

## THE LONG ARM OF CONFIDENCE.

## CHAPTER I.

MR. BIDDER had a telegram in his hand. Here it is:

"Come up at once."

"Stone, Scotland Yard."

Mr. Bidder was the senior partner in the firm of Bidder, Tuxwell & Harris, of Birkenhead. A confidential clerk—one Raymond Hastie—had been discovered in an extensive system of embezzlement. Mr. Hastie had disappeared, and with him some necessary books and a considerable sum in cash as well. The affair was in the hands of the police, and the above curt telegram had been just received from that well-known officer, George Stone, of Scotland Yard. Mr. Bidder left for London almost immediately after its receipt. He journeyed by the train which leaves Liverpool at 4:05 p. m., and is due at Euston at half past eight. He took with him a black portmanteau. It was one of tolerable size. He was a spruce gentleman, and as he might be detained in town for a day or two he thought it would be as well to go provided.

In his first-class compartment there was but one other passenger. This was a slight, weedy-looking gentleman who was enveloped in a voluminous overcoat which was obviously not of English manufacture. The afternoon was dull, there was more than a suspicion of mist in the air; but though it was cool, it was still not cold enough for the average Britisher to sit muffled to the chin in a curiously shoddy garment made of Irish frieze apparently about an inch in thickness. Mr. Bidder eyed his fellow-passenger, though there was not much of him to be seen; for, in addition to being muffled to the chin, he wore a soft felt hat which he had pulled down to his eyes. Mr. Bidder was conversationally inclined, but he felt persuaded that there was little in the shape of social intercourse to be got out of the gentleman who crunched at the other end of the carriage. Still he would try.

"Going through?"

Mr. Bidder flattered himself that the tone in which he put this inquiry was genial. But the fact is he was used to public speaking of a kind—teetotal and down-with-everything-pleasant platforms, and such like—and in spite of himself his manner was pompous, and, perhaps a trifle dictatorial. Still, this was not sufficient to account for the behavior of the gentleman addressed. That individual sprang from his seat and turned towards Mr. Bidder with a gesture that was distinctly threatening. For a moment it really appeared as though he was about to assault him. If such was his intention he very wisely thought better of it, and sunk back into his corner.

"What's that to do with you?" he growled.

Mr. Bidder was conscious that it had nothing to do with him; still, the fact might have been stated in more courteous fashion. He began to consider whether it would not be advisable at the first stopping station to get into another carriage. But when they did stop other passengers got in, who appeared to be quite as much disposed to talk as he was.

At Euston, in connection with this gentleman, something really remarkable happened. Mr. Bidder was going along the platform in search of his portmanteau when he met a porter bearing the identical article aloft upon his shoulder. By his side walked the gentleman with the overcoat. Mr. Bidder stopped.

"Porter, that's my portmanteau. What do you mean by walking off with it?"

The porter seemed to be a little surprised. "Yours? Why, this gentleman says it's his."

"It is nothing of the kind. Take it to my cab. It's mine!"

"Yours?" The gentleman in the overcoat stepped in front of him. He seemed to be literally shaking with rage. "If you don't stow that I'll make you sit up sharp. Give me that portmanteau!"

He stretched out his hand to take the portmanteau from the porter; but Mr. Bidder was not to be bullied out of his property quite so easily as that.

"You will do nothing of the kind, porter. I tell you that portmanteau's mine. Call a constable. Officer!"

There was a policeman standing a little distance off. Mr. Bidder beckoned to him. Directly he did so the stranger's face assumed a peculiarly ghastly hue. Without a word he slunk off and disappeared in the crowd.

The porter was amazed.

"Well, that beats anything. That's the coolest hand I ever see. He came to me and says, 'That portmanteau on a cab,' as though he was a dook. Are you going to give him in charge?"

"I ought to, but I'm in a hurry. I'll let the scoundrel off free this time."

Off went Mr. Bidder in triumph with the porter and portmanteau. He told the cabman to drive to a certain well-known hotel. When he reached it, a mansuddenly appeared at the side of the cab and looked at him. Mr. Bidder stared in return, for the man was a perfect stranger to him. He was one of the tallest men he had ever seen, six foot five or six with a mustache of the most extravagant dimensions.

The hotel porter coming to take the luggage from the driver, the man stood aside on the pavement. But as he went up the steps Mr. Bidder not only saw the fellow wink at him, but even hook his finger on to the bridge of his nose with a gesture which was not only familiar but impertinent. Mr. Bidder, who had not yet altogether recovered from his adventure with the gentleman in the overcoat, told himself that the man was drunk.

It was considerably past nine o'clock. Mr. Bidder was hungry. Giving instructions to have some dinner prepared for him, Mr. Bidder followed his portmanteau to his bedroom. The hotel porter having removed the strap, all he had to do was to insert the key and turn the lock. But this was exactly what he was unable to do. There was something the matter either with the key or the lock, for the key wouldn't turn. Mr. Bidder began to lose his temper. It was long past his regular dinner hour, and he was very hungry indeed. He examined the key; it seemed to be all right. He put it again into the lock; but no, it would not turn.

"I wonder if that scamp has been playing any tricks with the lock?"

He alluded to the gentleman in the overcoat. But a moment's reflection showed him that that was scarcely possible. He had seen the portmanteau put into the luggage van with his own eyes; it had reposed in the luggage van throughout the journey. Certainly the gentleman in the overcoat had not stirred from his own corner of the carriage. On their arrival scarcely a moment had elapsed before he had detected the enterprising traveler in the act of escorting his prize. It was impossible that it could have been tampered with by him.

Mr. Bidder tried again. He gave the key an extra twist; it turned—indeed, it turned with a vengeance. But that was not the only cause which induced him to so precipitately assume an upright position on his feet. It was perhaps a little surprising that the key should all at once have turned so readily, but it was much more surprising that, simultaneously, such a peculiar sound should have begun to issue from what might, metaphorically, be called the bosom of the portmanteau, and not only begun, but continued; in fact, was continuing as Mr. Bidder stared down at the receptacle of his belongings.

"Whatever have I put inside to make such a noise as that?"

He knelt down to see; but the portmanteau refused to open. The key was still in the lock. He felt quite sure he had turned it; still, he might be mistaken, so he made another trial. Whether he had or had not turned it before it turned quite easily again; and instantly the noise redoubled. The thing might have been alive, and resenting the touch of its owner's hand. Mr. Bidder sprang to his feet again; he was not only surprised, he was even startled.

"It sounds exactly as though some one had set the mechanism of some clock-work going. Good!"—he hesitated before he let the word come out, but it did come out—"good heavens! I don't believe that after all the thing is mine."

By "the thing" he meant the portmanteau. When the thought first struck him the perspiration stood upon his brow. Was he the thief? Had he robbed that other man? What a bare-faced scoundrel the gentleman in the overcoat must have taken him to be! The idea was horrible, but close examination showed that it was true: the portmanteau was not his. It bore a strong superficial resemblance to the genuine article, but none the less for that it was not the real thing. It was not difficult, especially at night, to mistake one portmanteau for another; a fact which was acutely realized by Mr. Bidder then. He was agitated. He was a man of some imagination, and a mental picture was present to his mind—what must the gentleman in the overcoat be thinking of him then? And he had beckoned to a policeman, too!

As he sat still trying to realize the situation some one tried the handle of the bedroom door, and finding it locked tapped at the panel. Mr. Bidder opened. A stout, middle-aged man immediately stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"I'm a detective."

"A detective!" cried Mr. Bidder, his brain in a whirl. "The very man I want."

"Indeed," rejoined the new-comer with a

noticeable dryness. "That's odd, because you're the very man I'm wanting too."

Mr. Bidder was the very man he wanted! A detective!

Was it possible that the gentleman in the overcoat had already lain information, and he was actually suspected of crime? The situation was distinctly not a nice one—but it was obvious that it only required a few words of explanation.

"It is absurd; one of the most absurd things of which I ever heard, though I own that at first sight it must have a suspicious appearance to a stranger's eye."

Mr. Bidder laughed uneasily; he was scarcely in a jovial frame of mind.

"I suppose you know what I want you for?"

"I suppose I do—if you put it in that uncomfortable sort of way. But, my dear sir, if you will allow me to explain."

"You can make a statement at your own risk, and I shall take it down. But perhaps first you'd better hear the warrant read?"

"The warrant!" Mr. Bidder stared.

"The warrant."

"You don't mean to say there has been a warrant taken out already?"

"I don't know what you call already. The warrant has been out three months."

"Three months! Why, the thing has only just occurred!"

The detective gave quite a start.

"You don't mean to say you've been up to any of your tricks already?"

"My tricks, sir! What on earth do you mean?"

"I don't want to have any talk with you. We expected you over three months ago; we're not so fast asleep as some of your fellows seem to think. I don't know how it was I missed you at Liverpool, but I was on your track directly afterward, and you only slipped me at Euston by the skin of your teeth."

By this time it began to dawn upon Mr. Bidder that a certain amount of confusion existed either in his or in the detective's mind.

"Will you be so good as to tell me who and what you take me for?"

"I'm going to arrest you on the charge of bringing over an infernal machine from America to England."

"An infernal machine!" gasped Mr. Bidder.

"From information received I believe the thing is called a dynamite portmanteau."

"A dynamite portmanteau!" Mr. Bidder turned to the portmanteau on the floor. "You don't mean to say that this—that that fellow's portmanteau—Good heaven! you don't mean to say that this apparently innocent-looking piece of luggage is a dynamite portmanteau?"

"Is that the article? What's that noise?"

"It's—it's the portmanteau!"

"You infernal villain! you don't mean that you've set it going!"

The detective made a lolt for the door, dragging Mr. Bidder with him. He flung it open, but he was just too late to get outside, for there was a vivid flame, a blinding smoke, a loud report, and the next thing Mr. Bidder and the detective were conscious of was that they were lying on the top of the landing in the center of a crowd of excited people.

"They're not dead," said some one.

"Nor likely to die," exclaimed a voice at Mr. Bidder's side, and the detective staggered to his feet. Mr. Bidder felt that he would rather lie a little longer where he was. The detective pulled himself together.

"I'm a detective. There's been an explosion. This man has tried to blow the place up with an infernal machine."

"I protest," cried Mr. Bidder, struggling to stand up straight to deny the charge. The detective, thrusting his fingers into the collar of his shirt so as to almost choke him, nipped his denial in the bud.

"Are there any constables here?"

"Heaps," replied one of the by-standers. "The house is full of them, and the street as well."

As a matter of fact a couple of constables immediately advanced.

"You know me?"

"You're Mr. Humes, sir. We know you very well."

"Is there an inspector here?"

"Inspector, sir, is down-stairs."

"I'll go down to him. See that no one goes inside that room; for all I know there may be another explosion still to come."

Mr. Humes went down; Mr. Bidder went with him—with Mr. Humes' fingers in his collar. In the hall they encountered an inspector. The trio adjourned to a little room upon one side. Here they were immediately joined by the manager of the hotel.

"What is the meaning of this?" inquired that gentleman.

"It means that this man has brought an

infernal machine over from America and exploded it in your hotel."

"It is false!" grasped Mr. Bidder. "Officer, I insist upon your taking your hand away from my throat."

Mr. Humes nodded to the inspector; the inspector put his hand into his pocket. In an instant Mr. Bidder had a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. Then Mr. Humes removed his fingers.

Mr. Bidder was almost inarticulate with rage. He put great pressure on himself in order to retain a degree of self-control.

"You are making a hideous mistake. I tell you I know no more about what has occurred than you do."

"I suppose the thing went off before you meant it to; and that you didn't intend to be right on top of it when it did go off, I can easily believe."

Mr. Humes smiled at his auditors.

"The thing went off before I meant it to! I am James Bidder, of the firm of Bidder, Tuxwell & Harris, of Birkenhead. If you will let me get at my pockets, I will give you proof of every word I say."

"You can do that equally well at the station," said Mr. Humes.

"You had better take him the back way," suggested the inspector. "There's an ugly crowd in front." He pointedly addressed himself to Mr. Bidder: "If they got hold of you, they might tear you to pieces."

"Tear me to pieces!"

"Dynamite's not popular in an English crowd."

"But, my dear sir, I tell you that the whole thing—"

"Come along; we've had enough of that." Mr. Humes opened the door. He spoke to the constable without. "Get me a cab round at the back."

"There's one, sir, waiting for you already."

"All right. Come along, now."

Mr. Bidder went along, escorted by the guardians of the law. It seemed to him that he was in a dream. He was too bewildered to be entirely master of his thoughts, but a hazy idea presented itself to his mind—what a subject to ventilate in the "Times." He would have deemed it incredible that any respectable man, entirely innocent of anything but a deep-rooted abhorrence of any sort of crime, could have been subjected to the indignities which were being heaped upon him then. When they reached the door they found that a hansom cab was waiting them in the street. It was a little narrow street, not too well lighted. There were a few loiterers about, but nothing in the shape of an ugly crowd. When Mr. Humes saw it was a hansom, he drew back.

"Why didn't you get a four-wheeler?" he asked.

"There wasn't one to be had."

Without another word the detective hurried Mr. Bidder across the little strip of pavement. When they were seated, he gave the direction to the driver, "Bow Street Police Station," and the cab was off.

"If any one had told me," said Mr. Bidder, who found it impossible to keep still, "that a person in my position could have been the victim of such a blunder as this, I should have been prepared to stake all that I possess in the world on the fact that the man was lying."

"That's right. Pitch a yarn or two, only don't throw them away on me."

"A dynamite portmanteau!"

"Just so—a dynamite portmanteau."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"I don't suppose you ever did."

"What we hear about the blunders of the foreign police is nothing compared to this."

"I dare say you know more about the foreign police than I do."

"Sir!"

"Now, then, sit still. Stop that! What on earth—Driver!"

To this day Mr. Bidder does not know exactly what it was that happened. They were going up a narrow, ill-lighted street; suddenly some one sprang off the pavement and leaped at the horse's head; this person was followed by others, dark figures seen dimly in the night. They did something to the horse; the animal swerved violently to one side; the hansom was overturned. Mr. Bidder was conscious that it fell on one side, with him inside it, then consciousness forsook him.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

## Too Many Already.

Algy—"Do you think, my love, that your father will consent to our marriage?" Angel—"Of course, papa will be very sorry to lose me, darling." Algy—"But I will say to him that, instead of losing a daughter, he will gain a son." Angel—"I wouldn't do that, love, if you really want me. Papa has three such sons staying here now, and he's a little touchy on the point."