

**THE 'PHONE BOOTH
MYSTERY**

BY

JOHN IRONSIDE

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CHAPTER I

LADY RAWSON

“I’m extremely sorry, Carling. It’s too bad to keep you to-night, but——”

“That’s all right, sir. Lucky they came in to-night and not to-morrow. I shall soon be through with them.”

“It’s most awfully good of you,” rejoined Sir Robert Rawson heartily. “I would deal with them myself, but we are dining with Lord Warrington, as you know.”

“Yes, sir; but it’s of no consequence really. I can spare the time perfectly well.”

Already Carling’s sleek head was bent over the special dispatches which had just been delivered at the private residence of Sir Robert Rawson. There were two sets, written in different languages, but both referring to one subject—secret intelligence concerning the strained relations between two foreign countries: a matter that at present was suspected rather than known, but that might at any moment develop on serious lines, and even occasion a war involving Great Powers.

These particular papers were probably of immense importance. That remained to be seen; and Carling’s duty was to translate and prepare a précis of them for his chief.

They certainly had arrived at rather an awkward moment for the young secretary—on the eve of his six weeks’ holiday, which

would include a honeymoon, for he was to be married on the morrow.

“I don’t know what on earth I shall do without you, Roger,” Sir Robert remarked, casting a glance of mingled affection and compunction at the young man, whom he had learnt to regard as his right hand, and to whom he was sincerely attached, wishing with all his heart that he had a son like him; but he had married late in life and he and his wife were childless.

She entered the room at this moment, and he advanced to meet her with courtly apology.

“Have I kept you waiting, Paula? Forgive me.”

“It is no matter, we are in good time,” she answered in a voice so rich and soft that the words sounded like a caress, accompanied as they were by a smiling glance at her husband. “Why, is that poor Mr. Carling still at work? It is too bad of you, Robert, to detain him on this night of all others.”

She spoke as though she had but just caught sight of the industrious secretary, yet as she entered the room she had seen him at once, and noted his occupation.

She crossed to his side now in a graceful, leisurely manner that, to her husband’s admiring eyes, seemed perfectly natural. He did not perceive the keen glance she directed, not at the secretary, but at the papers over which he was poring.

“It is too bad!” she repeated in her caressing voice. “You should—what is the word?—ah, yes, you should *strike*, Mr. Carling.”

Roger looked up and stumbled to his feet, thereby interposing himself as a screen between her and his writing-table.

“Not at all, though it’s awfully kind of you to say so, Lady Rawson,” he murmured confusedly. “As I told Sir Robert, I had nothing particular to do this evening; Grace doesn’t expect me, and I’d rather finish up everything to the last moment.”

“Is the work important?” She directed the question to her husband.

“Yes, and we really must not hinder him. Good night, my boy. We shall see you to-morrow. You’ll put those papers in the safe as usual, of course. I’ll attend to them in the morning—or to-night, perhaps.”

“Yes, sir. Good night. Good-bye, Lady Rawson.”

“Not good-bye; you forget that I also will come to the marriage,” she said graciously, giving him her hand.

“We shall be honoured,” he murmured, as he bowed over the small gloved hand, with outward deference and inward aversion.

He disliked and distrusted his chief’s lovely young wife—why he did not know, for her manner towards him had always been charming. It was a purely instinctive feeling which, naturally, he had carefully concealed, and of which he was not a little ashamed; but there it was.

She was of foreign birth, but of what nationality no one seemed to know; a strikingly handsome young woman, whose marriage to the elderly financier had created a considerable sensation, for Sir Robert had long been considered a confirmed bachelor. Malicious tongues had predicted a speedy and scandalous dissolution of this

union of May and December, but those predictions were as yet unfulfilled, for Lady Rawson's conduct was irreproachable. She appeared as absolutely devoted to her husband as he was to her, and even the most inveterate and malignant gossip found no opportunity of assailing her fair fame. Yet, although immensely admired she was not popular. There was something of the sphinx about her—a serene but impenetrable mystery. Roger Carling was by no means the only person who felt that strong aversion from her.

He watched her now as, by her husband's side, she recrossed the large room, moving with the languid, sinuous grace peculiar to her. She looked royally beautiful to-night, in a diaphanous robe of vivid green and gold tissue, an emerald tiara poised proudly on her splendid, simply dressed black hair, a magnificent emerald collar scintillating on her white neck.

She turned at the door and flashed a farewell smile at the young man, to which, as to Sir Robert's genial nod, he responded with a bow.

“What is there about her that always makes me think of a snake?” he asked himself as, with a sigh of genuine relief, he reseated himself at the writing-table. “And Grace feels just the same, though she has always been jolly nice to her. I wish she wasn't coming to-morrow, but of course it can't be helped. Wonder what took her to that unlikely place yesterday, for I'll swear it was she, though I've never seen her in that get-up before, but I'd know her walk anywhere. However, it's none of my business where she goes or what she does.”

He addressed himself to his task again—an absorbing one, for the papers contained startling and most valuable information, which

should be communicated to the Government with as little delay as possible. That was Sir Robert's duty, of course.

He finished at last, folded and arranged the papers in order, with his translation and notes on top, tied them with red tape, stuffed them into a blue, canvas-lined official envelope printed with Sir Robert's address, sealed the package—quite a bulky one—and bestowed it in a small safe in the wall, cunningly concealed behind one of the oak panels. Only he and his chief knew the secret of the panel or possessed keys of the safe.

“Thank goodness, that's done,” he ejaculated, as he closed the panel, which slid noiselessly into place. “Ten o'clock, by Jove! Those fellows will think I'm never coming.”

He was to spend the last night of his bachelor existence at Austin Starr's chambers in Westminster, where a convivial supper-party awaited him. He had already telephoned that he would not arrive till late.

In the hall he encountered Thomson, Sir Robert's confidential man—a short, spare, reticent individual, who had grown grey in his master's service.

“Won't you have some coffee, sir, or a whisky-and-soda,” he asked, as he helped Roger into his coat.

“No, thanks. Good night, Thomson, and good-bye. I shan't be back for some weeks, you know.”

“Good-bye, sir, and the best of good luck to you and the young lady.”

The last words were an astonishing concession, for Thomson seldom uttered an unnecessary syllable—not even to his master. Roger was surprised and touched.

“Good old Thomson!” he thought, as he hailed a passing taxi. “I suppose he actually approves of me after all, though I should never have guessed it! What a queer old stick he is.”

He was greeted uproariously by the small assemblage that awaited him at Austin Starr’s snug flat in Great Smith Street: Starr himself, a smart young American journalist, whom he had met when he was on service during the war, and with whom he had formed a friendship that seemed likely to prove permanent; George Winston, a Foreign Office clerk, who was to be his “best man” to-morrow; and some half-dozen others.

Already he had dismissed from his mind everything connected with the task that had detained him, and never gave it another thought. But it was abruptly recalled to him the next morning when he was awakened by his host.

“Real sorry to disturb you, Roger. Late? No, it’s quite bright and early, but they’ve rung you up from Grosvenor Gardens—Sir Robert himself.”

“Sir Robert! What on earth can he want at this hour!” he exclaimed, springing out of bed and hurrying to the telephone.

“Is that you, sir?... Those papers? They’re in the safe.... *Not there!* But they must be. Sealed up in one of the blue envelopes. They can’t have been stolen—it’s impossible.... Yes, of course, sir, I’ll come up at once.”

CHAPTER II

“MURDER MOST FOUL!”

“I want to telephone.”

“Yes, madam. What number?”

“I—— Can’t I ring up for myself?”

The momentary hesitation in speech caused the busy little postmistress to glance up at her customer—a lady of medium height and slender figure, well but quietly dressed. She wore a motor hat with a dark-blue veil which fell loosely over her face, shrouding her features; but Mrs. Cave judged her to be handsome, and guessed her elderly, for she saw the gleam of white hair. A nervous old lady, probably unused to telephoning.

“No, madam. If you will just give me the number I will tell you when you are connected. The booth is at the end of the shop.”

The lady glanced in the direction indicated and again hesitated, standing at the railed-in post office counter and resting a fairly large morocco bag on it—a dressing or jewel bag—though she retained her grip of the handle with both hands. The right hand was ungloved and several valuable rings sparkled on the delicate white fingers.

“Oh, very well! No. 5339 Granton. How much?” she said at last, speaking in a low voice, with a slight but perceptible foreign accent. Removing her bejewelled hand from the bag, she fumbled in a *châtelaine* purse and produced a shilling.

Mrs. Cave entered and applied for the call before she took the coin and dealt out the change.

The bell tinkled, and at the same instant two other customers came into the shop.

“Your number, madam,” said Mrs. Cave, indicating the ’phone booth. “Your change.”

But the lady was already on her way to the box, and, setting the change aside on the counter, the postmistress turned to serve the new-comers—a woman who wanted to draw ten shillings from the savings bank, a man and a child demanding stamps. As she attended to them briskly in turn, two more people entered and went to the stationery counter opposite.

Mrs. Cave glanced at them apologetically; fortunately she knew them both, but it really was trying that a rush should come just at this moment when she was single-handed. Her husband was out, her niece at dinner upstairs.

“That’s your parcel, Mr. Laidlaw,” she called from behind her grating. “There, on the right. Jessie will be down to serve you in half a minute, Miss Ellis.”

As she spoke she rang the bell to summon her niece, and also, as the telephone sounded the end of the call, she mechanically rang off. Other customers came in, and for a few minutes she and Jessie were as busy as they could be, and only when the shop was clear again did she notice the change set aside for the telephone customer.

“There, that lady never asked for her change after all, and I didn’t see her go out either. I dare say she’ll be back for it directly. Did

you finish your dinner, Jessie? No? Then you'd better run up and have it while there's time."

Jessie Jackson, a nice-looking, fresh-complexioned girl, very like her capable little aunt, came from behind the news counter, and passed along to the door at the back leading to the house, close by and at right angles to that of the telephone booth; a dark corner on this dull, foggy November day.

"There's something wet here!" she exclaimed. "Somebody must have been spilling some water."

She reached for an electric switch and turned on the light.

An instant later Mrs. Cave heard a shriek that brought her rushing out of the post office, to find the girl leaning back against the doorpost, her face blanched, her dilated eyes staring at the horrible pool in which she was standing—a pool of blood, forming from a stream that trickled over the sill of the telephone booth, the door of which was partly open.

"My God! What's happened?" cried Mrs. Cave. "Here, pull yourself together, girl, and get out of the way."

Clutching Jessie's arm she hauled her aside and pulled open the door. Something lurched forward—a heap surmounted by a blue veil.

"It's her, the lady herself; she—she must have broken a blood vessel—or something," she gasped, bending down and trying to lift the huddled figure, for she was a clever and resourceful little woman, and as yet no suspicion of the ghastly truth had flashed to her mind. "Run, Jessie—run and call someone—anyone."

But Jessie had collapsed on a chair by the counter, sobbing and shaking, half-fainting, and it was her aunt whose screams summoned the neighbours and passers-by. The greengrocer from the opposite corner shop was first on the scene, wiping his mouth as he ran, for he too had been disturbed at dinner. In less than a minute the shop was filled to overflowing, and a crowd had gathered outside, through which a belated policeman shouldered his way.

“‘Ere, make way there! Stand back, will you? What’s up ’ere?” he began with pompous authority. “Good Lord! Why, it’s murder!”

“It can’t be—how can it?” sobbed poor Mrs. Cave, whose nerve had given way at last. “Why, there wasn’t a soul anywhere near her!”

“Do you know who she is?” demanded the officer, bending over the corpse, but not touching it. The woman was dead, not a doubt of that. It was best to leave her as she was till the doctor arrived.

A ghastly object she looked lying huddled there, her head still shrouded in the blue motor veil, now horribly drenched and bedabbled. It had been flung back from her face—probably she had raised it herself when she entered the booth a few short minutes before—and her naturally handsome features were distorted to an expression of fear and horror, the dark eyes half open, the lips drawn back showing the white, even teeth. There was no doubt as to the cause of death, for under her left ear was plainly visible the still-welling wound—a clean stab less than half an inch broad that had completely severed the jugular vein.

“I never saw her before,” cried Mrs. Cave, wringing her hands helplessly. “She just came in to telephone, and when she went into

the booth several people came in and we were busy for a few minutes, and I never thought a word about her till we found her— Jessie and I—like that! She *must* have done it herself—and in our shop, too! Oh, whatever shall we do!”

At the moment the obvious thing to be done was to clear the shop and summon the local doctor and the district police inspector, who arrived simultaneously a few minutes later.

The woman had been murdered, not a doubt of that, for it was impossible that such a wound could have been self-inflicted. It was extraordinarily deep, penetrating nearly three inches, and causing practically instantaneous death; while no weapon whatever was discovered nor anything that, at the moment, disclosed the identity of the victim.

One fact was established at once: that she had been partially disguised, for the white hair which Mrs. Cave had noticed proved to be a wig—what hairdressers describe as a “transformation”—adjusted over the natural hair, silky, luxuriant dark tresses closely coiled about the shapely head. Her age was judged by the doctor to be about five-and-twenty, and she was a fine and handsome young woman, presumably wealthy also. Certainly her white, well-shaped, beautifully kept hands had had no acquaintance with work of any kind, and the rings on the slender fingers were extremely valuable, among them a wedding ring. On the floor of the booth was found her gold purse, containing a sum of four pounds odd in notes and silver.

But of the murderer there was no trace whatever, except, indeed, a wet and bloodstained dishcloth lying in the sink of a little scullery place behind the shop. The house was originally a private one, and

the whole of the ground floor had been converted into business premises. The Cave's kitchen and living-room were on the first floor, the stairs going up just inside the door leading into the shop at the back, beside the telephone booth. At the foot of the staircase was a private door opening on to a side street, and beyond it the scullery and a fairly long garden, with a door at the end through which also the side street could be gained. This door had bolts top and bottom, but they were now drawn back, though the door itself was closed.

"Is this door always kept open like this?" asked the inspector of little Mrs. Cave, who, though still piteously agitated, followed him and managed to answer his many questions promptly and intelligibly.

"No, it's never unbolted except when the dustmen come, and I bolted it myself after them yesterday."

The inspector nodded, and jotted a line in his notebook. Stepping out into the street, he glanced up and down. It was a particularly quiet and respectable little street, the upper end flanked by the walls of the gardens belonging to the two corner houses, the lower by small suburban villas, each with its tiny garden in front: a street where usually at this time of day the only passers-by were children returning to school, but where already a big and increasing crowd was assembled at the corner by the Cave's shop and house.

"There's the inspector; you just come along and tell him what you saw, Margie," cried a woman, who thereupon ran towards him, dragging a pretty little girl by the hand. "Please, sir, my Margie saw a man come out of the side door and run away just before the screaming began."

“What’s that? Come, tell me all about it, my dear. Quick, where did he come from? This door?”

“No, sir—that,” said the child promptly, pointing to the house door. “Mother sent me for a lemon, and——”

“What was he like?”

“One of them shovers, sir, that drives the taxis. He was saying swear words, and run ever so fast down the street.” Again she pointed.

“Did you see his cab—a taxicab?”

“No, there wasn’t only me and the man.”

“Should you know him again?”

“Yes, sir, I think so.”

“Good girl! What’s your name? Margery Davies—at number six? That’s right.”

With a kindly nod, leaving Margie and her mother to be surrounded and questioned by the excited crowd that had followed them and listened to the brief colloquy—he entered the garden, just in time to encounter Jessie Jackson, who stumbled against him, and would have fallen if he had not shot out a ready arm to support her.

“Hallo! Who’s this young woman, and what’s the matter with her?” he demanded, lowering her to the ground, gently enough, and scrutinizing her face—a pretty, innocent-looking young face, deadly pale at this moment, for the girl had fainted.

“It’s Jessie, my niece, that found the poor thing, as I told you. It’s upset her—no wonder. Why, Jessie, dear,” cried Mrs. Cave, incoherently, kneeling beside her and frantically chafing her limp hands.

“I must see her presently, when you’ve got her round,” said the inspector, and returned to the house.

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