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READ THIS STORY, YOU WILL LIKE IT.

## A Srap of Paper

Billy Maitland was feeling particularly happy. It was the first day of his holiday, and the prospect of three weeks' freedom from the cares and worries of business made him feel so light-hearted that he was fain to burst into song. Unfortunately, his singing voice was of the kind that attracted unwelcome attention—people were wont to inquire if he was in pain—so he repressed the impulse.

Billy Maitland was twenty-three. He had blue eyes and sandy hair. At the moment of which we are writing, he was striding jauntily along the platform at Waterloo, with a smile on his face and a suit-case in his hand.

The train was not full. He selected a compartment at random, and got in.

He had scarcely deposited his suit-case on the rack, when the door opened and two ladies entered the carriage.

The first was an elderly woman in black, stern-looking, sour-visaged, and spectacled. To her his eye gave scant attention. A glance was enough to cause him to divert his eye hastily to her companion.

Maitland almost gasped. Without doubt she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. Age—well, eighteen or thereabouts. Fair hair, like gleaming silk, a perfect, scarlet mouth, and a complexion, he considered, comparable to the bloom on a peach—only better.

The elderly woman was clearly a dragon, probably an aunt. She looked a woman of character, too. Her mouth gave one the impression that it could, when occasion demanded give voice to remarks of considerable acidity.

As his gaze transferred itself again to the girl, their eyes met for the fraction of a second, and Maitland felt his heart pounding against his ribs like a force-pump working overtime.

Yet, as he covertly regarded her over the edge of a newspaper, which he was pretending to read, he noted that there was a look of deep sadness in her eyes. She was a little pale, too, and there clung to her an indefinable air of dejection. That she was suffering from some unhappiness, or sorrow, Maitland was convinced.

And soon he began to feel dejected himself, in silent sympathy. Unreasonably, he began to cherish a smouldering indignation towards the dragon, who remained expressionless, cold, supercilious.

Deep in his thoughts, Maitland drew his case from his pocket, carefully selected a cigarette, and tapped it pensively on the back of his hand before putting it in his mouth.

He was about to strike a match when the sound of a voice arrested him.

"Young man!" (It was the dragon, of course, speaking). "This is not a smoking carriage!"

Maitland coloured slightly, and, muttering an apology, abandoned his incendiary intentions.

"I'm awfully sorry!" he repeated. "I quite forgot!"

No answer. "Thanks very much for reminding me," he added, clutching at the fleeting opportunity of getting into conversation with his fellow travellers.

Deep silence.

Maitland cast one last beseeching glance at the dragon, but the latter appeared to be deeply absorbed in the landscape that was flashing past the window at her side.

The girl, he noticed, presently opened a small attache case she was carrying and extracted a writing-pad. Using the case as a rest, she began to write.

Before long, the dragon addressed a question to the girl in an undertone. Maitland did not hear the words, but the girl nodded, and then he saw her colour slightly.

The train, which was a fast one, sped rapidly into the country, until at last it drew up at the little station of Asher. As it slowed down, Maitland saw his companions hastily gather their belongings together. With a wrench, he realised that the girl was going to get out and pass out of his life altogether.

When the train stopped, the two alighted.

Maitland's eyes followed the girl in an ardent gaze. To his great joy, she glanced wistfully back at him before she disappeared from view. It was nothing, merely an exchange of looks, yet how thrilling.

Then a curious thing occurred.

Maitland's gaze fell to the carriage floor, attracted by a white object reposing there. It was a piece of writing-paper. The girl must have dropped it. He sprang to his feet and picked it up.

His immediate impulse was to run after her, to restore the paper to her. Then, involuntarily, he glanced at the writing.

At that moment the porters were slamming the carriage doors. The guard blew his whistle. The engine gave a preparatory snort. Then the train began to glide forward.

But Maitland stood transfixed, his staring eyes focussed upon the paper in his trembling hands. In a large, bold, feminine hand, he read the following words:

"Dear Friend,—I am in terrible danger. Every moment my life is threatened, and, if help is not quickly forthcoming, I am condemned to die. Unless you aid me, I am without a friend in the world. I am in the clutches of a gang of desperate scoundrels, who will stick at nothing. So, although I seek your help on my behalf, I feel I must warn you to turn back if you are afraid of risking your life. If, on the other hand, you are prepared to take the risks, please do be cautious. In return, I can offer no reward other than friendship and esteem, for I am both poor and friendless. But something tells me I can trust you and rely upon your help. You seem so strong and brave and good. Else I would die rather than make this despairing appeal! Will you try to help me?"

"Will I try to help her!" repeated Maitland, in a ringing voice, adding resolutely, "I will move Heaven and earth to save her!"

And then, moved by a sudden emotion that sometimes makes even big, strong, silent men do things they are sorry for afterwards, Maitland kissed the scrap of paper tenderly.

"My little Blue Eyes!" he murmured, in rapturous accents.

But the train, of course, had meanwhile gathered speed, and, when Maitland frantically sprang to the carriage door, the little station of Asher was fast receding into the distance.

## II.

The next station to Asher was Wilford, a matter of half an hour's run. To Maitland it seemed like months. He thought the train was never going to stop. To contain himself was a matter of considerable effort.

As the station hove in sight, he seized his suit-case, and several seconds before the train came to rest he leapt to the platform. He glanced at the station clock. It was just noon.

Wilford seemed a small and sleepy place. Apparently, the railway officials were specially selected to fit in with the general scheme, for the porter whom Maitland accosted a few moments later was the sleepest, most vacant man imaginable.

Maitland caught him as he was in the act of slowly closing a carriage door. "Next train back to Asher?" snapped Maitland.

"Eh?"

"What time can I catch a train to Asher?"

"This train don't go to Asher, guv'nor."

"I know that. I've just got out of it!"

"Other platform for Asher."

"Yes! Yes! But what time?"

"This train goes to Blkington, Farley, Downstead, Evesham, Little Sprotonfield, Haverside—"

"I don't want to know where this train goes to!" shouted Maitland impatiently.

"Can't you tell me the time of the next train to Asher?"

"Oh, Asher!" repeated the porter, scratching the back of his head.

"Yes, Asher!"

The porter meditated for a full minute.

"You'd better ask at the booking-office," he mumbled at last. "You see, guv'nor, this is my platform, and Asher trains come in at the other platform."

Maitland strode off in disgust.

At the booking-office he had better luck.

After repeating his question several times, he at length elicited the fact that the next train back to Asher was the 2.25 p.m.

"Two hours wait!" he groaned.

He left his suit-case in the cloakroom, and walked into Wilford. He was hot

and flustered, and required a period of quiet thinking to restore his muffled temper. Besides, his plan of action was to be thought out.

He had quite decided to help the girl. But, how? First, he would go back to Asher. Inquiries from the station officials might put him on the scent. The striking beauty of the girl was almost sure to have been remarked.

Then, assuming he discovered where she had gone, what then? How was he to effect a rescue? He reflected that he was alone and unarmed. Should he buy a revolver? "I'll wait until I get back to Asher," he decided, after much strenuous thought. He returned to the station, and, after what seemed an age, the 2.25 puffed sedately in.

The journey back to Asher seemed to take even longer than the previous one, but there is an end to all things, and at last the train drew in the station. He alighted hastily.

Waiting until the other passengers had given up their tickets, Maitland approached the collector—a red faced man, with a fiery moustache.

"Were you on duty here about three hours ago?" he asked.

"Wot?" said the other, in a surly tone.

"Were you here when the ten o'clock train from Waterloo arrived?"

"Yes, I was 'ere, mister," he admitted.

"Now, tell me, Did you notice, by any chance, an elderly lady, dressed in black—a rather stern face, she's got—accompanied by a very pretty girl of eighteen? Both were carrying small handbags."

"Ay! I know the parties you mean. I saw 'em!"

Maitland felt a glow of excitement thrill his veins.

"Did they change into another train, or go out of the station?"

"I suppose you lost sight of them then?"

"For the moment I did; but about five minutes later, as I was a-going to the office to give up me tickets, I saw 'em outside the station 'ere. They were just goin' to take the cab, I should say."

"Good!" said Maitland. "Thanks very much!"

He quitted the station hurriedly. Now he was sure on point number one—that his quarry had not left the neighbourhood of Asher. Outside the station stood a single one-horse cab of dilapidated appearance. It was difficult to decide which was the more decrepit—the cab or the horse. Near by, leaning up against the wall, with a straw in his mouth, was a tough-looking, brown-faced, old man. On seeing Maitland, the old man slowly straightened himself.

"Cab, zur?" he asked, in funeral tones.

Without replying, Maitland produced another half-crown, and fingered it casually.

"Are you the only cab that plies here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. And a very good cab it be, sir. Comfortable as a kerriage. And safe."

"My yes; I should imagine it's quite safe," replied Maitland, regarding the ancient nag between the shafts.

"Where would you want to be going, sir?"

Maitland was visited by an inspiration.

"I want you to drive me, cabby, to the same place that you drove those two ladies who came down by the eleven-thirty train from London."

"What—Digby Lodge, sir?"

"That's place," said Maitland easily.

"But I don't want to go right to the house itself. Put me down a hundred yards this side of it."

"All right, sir, I understand."

Maitland climbed into the rickety, old cab. A minute later, he was being conveyed, at a leisurely pace, towards the object of his search.

The cab drove through the quaint streets of the little town of Asher, eventually emerging into a quiet, well-kept road. On either side, each in its own grounds, and situated well back from the road itself, were a number of attractive houses, of comfortable size, suddenly, the cab pulled up with a jerk.

Maitland alighted.

"Here you are, sir!" said the cabbie.

"Digby Lodge be the third 'un on the left."

Maitland thanked him and paid the man who after persuading his steed to perform a number of complicated evolutions, succeeded in turning the cab about, and drove off.

Digby Lodge proved to be a type similar to its neighbours. As he strolled by, in a leisurely manner, Maitland scrutinised it closely. Certainly, its outward appearance gave no signs of crime and villainy.

He walked past the house a dozen yards then turned, and slowly retraced his steps. This occurred several times. When he was passing the house, for, perhaps, the tenth time, he realised, with a start that he was being watched.

Next door to Digby Lodge was a villa called The Cherries, and it was at the gate of this latter residence that Maitland discerned a small, white-haired, wizened, old man intently regarding him.

"Won't do to let the old boy get suspicious," thought Maitland to himself. "I can do nothing for the moment, anyway. Besides, I'm getting deucedly hungry."

With that, he sauntered calmly along the road, back towards the town, where half an hour later he was engaged in satisfying his hunger and thinking out his plan of action.

Yet, had he known it, scarcely was he out of sight, when the wizened, little, old man trotted out of his gate and up the drive to Digby Lodge.

Arrived at the front door, he rapped an agitated knock.

"Is Miss Bloomsbury in?" he asked the maids, in breathless tones.

"Yes, sir!"

"Please tell her I must see her at once on a matter of the greatest importance!"

Maitland sat long over his meal in the little hotel which he had discovered. When his hunger was appeased, he smoked cigarette after cigarette, whilst he deeply cogitated over his next step.

It was nearing seven o'clock when he left the hotel, and already the daylight was beginning to fade. Proceeding slowly, and taking a circuitous route, he wended his way once more towards Digby Lodge.

The road was deserted, and now it was almost dark. Walking boldly up to the gate, Maitland opened it, and quietly slipped along the drive.

Close to the house was a clump of laurel bushes. A moment later he had left the drive and concealed himself in these, in such a position that, though invisible himself, he had a good view of the house.

Inside he could see all lights were turned on, but the drawn blinds prevented him seeing actually into the rooms. Occasionally, he heard voices, and once he thought he caught the sound of her voice.

"Blue Eyes!"

From the church clock, in the town, he presently heard the hour chiming. Eight o'clock! An hour passed slowly, without event, and then another. Maitland began to feel stiff and cramped, and more than once he caught himself nodding, as his eyelids grew heavy with watching. The clock chimed the half-hour after ten.

"Click."

What was that? He glanced upwards, and saw that the lights had suddenly been switched on in one of the bedrooms upstairs. Evidently, the people in the house were preparing to retire for the night.

Then he saw the outline of a figure, silhouetted for a moment, in the act of shutting the window before drawing the blind. It was the girl!

Stooping, he hurriedly grabbed a handful of earth and pebbles, and flung them at the window. In an instant, the window was raised again.

"Who's there?"

"Hush!" replied Maitland, in subdued tones. "They might hear you!"

"Who are you?"

"A friend. I've come to help you! I got your note."

The girl paused doubtfully for a moment. She was now leaning out of the window, peering down into the darkness towards Maitland.

"Where are you?" she asked. "I can't see you."

"I'm in the laurel bushes."

"Ah!"

"Don't speak too loudly. We may be overheard," warned Maitland.

At his words, it seemed that the girl gave a little gasp. Then she said:

"Then—stop where you are for a little while!"

"I will wait an inch!"

The next instant, the girl withdrew and closed the window. Maitland remained motionless, wondering what was going to happen next. He was now trembling violently with excitement and anticipation.

Then a footstep on the drive made his heart jump. He stared into the darkness.

The figure of a man was standing motionless a few yards from him.

Maitland kept quite still, scarcely daring to breathe. Had he been discovered? The man seemed to be looking towards the laurel bushes.

His curiosity was satisfied a moment later.

"Come out of it, you villain!" said the man, suddenly breaking the silence. "And I warn you I have you covered with a revolver. If you try to escape, I shall shoot! Come out!"

Maitland hesitated. Then his ear caught an ugly click, suggestive of a revolver hammer being drawn back to full-cock.

Having no desire to be made a target, he parted the bushes and emerged.

The man with the revolver recoiled a couple of paces, keeping him covered.