

# Peter Ruff and the Double Four

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## I.1. Introducing Mr. Peter Ruff

There was nothing about the supper party on that particular Sunday evening in November at Daisy Villa, Green Street, Streatham, which seemed to indicate in any way that one of the most interesting careers connected with the world history of crime was to owe its very existence to the disaster which befell that little gathering. The villa was the residence and also - to his credit - the unmortgaged property of Mr. David Barnes, a struggling but fairly prosperous coal merchant of excellent character, some means, and Methodist proclivities. His habit of sitting without his coat when carving, although deprecated by his wife and daughter on account of the genteel aspirations of the latter, was a not unusual one in the neighbourhood; and coupled with the proximity of a cold joint of beef, his seat at the head of the table, and a carving knife and fork grasped in his hands, established clearly the fact of his position in the household, which a somewhat weak physiognomy might otherwise have led the casual observer to doubt. Opposite him, at the other end of the table, sat his wife, Mrs. Barnes, a somewhat voluminous lady with a high colour, a black satin frock, and many ornaments. On her left the son of the house, eighteen years old, of moderate stature, somewhat pimply, with the fashion of the moment reflected in his pink tie with white spots, drawn through a gold ring, and curving outwards to seek obscurity underneath a dazzling waistcoat. A white tube-rose in his buttonhole might have been intended as a sort of compliment to the occasion, or an indication of his intention to take a walk after supper in the fashionable purlieu of the neighbourhood. Facing him sat his sister - a fluffy-haired, blue-eyed young lady, pretty in her way, but chiefly noticeable for a peculiar sort of self-consciousness blended with self-satisfaction, and possessed only at a certain period in their lives by young ladies of her age. It was almost the air of the cat in whose interior reposes the missing canary, except that in this instance the canary obviously existed in the person of the young man who sat at her side, introduced formally to the household for the first time. That young man's name was - at the moment - Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald.

It seems idle to attempt any description of a person who, in the past, had secured a certain amount of fame under a varying personality; and who, in the future, was to become more than ever notorious under a far less aristocratic pseudonym than that by which he was at present known to the inhabitants of Daisy Villa. There are photographs of him in New York and Paris, St. Petersburg and Chicago, Vienna and Cape Town, but there are no two pictures which present to the casual observer the slightest likeness to one another. To allude to him by the name under which he had won some part, at least, of the affections of Miss Maud Barnes, Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, as he sat there, a suitor on probation for her hand, was a young man of modest and genteel appearance. He wore a blue serge suit - a little underdressed for the occasion, perhaps; but his tie and collar were neat; his gold-rimmed spectacles - if a little disapproved of by Maud on account of the air of steadiness which they imparted - suggested excellent son-in-lawlike qualities to Mr. and Mrs. Barnes. He had the promise of a fair moustache, but his complexion generally was colourless. His features, except for a certain regularity, were undistinguished. His speech was modest and correct. His manner varied with his company. To-night it had been pronounced, by excellent judges - genteel.

The conversation consisted - naturally enough, under the circumstances - of a course of subtle and judicious pumping, tactfully prompted, for the most part, by Mrs. Barnes. Such, for instance, as the following:

"Talking about Marie Corelli's new book reminds me, Mr. Fitzgerald - your occupation is connected with books, is it not?" his prospective mother-in-law enquired, artlessly.

Mr. Fitzgerald bowed assent.

"I am cashier at Howell & Wilson's in Cheapside," he said. "We sell a great many books there - as many, I should think, as any retail establishment in London."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Barnes purred. "Very interesting work, I am sure. So nice and intellectual, too; for, of course, you must be looking inside them sometimes."

"I know the place well," Mr. Adolphus Barnes, Junior, announced condescendingly, - "pass it every day on my way to lunch."

"So much nicer," Mrs. Barnes continued, "than any of the ordinary businesses - grocery or drapery, or anything of that sort."

Miss Maud elevated her eyebrows slightly. Was it likely that she would have looked with eyes of favour upon a young man engaged in any of these inferior occupations?

"There's money in books, too," Mr. Barnes declared with sudden inspiration. His prospective son-in-law turned towards him deferentially.

"You are right, sir," he admitted. "There is money in them. There's money for those who write, and there's money for those who sell. My occupation," he continued, with a modest little cough, "brings me often into touch with publishers, travellers and clerks, so I am, as it were, behind the scenes to some extent. I can assure you," he continued, looking from Mr. Barnes to his wife, and finally transfixing Mr. Adolphus - "I can assure you that the money paid by some firms of publishers to a few well-known authors - I will mention no names - as advances against royalties, is something stupendous!"

"Ah!" Mr. Barnes murmured, solemnly shaking his head.

"Marie Corelli, I expect, and that Hall Caine," remarked young Adolphus.

"Seems easy enough to write a book, too," Mrs. Barnes said. "Why, I declare that some of those we get from the library - we subscribe to a library, Mr. Fitzgerald - are just as simple and straightforward that a child might have written them. No plot whatsoever, no murders or mysteries or anything of that sort - just stories

about people like ourselves. I don't see how they can pay people for writing stories about people just like those one meets every day!"

"I always say," Maud intervened, "that Spencer means to write a book some day. He has quite the literary air, hasn't he, mother?"

"Indeed he has!" Mrs. Barnes declared, with an appreciative glance at the gold-rimmed spectacles.

Mr. Fitzgerald modestly disclaimed any literary aspirations.

"The thing is a gift, after all," he declared, generously. "I can keep accounts, and earn a fair salary at it, but if I attempted fiction I should soon be up a tree."

Mr. Barnes nodded his approval of such sentiments.

"Every one to his trade, I say," he remarked. "What sort of salaries do they pay now in the book trade?" he asked guilelessly.

"Very fair," Mr. Fitzgerald admitted candidly, - "very fair indeed."

"When I was your age," Mr. Barnes said reflectively, "I was getting - let me see - forty-two shillings a week. Pretty good pay, too, for those days."

Mr. Fitzgerald admitted the fact.

"Of course," he said apologetically, "salaries are a little higher now all round. Mr. Howell has been very kind to me, - in fact I have had two raises this year. I am getting four pounds ten now."

"Four pounds ten per week?" Mrs. Barnes exclaimed, laying down her knife and fork.

"Certainly," Mr. Fitzgerald answered. "After Christmas, I have some reason to believe that it may be five pounds."

Mr. Barnes whistled softly, and looked at the young man with a new respect.

"I told you that - Mr. - that Spencer was doing pretty well, Mother," Maud simpered, looking down at her plate.

"Any one to support?" her father asked, transferring a pickle from the fork to his mouth.

"No one," Mr. Fitzgerald answered. "In fact, I may say that I have some small expectations. I haven't done badly, either, out of the few investments I have made from time to time."

"Saved a bit of money, eh?" Mr. Barnes enquired genially.

"I have a matter of four hundred pounds put by," Mr. Fitzgerald admitted modestly, "besides a few sticks of furniture. I never cared much about lodging-house things, so I furnished a couple of rooms myself some time ago."

Mrs. Barnes rose slowly to her feet.

"You are quite sure you won't have a small piece more of beef?" she enquired anxiously.

"Just a morsel?" Mr. Barnes asked, tapping the joint insinuatingly with his carving knife.

"No, I thank you!" Mr. Fitzgerald declared firmly. "I have done excellently."

"Then if you will put the joint on the sideboard, Adolphus," Mrs. Barnes directed, "Maud and I will change the plates. We always let the girl go out on Sundays, Mr. Fitzgerald," she explained, turning to their guest. "It's very awkward, of course, but they seem to expect it."

"Quite natural, I'm sure," Mr. Fitzgerald murmured, watching Maud's light movements with admiring eyes. "I like to see ladies interested in domestic work."

"There's one thing I will say for Maud," her proud mother declared, plumping down a dish of jelly upon the table, "she does know what's what in keeping house, and even if she hasn't to scrape and save as I did when David and I were first married, economy is a great thing when you're young. I have always said so, and I stick to it."

"Quite right, Mother," Mr. Barnes declared.

"If instead of sitting there," Mrs. Barnes continued in high good humour, "you were to get a bottle of that port wine out of the cellarette, we might drink Mr. Fitzgerald's health, being as it's his first visit."

Mr. Barnes rose to his feet with alacrity. "For a woman with sound ideas," he declared, "commend me to your mother!"

Maud, having finished her duties, resumed her place by the side of the guest of the evening. Their hands met under the tablecloth for a moment. To the girl, the pleasure of such a proceeding was natural enough, but Fitzgerald asked himself for the fiftieth time why on earth he, who, notwithstanding his present modest exterior, was a young man of some experience, should from such primitive love-making derive a rapture which nothing else in life afforded him. He was, at that moment, content with his future, - a future which he had absolutely and finally decided upon. He was content with his father-in-law and his mother-in-law, with Daisy Villa, and the prospect of a Daisy Villa for himself, - content, even, with Adolphus! But for Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, these things were not to be! The awakening was even then at hand.

The dining room of Daisy Villa fronted the street, and was removed from it only a few feet. Consequently, the footsteps of passers-by upon the flagged pavement were clearly distinguishable. It was just at the moment when Mrs. Barnes was inserting a few fresh almonds into a somewhat precarious tipsy cake, and Mr. Barnes was engaged with the decanting of the port, that two pairs of footsteps,



considerably heavier than those of the ordinary promenader, paused outside and finally stopped. The gate creaked. Mr. Barnes looked up.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "What's that? Visitors?"

They all listened. The front-door bell rang. Adolphus, in response to a gesture from his mother, rose sulkily to his feet.

"Job I hate!" he muttered as he left the room.

The rest of the family, full of the small curiosity of people of their class, were intent upon listening for voices outside. The demeanour of Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, therefore, escaped their notice. It is doubtful, in any case, whether their perceptions would have been sufficiently keen to have enabled them to trace the workings of emotion in the countenance of a person so magnificently endowed by Providence with the art of subterfuge. Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald seemed simply to have stiffened in acute and earnest attention. It was only for a moment that he hesitated. His unfailing inspiration told him the truth!

His course of action was simple, - he rose to his feet and strolled to the window.

"Some people who have lost their way in the fog, perhaps," he remarked. "What a night!"

He laid his hand upon the sash - simultaneously there was a rush of cold air into the room, a half-angry, half-frightened exclamation from Adolphus in the passage, a scream from Miss Maud - and no Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald! No one had time to be more than blankly astonished. The door was opened, and a police inspector, in very nice dark braided uniform and a peaked cap, stood in the doorway.

Mr. Barnes dropped the port, and Mrs. Barnes, emulating her daughter's example, screamed. The inspector, as though conscious of the draught, moved rapidly toward the window.

"You had a visitor here, Mr. Barnes," he said quickly - "a Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald. Where is he?"

There was no one who could answer! Mr. Barnes was speechless between the shock of the spilt port and the appearance of a couple of uniformed policemen in his dining room. John Dory, the detective, he knew well enough in his private capacity, but in his uniform, and attended by policemen, he presented a new and startling appearance! Mrs. Barnes was in hysterics, and Maud was gazing like a creature turned to stone at the open window, through which little puffs of fog were already drifting into the room. Adolphus, with an air of bewilderment, was standing with his mouth and eyes wider open than they had ever been in his life. And as for the honoured guest of these admirable inhabitants of Daisy Villa, there was not the slightest doubt but that Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald had disappeared through the window!

Fitzgerald's expedition was nearly at an end. Soon he paused, crossed the road to a block of flats, ascended to the eighth floor by an automatic lift, and rang the bell at a door which bore simply the number II. A trim parlourmaid opened it after a few minutes' delay.

"Is Miss Emerson at home?" he asked.

"Miss Emerson is in," the maid admitted, with some hesitation, "but I am not sure that she will see any one to-night."

"I have a message for her," Fitzgerald said.

"Will you give me your name, sir, please?" the maid asked.

An inner door was suddenly opened. A slim girl, looking taller than she really was by reason of the rug upon which she stood, looked out into the hall - a girl with masses of brown hair loosely coiled on her head, with pale face and strange eyes. She opened her lips as though to call to her visitor by name, and as

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