

# Mr. Max of Scotland Yard

by Charles Oliver

## III. The Gresham Hotel Robberies



I HAD had a touch of fever—the legacy of the South African campaign—and had slept very badly. I was good for nothing when I got up, and lay idle all day on my sofa, listening to the drip of the incessant rain.

About five o'clock old Doidge opened my door cautiously.

"Are you asleep still, Captain?" he asked.

"I think not, Mr. Doidge," I answered.

And how's the head?

"I believe it's better, thanks, but I can't tell you definitely till I stand up."

"You just stay where you are," he said, firmly. There's no sense in playing the fool with them fevers. And if you want company you can have it. Here's Mr. Max come to ask after you. Will you see him?"

"Oh, that's very kind of him," I answered. "But I don't think I'm up to talking."

"You have no call to be up to talkin' when Max is about," urged the old man. "He's been sittin' in my bar hinderin' of me, and tellin' me lies for an hour on end. Hang the man! I don't believe he took his breath more'n once. You'd better see him. Let alone it's bein' unfriendly, it won't do to be mopeful. And I want to be rid of the chap."

"Well, then, ask him in," I said. "And let's have tea, will you?"

"Come in, Mr. Max," called Doidge down the passage. "Our fever's somewhat abated, and we shall be pleased to see you."

"I'm sorry you're down," said Mr. Max, coming up to the sofa and taking my hand. "Hand a bit moist, I feel, so I suppose the temperature's moving to normal."

"Yes, I'm over the worst now. I shall be about to-morrow."

"That's right," said Mr. Max cheerfully. "The wind has got around, and I think I can promise you a fine day to-morrow. Eh, Mr. Doidge?"

The old man sniffed a bit contemptuously. "Oh, promise away," he said. "I'm not one of the sort who promise more'n it is in their power to perform. P'raps you're right and p'raps you're wrong. There ain't no tellin' till to-morrow. Take tea, Mr. Max?"

"I should just say so, Mr. Doidge."

"Well, there, you right surprise me, Mr. Max," said the old innkeeper, shaking his head. "Just like an ordinary man!"

He went out, closing the door quietly behind him. Then he opened it again, and put his head in.

"Tea?" he asked, with a grin. "You're sure? Not blood?"

He sputtered with laughter, and we could hear him chuckling to himself as he went away down the passage.

"That's his notion of having his little joke," said Mr. Max, with a smile. "Well, it's harmless enough. He's a good old fellow, but a confounded chatterer. I've been with him for an hour, and, I assure you, I could hardly get a word in edgeways. I can't make out how he does it; he never seems to take breath."

I laughed at the idea of the two sitting opposite to each other and trying to talk one another down. It seemed to be another variety of the old problem of the invulnerable armour and the irresistible torpedo. Mr. Max did not notice my amusement. He was strolling about the room, interesting himself in my possessions and surroundings.

"You do not object to my prowling, Captain Grensley, do you?" he said. "Curiosity was once my business, and now it is my hobby. I like this window of yours, giving on to that little bit of garden, and the gate

beyond on to the moor. It is very satisfactory to be able to get out that way without having to run the gauntlet of the bar company and old Doidge's harangues. Ah! you have your service revolver here, I see."

"I don't know why on earth my man put it in," I answered. "And I am not a bit of good with it, either."

"I have been a shot in my day," said Mr. Max, handling the weapon. "Not quite in the first rank, perhaps, but not very far below it, either. But I don't set much value on the thing. It isn't trustworthy. We've all heard of these gentlemen who can put a bullet into the ace of hearts twenty times running at fifteen paces, but who has seen them? Not I, for one; and not you, for two, I'll be bound. The safest end of the revolver, in my opinion, is the butt; you can put in some useful work with that in a crowd. No, I never carry the thing, and I've only got one that I keep as a memento. And that's an idea. Would you like to hear how I came into possession of it? It is just the story for you to-day—won't get on your nerves a bit, I promise you."

"That's very kind of you," I said. "But Doidge will be bringing the tea in a minute."

"Doidge's minutes are not told off along the same measure as other people's," answered Mr. Max. "I'll back myself to finish the story comfortably before the old man comes. Here goes!"

"I suppose you never heard of the Gresham Hotel robberies? The company had very good reason for keeping them dark, for it's fairly fatal to an hotel when the report gets about that property isn't safe there. And it wasn't safe once in the Gresham, I can tell you. Robberies went on all over the place, high and low, on all floors, in all the rooms. It was money and jewellery that disappeared invariably. The manager, Mr. Irvin, was at his wits' end. The whole staff of servants were dismissed twice, but it was no use. The robberies went on worse than ever; people began to whisper and custom to fall off. Then the manager did what he ought to have done long before; he came to us and asked the chief to send down the best man he had. The chief sent me.

"The Gresham was an old-fashioned hotel that did a very large business with foreigners. I looked at the visitors' book the evening I got there, and there were any amount of great guns of all nationalities on the list—Russian Grand Dukes, German Princes, American millionaires, French ex-Royalties; it was dazzling, and I said as much to Mr. Irvin.

"It's not what it used to be," he replied, with tears in his eyes. "I have known the day when an Archbishop was of no more account here than you or I."

"Speak for yourself, sir," I answered, "for I know my value if other people don't, and I don't set such great store on Archbishops."

"We had a long talk over the matter, and it was arranged that I was to come in as a waiter. In a huge place like that the waiters change frequently, and are hardly known to each other personally. The manager promised to see to it that I made no great blunders.

"And of course," I said in conclusion, "you must keep the thing absolutely to yourself, or you might as well put a chimney-sweep on the job."

"Oh, we must have Father Mactane in with us," declared Mr. Irvin. "He'll be of the greatest service, I assure you."

"And who may this Father Mactane be?" I asked coldly. "I generally do my work singlehanded."

"The oldest resident in the hotel," answered the manager. "He has been with us now—let me see—five years. A treasure, sir—just a prize customer. He pays up by the clock, and is most popular with our clients. He speaks four languages. You see, this is rather by way of being a Catholic house, and our clients like to have one of their priests about. He gets to know them all—it's wonderful. And they just adore him. He's got his head screwed on pretty straight, too—he'll help us no end."