

# The Devil's Paw

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## Chapter 1

The two men, sole occupants of the somewhat shabby cottage parlour, lingered over their port, not so much with the air of wine lovers, but rather as human beings and intimates, perfectly content with their surroundings and company. Outside, the wind was howling over the marshes, and occasional bursts of rain came streaming against the window panes. Inside at any rate was comfort, triumphing over varying conditions. The cloth upon the plain deal table was of fine linen, the decanter and glasses were beautifully cut; there were walnuts and, in a far Corner, cigars of a well-known brand and cigarettes from a famous tobacconist. Beyond that little oasis, however, were all the evidences of a hired abode. A hole in the closely drawn curtains was fastened together by a safety pin. The horsehair easy-chairs bore disfiguring antimacassars, the photographs which adorned the walls were grotesque but typical of village ideals, the carpet was threadbare, the closed door secured by a latch instead of the usual knob. One side of the room was littered with golf clubs, a huge game bag and several boxes of cartridges. Two shotguns lay upon the remains of a sofa. It scarcely needed the costume of Miles Furley, the host, to demonstrate the fact that this was the temporary abode of a visitor to the Blakeney marshes in search of sport.

Furley, broad-shouldered, florid, with tanned skin and grizzled hair, was still wearing the high sea boots and jersey of the duck shooter. His companion, on the other hand, a tall, slim man, with high forehead, clear eyes, stubborn jaw, and straight yet sensitive mouth, wore the ordinary dinner clothes of civilisation. The contrast between the two men might indeed have afforded some ground for speculation as to the nature of their intimacy. Furley, a son of the people, had the air of cultivating, even clinging to a certain plebeian strain, never so apparent as when he spoke, or in his gestures. He was a Member of Parliament for a Labour constituency, a shrewd and valuable exponent of the gospel of the working man. What he lacked in the higher qualities of oratory he made up in sturdy common sense. The will-o'-the-wisp Socialism of the moment, with its many attendant "isms" and theories, received scant favour at his hands. He represented the solid element in British Labour politics, and it was well known that he had refused a seat in the Cabinet in order to preserve an absolute independence. He had a remarkable gift of taciturnity, which in a man of his class made for strength, and it was concerning him that the Prime Minister had made his famous epigram, that Furley was the Labour man whom he feared the most and dreaded the least.

Julian Orden, with an exterior more promising in many respects than that of his friend, could boast of no similar distinctions. He was the youngest son of a particularly fatuous peer resident in the neighbourhood, had started life as a barrister, in which profession he had attained a moderate success, had enjoyed a brief but not inglorious spell of soldiering, from which he had retired slightly lamed for life, and had filled up the intervening period in the harmless occupation of censoring. His friendship with Furley appeared on the surface too singular to be anything else but accidental. Probably no one save the two men themselves understood it, and they both possessed the gift of silence.

"What's all this peace talk mean?" Julian Orden asked, fingering the stem of his wineglass.

"Who knows?" Furley grunted. "The newspapers must have their daily sensation."

"I have a theory that it is being engineered."

"Bolo business, eh?"

Julian Orden moved in his place a little uneasily. His long, nervous fingers played with the stick which stood always by the side of his chair.

"You don't believe in it, do you?" he asked quietly.

Furley looked straight ahead of him. His eyes seemed caught by the glitter of the lamplight upon the cut-glass decanter.

"You know my opinion of war, Julian," he said. "It's a filthy, intolerable heritage from generations of autocratic government. No democracy ever wanted war. Every democracy needs and desires peace."

"One moment," Julian interrupted. "You must remember that a democracy seldom possesses the imperialistic spirit, and a great empire can scarcely survive without it."

"Arrant nonsense!" was the vigorous reply. "A great empire, from hemisphere to hemisphere, can be kept together a good deal better by democratic control. Force is always the *arriere pensee* of the individual and the autocrat."

"These are generalities," Julian declared. "I want to know your opinion about a peace at the present moment."

"Not having any, thanks. You're a dilettante journalist by your own confession, Julian, and I am not going to be drawn."

"There is something in it, then?"

"Maybe," was the careless admission. "You're a visitor worth having, Julian. '70 port and homegrown walnuts! A nice little addition to my simple fare! Must you go back to-morrow?"

Julian nodded.

"We've another batch of visitors coming, - Stenson amongst them, by the bye."

Furley nodded. His eyes narrowed, and little lines appeared at their corners.

"I can't imagine," he confessed. "What brings Stenson down to Maltenby. I should have thought that your governor and he could scarcely spend ten minutes together without quarrelling!"

"They never do spend ten minutes together alone," Julian replied drily. "I see to that. Then my mother, you know, has the knack of getting interesting people together. The Bishop is coming, amongst others. And, Furley, I wanted to ask you - do you know anything of a young woman - she is half Russian, I believe - who calls herself Miss Catherine Abbeway?"

"Yes, I know her," was the brief rejoinder.

"She lived in Russia for some years, it seems," Julian continued. "Her mother was Russian - a great writer on social subjects."

Furley nodded.

"Miss Abbeway is rather that way herself," he remarked. "I've heard her lecture in the East End. She has got hold of the woman's side of the Labour question as well as any one I ever came across."

"She is a most remarkably attractive young person," Julian declared pensively.

"Yes, she's good-looking. A countess in her own right, they tell me, but she keeps her title secret for fear of losing influence with the working classes. She did a lot of good down Poplar way. Shouldn't have thought she'd have been your sort, Julian."

"Why?"

"Too serious."

Julian smiled - rather a peculiar, introspective smile.

"I, too, can, be serious sometimes," he said.

His friend thrust his hands into his trousers pocket and, leaning back in his chair, looked steadfastly at his guest.

"I believe you can, Julian," he admitted. "Sometimes I am not quite sure that I understand you. That's the worst of a man with the gift for silence."

"You're not a great talker yourself," the younger man reminded his host.

"When you get me going on my own subject," Furley remarked, "I find it hard to stop, and you are a wonderful listener. Have you got any views of your own? I never hear them."

Julian drew the box of cigarettes towards him.

"Oh, yes, I've views of my own," he confessed. "Some day, perhaps, you shall know what they are."

"A man of mystery!" his friend jeered good-naturedly.

Julian lit his cigarette and watched the smoke curl upward.

"Let's talk about the duck," he suggested.

The two men sat in silence for some minutes. Outside, the storm seemed to have increased in violence. Furley rose, threw a log on to the fire and resumed his place.

"Geese flew high," he remarked.

"Too high for me," Julian confessed.

"You got one more than I did."

"Sheer luck. The outside bird dipped down to me."

Furley filled his guest's glass and then his own.

"What on earth have you kept your shooting kit on for?" the latter asked, with lazy curiosity.

Furley glanced down at his incongruous attire and seemed for a moment ill at ease.

"I've got to go out presently," he announced.

Julian raised his eyebrows.

"Got to go out?" he repeated. "On a night like this? Why, my dear fellow - "

He paused abruptly. He was a man of quick perceptions, and he realised his host's embarrassment. Nevertheless, there was an awkward pause in the conversation. Furley rose to his feet and frowned. He fetched a jar of tobacco from a shelf and filled his pouch deliberately:

"Sorry to seem mysterious, old chap," he said. "I've just a bit of a job to do. It doesn't amount to anything, but - well, it's the sort of affair we don't talk about much."

"Well, you're welcome to all the amusement you'll get out of it, a night like this"

Furley laid down his pipe, ready-filled, and drank off his port.

"There isn't much amusement left in the world, is there, just now?" he remarked gravely.

"Very little indeed. It's three years since I handled a shotgun before to-night."

"You've really chucked the censoring?"

"Last week. I've had a solid year at it."

"Fed up?"

"Not exactly that. My own work accumulated so."

"Briefs coming along, eh?"

"I'm a sort of hack journalist as well, as you reminded me just now," Julian explained a little evasively.

"I wonder you stuck at the censoring so long. Isn't it terribly tedious?"

"Sometimes. Now and then we come across interesting things, though. For instance, I discovered a most original cipher the other day."

"Did it lead to anything?" Furley asked curiously.

"Not at present. I discovered it, studying a telegram from Norway. It was addressed to a perfectly respectable firm of English timber merchants who have an office in the city. This was the original: `Fir planks too narrow by half.' Sounds harmless enough, doesn't it?"

"Absolutely. What's the hidden meaning?"

"There I am still at a loss," Julian confessed, "but treated with the cipher it comes out as `Thirty-eight steeple on barn.'"

Furley stared for a moment, then he lit his pipe.

"Well, of the two," he declared, "I should prefer the first rendering for intelligibility."

"So would most people," Julian assented, smiling, "yet I am sure there is something in it - some meaning, of course, that needs a context to grasp it."

"Have you interviewed the firm of timber merchants?"

"Not personally. That doesn't come into my department. The name of the man who manages the London office, though, is Fenn - Nicholas Fenn."

Furley withdrew the pipe from his mouth. His eyebrows had come together in a slight frown.

"Nicholas Fenn, the Labour M.P.?"

"That's the fellow. You know him, of course?"

"Yes, I know him," Furley replied thoughtfully. "He is secretary of the Timber Trades Union and got in for one of the divisions of Hull last year."

"I understand that there is nothing whatever against him personally," Julian continued, "although as a politician he is of course beneath contempt. He started life as a village schoolmaster and has worked his way up most creditably. He professed to understand the cable as it appeared in its original form. All the same, it's very odd that, treated by a cipher which I got on the track of a few days previously, this same message should work out as I told you."

"Of course," Furley observed, "ciphers can lead you - "

He stopped short. Julian, who had been leaning over towards the cigarette bog, glanced around at his friend. There was a frown on Furley's forehead. He withdrew his pipe from between his teeth.

"What did you say you made of it?" he demanded.

"Thirty-eight steeple on barn."

"Thirty-eight! That's queer!"

"Why is it queer?"

There was a moment's silence. Furley glanced at the little clock upon the mantelpiece. It was five and twenty minutes past nine.

"I don't know whether you have ever heard, Julian," he said, "that our enemies on the other side of the North Sea are supposed to have divided the whole of the eastern coast of Great Britain into small, rectangular districts, each about a couple of miles square. One of our secret service chaps got hold of a map some time ago."

"No, I never heard this," Julian acknowledged. "Well?"

"It's only a coincidence, of course," Furley went on, "but number thirty-eight happens to be the two-mile block of seacoast of which this cottage is just about the centre. It stretches to Cley on one side and Salthouse on the other, and inland as far as Dutchman's Common. I am not suggesting that there is any real connection between your cable and



this fact, but that you should mention it at this particular moment - well, as I said, it's a coincidence."

"Why?"

Furley had risen to his feet. He threw open the door and listened for a moment in the passage. When he came back he was carrying some oilskins.

"Julian," he said, "I know you are a bit of a cynic about espionage and that sort of thing. Of course, there has been a terrible lot of exaggeration, and heaps of fellows go gassing about secret service jobs, all the way up the coast from here to Scotland, who haven't the least idea what the thing means. But there is a little bit of it done, and in my humble way they find me an occasional job or two down here. I won't say that anything ever comes of our efforts - we're rather like the special constables of the secret service - but just occasionally we come across something suspicious."

"So that's why you're going out again to-night, is it?"

Furley nodded.

"This is my last night. I am off up to town on Monday and 'shan't be able to get down again this season."

"Had any adventures?"

"Not the ghost of one. I don't mind admitting that I've had a good many wettings and a few scares on that stretch of marshland, but I've never seen or heard anything yet to send in a report about. It just happens, though, that to-night there's a special vigilance whip out."

"What does that mean?" Julian enquired curiously.

"Something supposed to be up," was the dubious reply. "We've a very imaginative chief, I might tell you."

"But what sort of thing could happen?" Julian persisted. "What are you out to prevent, anyway?"

Furley relit his pipe, thrust a flask into his pocket, and picked up a thick stick from a corner of the room.

"Can't tell," he replied laconically. "There's an idea, of course, that communications are carried on with the enemy from somewhere down this coast. Sorry to leave you, old fellow," he added. "Don't sit up. I never fasten the door here. Remember to look after your fire upstairs, and the whisky is on the sideboard here."

"I shall be all right, thanks," Julian assured his host. "No use my offering to come with you, I suppose?"

"Not allowed," was the brief response.

"Thank heavens!" Julian exclaimed piously, as a storm of rain blew in through the half-open door. "Good night and good luck, old chap!"

Furley's reply was drowned in the roar of wind. Julian secured the door, underneath which a little stream of rain was creeping in. Then he returned to the sitting room, threw a log upon the fire, and drew one of the ancient easy-chairs close up to the blaze.

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