

THE RED LODGE

A Mystery of Campden Hill

BY
VICTOR BRIDGES

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TO
MARGARET

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CHAPTER ONE

A dark green Rolls-Royce limousine slid round the corner of Sydney Place and, proceeding a few hundred yards along the Fulham Road, drew up in front of St. Christopher's Hospital. It had scarcely stopped before the door opened and its solitary occupant—a tall, well-dressed man of about fifty—stepped out on to the pavement.

"You can wait here, Simmons," he said, addressing the chauffeur. "I shan't be more than a few minutes."

The porter on duty, who was talking to a friend in the hall, touched his cap respectfully as the newcomer hurried past him in the direction of the main staircase.

"See that bloke, Fred?" he whispered, jerking his thumb after the retreating figure. "That's Sir George Onslow, that is. Some pore beggar's for it, you can take my word."

"Well, thank Gawd 'e ain't a-goin' to 'ack me about," returned the other. "Pack o' butchers, all the lot of 'em, if they gets 'alf a chance."

Unconscious of having been the cause of this somewhat drastic criticism of his profession, the famous surgeon mounted rapidly to the second landing, where a long, bare, distempered corridor stretched away in either direction. Choosing the one on the left, he came to a halt in front of a white door, on which the two words "House Surgeon" were neatly painted in black letters, and, without troubling to knock, turned the handle and walked in.

A broad-shouldered, cheerful-looking young man, who was sitting at the table reading a medical book, glanced up carelessly at his entrance. On seeing who the visitor was his expression changed, and with a certain air of surprise he rose quickly to his feet.

"Hullo, Sir George," he exclaimed. "We weren't expecting you this morning."

The elder man stepped forward and offered his hand.

"Sorry to interrupt your studies, Gray," he said, smiling. "This isn't an official visit. I've just looked in on a little private and personal matter."

The young house surgeon pulled forward a tattered armchair.

"Well, I'm delighted to see you, sir," he said heartily. "Won't you take a pew?"

Sir George sat down, and, leaning forward, helped himself to a cigarette from the box which his companion offered him.

"You were telling me about your plans a week or two ago," he said. "Have you come to any decision yet?"

Gray, who was standing with his back to the fireplace, nodded his head.

"Yes," he answered. "I've made up my mind to send in my resignation as soon as the secretary comes back. I can't help feeling that I'm wasting my time here. I have always meant to go in for research work, and if I'm to do any good at it it's quite time I started." He laughed a little awkwardly. "I hope it doesn't sound conceited talking like this, sir, but I really believe I've got a turn in that direction."

Sir George looked up at him with a friendly, half-quizzical twinkle in his eye.

"You needn't apologize, my boy," he said gravely. "I don't think any one would accuse you of having a swelled head." He paused. "If it doesn't sound an impertinent question, may I ask how you are situated with regard to money matters?"

"I can manage all right," replied the other. "I've got a small private income of about three hundred a year. I should have to give up the car, of course, but one can't expect luxuries if one goes in for laboratory work."

Sir George nodded his head approvingly.

"That's the proper frame of mind, anyhow," he observed. "There's no half-and-half business about science. It's a great game if you're prepared to give up everything else to it, but if you want money and comfort and reputation—well, you'd better copy my example and spend your time cutting out the entrails of over-fed millionaires." He flicked the ash off his cigarette, and, sinking back again in the chair, crossed his legs. "All the same," he added, "it just happens that I might be able to put something in your way which would make it possible for you to keep the car and hunt bugs at the same time."

Gray's boyish face lit up with sudden interest.

"By Jove, sir!" he exclaimed. "That sounds promising!"

"How would you like to go and live with old Carter as a sort of residential assistant?"

"Carter?" Gray repeated the name almost reverently. "Do you mean Professor Carter?"

"Of course I do. You don't suppose I'm referring to the man who makes the liver pills?"

"You can bet I should like it all right," was the eager reply. "Why, it's a chance for which any chap in my position would sell his soul."

The surgeon smiled again at his young companion's enthusiasm.

"Well, I think it might be arranged on less dramatic terms than that. As a matter of fact, I was talking to the old boy last night. He doesn't often show up in public nowadays, but he happened to come along to a special meeting of the Board of Health, and he and I had a long yarn together. Amongst other things he asked me if I knew a young fellow who'd make a suitable assistant. He wants someone to live in the house, and he told me that if he could find the right man he was prepared to pay a salary of four hundred a year. That, of course, would be in addition to living expenses."

"Four hundred a year!" echoed Gray in astonishment.

"Oh, he can afford it well enough. He's rolling in money, and he never spends a bob on anything except his work."

"Why, he can take his pick amongst the best-trained men in England," declared Gray. "They'd simply fall over themselves to get in with Carter, whether there's a salary attached to it or not."

"That may be the case," assented Sir George drily, "but, as it happens, very few of them possess the particular qualification on

which the Professor insists. You see, he wants someone who's an expert boxer as well as being a fully qualified scientist."

Gray stared at his visitor in utter bewilderment.

"Sounds a bit comic, doesn't it?" pursued the latter tranquilly. "The fact is the old gentleman's suffering from nerves. About nine weeks ago his house on Campden Hill was broken into by burglars, and ever since then he seems to have been living in a mortal funk that the same thing would happen again."

"But hasn't he any one in the place besides himself?" demanded Gray.

"Only a couple of women who cook for him and look after the house. He had an old servant for about forty years, but I think he's pensioned him off. Of course, it really isn't very safe as things are. Carter must be over eighty, and the Red Lodge is a devilish lonely place, shut in behind a high wall amongst a lot of trees. I don't wonder he feels a bit jumpy."

"But is he quite serious about wanting an assistant?" demanded Gray. "At present it sounds as if he were in more need of a bulldog."

Sir George laughed. "It's a genuine enough offer," he said. "He confided to me that he'd just undertaken some very important researches, and that it was absolutely necessary he should have a first-class man to help him. I thought of you at once. I said all the complimentary things I could about your work, and I added, as a sort of little extra inducement, that you'd won the inter-hospital heavyweight boxing competition for two years in succession."

Gray coloured modestly. "It was awfully good of you, Sir George," he replied.

"Not at all," was the answer. "In my opinion he'll be very lucky if he gets you. I told him I'd look you up and see how you felt about it, and that if you liked the idea I'd let him know some time to-day."

"I shall be ready to go directly I can get away from the hospital," declared Gray.

Sir George Onslow threw away the stump of his cigarette and rose to his feet.

"I don't think there will be any difficulty about that. I'll speak to the chairman personally, and if Carter wants you at once we can easily find someone to carry on until the secretary comes back," He glanced at his watch. "I must be running along now. I've got to be at the nursing home by twelve-thirty."

After expressing his gratitude once more, Gray accompanied his visitor down to the hall, where he remained standing on the steps until the car drove away. He was just turning back toward the staircase when the porter, who was engaged with the telephone, thrust his head out of the box.

"Gen'leman wants to speak to you, sir—a Mister Ashton."

Gray walked forward and picked up the receiver.

"Hullo!" he observed encouragingly.

"Hullo!" came the answer. "That you, Colin?"

"Of course it's me."

"Mark speaking—Mark Ashton. Are you engaged for lunch?"

"Not if I can get any one else to pay for it," was the candid reply.

"Well, how would you like to come along and feed with me at the Savoy Grill?"

"I've no particular objection. What's the matter? Have you come into money?"

There was a chuckle at the other end of the wire.

"Nothing like that. Just a sudden thirst for your society."

"It shall be gratified," said Gray. "What time shall I show up?"

"One o'clock. Suit you all right?"

"Excellently."

"That'll do, then. If you get there first order yourself a cocktail."

The speaker rang off, and, replacing the receiver, Gray glanced at his watch.

It was a few minutes past twelve, and, being the day on which he was off duty, there was nothing to prevent him leaving the hospital as soon as he pleased. The prospect of a two-mile walk before lunch distinctly appealed to him, so, remounting the stairs to his small bedroom at the top of the building, he proceeded to change out of his white surgeon's kit into something a little more in harmony with the best traditions of a fashionable restaurant.

At exactly five minutes to one he passed through the revolving glass door of the Savoy and entered the already crowded lounge. Before he had time to glance round, a man, who had been sitting in the farther corner, rose to his feet and came forward to meet him.

No one, not even a newspaper reporter, would have called Mark Ashton handsome. In spite of his roughly cut features, his untidy hair, his badly fitting frock coat, and his large gold-rimmed spectacles there was, however, such a genuine and friendly air about his whole appearance that anybody except a fool would have been attracted by him at once. Somehow or other he reminded one of a large, shaggy, good-tempered dog.

He came up to Gray and shook him heartily by the hand.

"This is splendid, Colin," he said. "I'm awfully glad you were able to manage it."

"So am I," returned his guest. "It would have broken my heart to refuse an invitation like this."

Mark grinned broadly, and, thrusting his arm through his companion's, piloted him across the lounge in the direction of the grill-room door.

"I've ordered a table," he announced, "so unless you'd rather wait a bit we may as well have lunch right away."

"That will suit me," said Colin cheerfully. "I breakfasted at eight, and I've just walked up from the hospital."

Following an obsequious gentleman, who apparently recognized Mark, they threaded their way through the room and

took their places at a small table in the opposite corner, which looked out into the courtyard.

Mark picked up the menu and studied it with some care.

"What do you say about oysters to start with?" he suggested. "A dozen oysters each and a bottle of Chablis?"

"It's a good idea," admitted Colin. "Especially the Chablis."

"We can discuss what we'll have afterward while we're eating them," continued his host. He gave the order, and, as the waiter departed, he sat back in his chair and took a genial survey of the restaurant.

"What is the precise meaning of this debauch?" inquired Colin. "Is it your birthday or have you been backing the winner of the Cesarewitch?"

The other laughed good-naturedly. "I told you over the telephone. It's just a case of a hard-working East End doctor snatching a brief interval from his practice to enjoy the society of his most brilliant and distinguished pupil." He paused. "As a matter of fact," he added, "the whole thing was Mary's notion. I wanted to have a talk with you, and she suggested that I should take a couple of hours off and invite you to lunch."

"Mary's a great woman," said Colin with feeling. "Why didn't you bring her along with you?"

"She's stopped behind to console the patients, shall have scores of 'em hanging round the surgery when I get back." He sighed heavily.

"Well, cheer up," said Colin. "By the time we've finished lunch they'll probably be dead." He helped himself to a roll, and, breaking off a bit of the crust, proceeded to nibble it thoughtfully. "What did you want to see me about?" he inquired.

Mark paused, while two waiters, who had suddenly appeared with the oysters and the Chablis, hovered round the table, intent on their ministrations.

"It's nothing much," he replied eventually. "I was wondering if by any chance you could find me a girl."

"Find you a girl?" echoed Colin. "Why, you old Mormon, you've got Mary already."

"That's just the trouble," was the depressed answer. "Mary has to go off to Lincoln for a month to nurse her mother. After next Wednesday I shall be a grass widower."

Colin looked at him with genuine sympathy. "My poor lad!" he exclaimed. "This is indeed a blow!"

"It's worse than that," observed his companion. "It's—it's a damned knock-out. She's never been away from me for more than a day, not since we went down to Shadwell. Heaven only knows how I shall get on without her. She answers the letters, keeps the accounts, pays the bills, mixes the medicines——"

"In fact," broke in Colin, "to put it plainly, she's a darn sight more important to the business than you are." He speared a recalcitrant oyster and sprinkled it with red pepper. "I wonder you let her go," he added mischievously. "Why don't you take up the strong, silent husband stunt and refuse to allow it?"

"Oh, I can't do that," objected Mark. "You see, the old lady really is very seedy. She's going to have an operation in about a month's time, and meanwhile she's got to keep to her bed. She's simply set her heart on having Mary to come and look after her, and I couldn't be such an utterly selfish pig as to go and put any difficulties in the way."

"No, I don't suppose you could," admitted Colin. "That sort of thing requires a lot of practice."

"We've talked it over," continued Mark, "and we've decided that the best plan would be to try and find some nice, sensible girl who'd come in for the day and make herself generally useful. Of course, it isn't exactly easy to get hold of the right person. I want a really capable, honest, pleasant girl, who can type and keep accounts, and who'll take a kind of personal interest in the whole show."

"You don't want much," observed Colin drily.

"Well, I'm prepared to pay for it, and if she turned out to be any use I'd keep her on permanently. I've been meaning to do something of the sort for the last six months. Mary's been working far too hard, and I'm making such a sinful amount of money I can quite well afford a little extra help." He pushed away his empty oyster shells and beckoned to the waiter. "We'd better order some more grub, eh? Can you manage a cold grouse?"

"With ease," said Colin.

He remained silent until the man had departed, and then, picking up the Chablis, refilled his glass.

"But where do I come in?" he inquired. "You're not expecting me to produce angels out of my waistcoat pocket?"

"We thought you might be able to recommend somebody. Mary said that a young, dashing, good-looking fellow like you—
—"

"She was pulling your leg," protested Colin. "She knows perfectly well that I'm terrified of girls."

"How about the hospital? Haven't you a pretty, intelligent nurse who'd like a nice Christian home?"

"I've never noticed her if we have." He paused as the recollection of his conversation with Sir George Onslow suddenly flashed into his mind. "By Jove!" he added. "That reminds me. I haven't told you my great news yet. I'm chucking the hospital and going as bottle-washer to old Carter."

His companion stared at him half incredulously.

"Is this a fact?" he demanded.

"Well, it's practically settled. I've had nothing to do with it really; Onslow's worked the whole thing for me. I'd just finished talking to him when you rang up."

In a few words he described his interview with Sir George and the curious information which the latter had given him with regard to the professor's requirements.

"I can't say if I shall fit the bill," he added, laughing, "but if the old boy takes a fancy to me I don't care how many damned burglars he has. I'd tackle half a dozen a night for the sake of being his assistant."

"It's a wonderful chance," admitted Mark thoughtfully. "Carter may be a little queer, but there's no doubt that he's the greatest man at his game in the world." He looked across rather wistfully into the strong, smiling face opposite him. "You're a fortunate young devil, Colin," he added. "Nature's presented you with practically everything a man can want—brains, good looks, and the strength of a cart-horse—and now I'm hanged if you're not going to be lucky as well. I'd have given my head for an opening like this when I was your age. Just fancy being able to devote one's life to science instead of wasting it in the futile way I've done."

"You're talking through your hat," protested Colin indignantly. "If you chose you could be sitting in an armchair in Harley Street, but instead of that you and Mary live down there in Shadwell and sweat your souls out amongst the poorest of the poor. Don't you call that good work?"

"Splendid," agreed Mark. "Stuffing 'em up with coloured water and ginger pills and making fifteen hundred a year out of the poor blighters for doing it." He smiled with a cheerful good nature that was rather out of keeping with his words. "I'm not envious, Colin. I'm only too delighted to know that you've found the right opening. Two or three years' experience with Carter will be simply invaluable to you. It will put you in the very front rank of investigators, and what's more, it will give you the opportunity of carrying on his work after he's dead. You'll be a great man before you've finished. When I'm an old buffer of eighty I shall probably go around bragging that the famous Sir Colin Gray was once my junior house surgeon at Bart's."

"Always supposing," added the future celebrity, "that I'm not knocked on the head by a burglar." He rolled up a bread pill and

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