puzzled and interested —'intrigued,' as they would say in the horrible modern phrase. But being a young man of caution, in addition to great native curiosity, he kept his wits active, and his suspicions, if he had any, close.

The game proceeded—badly enough on the part of Hugo, who was generally a skilful player. He fouled or missed so many shots that his form presently became a scandal. 'Phew!' whistled his opponent, after a peculiarly villainous attempt; 'what's gone wrong with you?'

The young man laughed vexedly; then, in a

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

sudden transition to violence, threw his cue from him so that it clattered on the floor.

'I can't play for nuts,' he said. 'You must get somebody else.'

'Hugh,' said his friend, after a moment or two of silence, 'there's something weighing on your mind.'

'Is there?' cried the other jeeringly. 'I wonder.'

'What is it? You needn't tell me.'

'O! thank you for that. I tell you what, Viv: I dreamed last night I was sitting on a barrel of gunpowder and smoking a cigarette, and the sparks dropped all about. Didn't I? That's what I feel, anyhow. Nerves, all nerves, my boy. O! shut up that long mug, and talk of something else. I told you I was off colour when I wrote.'

'I know you did, and I came down.'

'Good man. You'll be in at the kill. There's going to be a most infernal explosion—pyrotechnics galore. Or isn't there? Never mind.'

He appeared to Bickerdike to be in an extraordinary state, verging on the hysterical. But no more was said, and in a few moments they parted to dress for dinner.

M. le Baron, coming up to his room about the same time and for the same purpose, was witness of a little stage comedy, which, being for all his bulk a light treader, he surprised. The actors were his valet Louis and an under-housemaid, the latter of whom was at the moment depositing a can of hot water in the washing basin. He saw the lithe,

Digitized by Google
Original from NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY