

# THE STORY OF A SCRAPE

## The Troubles of a Too-Obliging Man

By HAROLD WHITE



AS I told the inspector at the police station, a fellow would not be such an ass as to do such a thing on purpose. The suit is as good as ruined, even if I do get it back, and Annette isn't one of those girls who see things in your light in a minute. As for concealing and condoning a felony, I ask any sensible person if he would conceal a felony in the newest suit of clothes in his wardrobe, or condone it by the public display of his love-letters, if he could help it.

You see, this is how it stands: I live in what the fellow who let the thing to me called a "maisonette"—goodness only knows why—just off X Square.

At about a quarter past twelve on Friday night or Saturday morning, whichever it is, I heard cries of "Fire!" and that gave me a start, you may be sure. I had gone to bed early and was just dozing off. I slipped a few clothes on in a moment, and ran out of the room and down the stairs as fast as I could pelt, and was exceeding glad when I got to the bottom of the four flights. I suppose that in the excitement of the moment I left the door of my "maisonette" open, but I'll come to that later on.

When I got into the street, I didn't have much difficulty in finding out where the fire was, because a fairly big crowd had collected already, and a policeman was standing just by our front door telling people to stand back and move on, and conducting the proceedings generally. The fire had broken out, it appeared, on the second floor of the corner house, where Bostock, the big banker, lives, but it was not considered serious. That didn't prevent all the people in London from collecting in the streets to see the fun, nor the fire engines from coming up in swarms. I always think it is inspiring to see the greys dashing up, and hear the "Hi! hi! hi!" of the firemen. They were pretty smart in getting their horses out and setting to work, and I was thinking it was a really thrilling sight, when the policeman suggested to me that, if I put myself behind the front door and shut it, I might go to bed, or else put some clothes on.

As I was going up the stairs, I could have sworn that I saw someone scuttle down and dash into my flat. I hurried up and found that I was right. A man was standing flat against the wall in the passage, and as I entered, he shut the door behind him.

"Hallo! Who the deuce—" I said. "All right! All right!" said the fellow as coolly as possible. "Let's get inside," and he walked straight into my sitting-room.

"What the deuce are you doing in my maisonette?" I said.

"Oh!" says he, looking round him, "so this is a maisonette, is it? And pretty cosy, too, I'll be bound."

"Look here! Out you go!" said I.

"No, I sha'n't," he answered. "I like it. It's cosy."

"If you don't go yourself, I'll put you out!" I told him. I tell you I was angry.

"You couldn't 'ave the— Oh! all right, guv'nor. I was only goin' to say want of 'orspitality."

"Hospitality be hanged!" said I, and came for him.

Then he set his back against the door and flicked something out of his great-coat pocket.

The fire threw a light on the plated barrel of a revolver, and I retired—just a step or two.

"Things come in 'andy, jest when you least expects 'em to, don't they? I've often 'eard folks pass that remark, and they was quite ac'rit. This 'ere," said he, jerking up the pistol, "as bin the means of restorin' peace and brother'ood within the precincts of this maisonette. Now you sit down quiet by the fire and warm yer pore feet"—my feet were bare—"and then we'll 'ave a chat. Too dark for comfort, ain't it? 'Ave you a lucifer?"

I was furious, but I lit the gas and sat down by the fire. He sat opposite to me and looked at me with an encouraging smile. By the full light I could now see that he was a smallish, pale man, with a short, black beard and quick, beady eyes. He was dressed, as I happen to know, in a newish

suit of dark blue, ready-made clothes and an old black overcoat, and his hands were very dirty.

"Now you and me must 'ave a talk. It's what I've bin wanting ever since you asked me into this 'ere—what did you call it? Excuse me," he added, as he stirred the fire with the poker. "I 'aven't known yer for seven years, 'ave I? That's my misfortune, through bein' otherwise engaged durin' the better part of that time. But intimacy don't go by time, does it, I ask you?"

"You aren't going to stop here all night!" I said.

"It ain't inconvenient, I do 'ope?" he answered, with affected consternation. "If I'd 'a known that, I shouldn't 'ave made my arrangements; but bein' made—oh, dear! oh, dear!"

"Look here!" I began.

"Look 'ere, you mean," he broke in, producing his infernal pistol again. "I did not think that I should 'ave to interdooce this means of restorin' peace and 'armony to this 'ere what-d'ye-call-it again. I'm bound to stop—per'aps for a day or two," he said, more seriously; then added to himself: "Still, time is time."

"For a day or two! Good gracious!" thought I "this is too horrible!" Then a thought struck me.

"You've come to rob me, I suppose," I said. "Well, why can't you take what you can get and clear out now?"

"To rob you!" he said, with a smile of amusement. "No, not much. You can preserve your goods in peace, as I've 'eard 'em say."

"Then what in Heaven's name have you come for?"

"Well, why shouldn't I tell you? But this is a dry picnic, ain't it? The key of the tantaliser is with you, I'm thinkin'. That's the ticket! And now for the soder and the glasses. I think I can trust yer to git 'em from the next room."

I put the things on the table, and he strolled round the room, commenting on the pictures and the photographs. The cheek of the fellow was consummate. He looked at my portraits one by one and clawed them all over with his dirty fingers. I have a lot of my sisters and my cousins and my aunts about the room, like other people.

"I'm afraid," he remarked, "that you're very wanderin' in your attentions. Now, this 'ere's abart my mark; but then I'm not partic'ler." It happened to be a portrait of Rosie Langton. "I'll keep it as a memento."

"Confound you!" said I.

"Tut, tut!" said he. "'Ave a drink and soothe yerself. Can yer recommend these smokes? Yer take care of yerself pretty fair, I remawk."

He lit a cigar and passed me the box, then, sitting himself comfortably down in my easy-chair, remarked:

"I'm a gentleman."

That did not seem to need contradiction.

"Yes, I'm a gentleman, like you. I don't earn my livin'. I lives on what other people earns—not but what I don't have some trouble to git it. Tomorrow I shall be dressed as well as you, and a deuced sight better. It's jest a bit of luck—luck right through all along, and I'll tell yer all abart it. I've come to your what-you-call-it straight from No. 25, where Bostock the banker lives, you know. I was there by invitation."

I expect I looked incredulous.

"Not, as you might expect, from Mr. nor yet from Mrs. Bostock. They 'aven't the pleasure of my acquaintance. It was a very partic'ler little friend o' mine called Mary as arst me. Nice, innercent name, Mary, ain't it? You should see her, and then you could judge for yourself. Mr. Bostock's out of town—gorn away 'untin', and this mornin' 'e 'ad a bit of a tumble orf 'is 'orse and 'urt 'is bloomin' 'ead. Just see my luck. They sent for Mrs. Bostock by the telegraph, and she went orf in a 'urry. See my luck again. But the people in the room—that's the servant's 'all—didn't see no necessity for anticipatin' sorrer before it comes, so they give what Mr. 'Iggins calls a 'scratch affair.' 'Ole 'Iggins! It makes me laugh to think of 'im. So Mary arsts me if I could drop in without mindin' the want of ceremony, which I did not mind. See, luck all the way through. We 'ad a tolerable supper and plays games, and then I says I don't want to break the 'armony of the evenin', but my time was money in the mornin', so 'Good-bye and be good,' and Mary says she'll see me orf the premises. But when I got in the passage I farnd it wasn't quite so late as I thought it was, and so, instead of

'urrying' I took a sort of tour of inspection of the upper floors. I took a sort o' fancy to Mrs. Bostock's room in especial, and commenced to examine more partic'ler the pretty things about. I come by accident on some pretty bits of jewellery, and thinks 'ow careless not to 'ave sent 'em to the bank, bein' in the bankin' line too, and the lock of the drawer bein' a very unperfection-al bit of work. I was puttin' them carefully away, when Mary, 'oo'd bin seein' to things darn below, come out all flustered like women git, and says: 'Art with the light!' and I arts it. Then she told me that they were up to playin' 'Ide and Seek' all over the 'ouse, and some of 'em were comin' upstairs there and then. 'Ere's a 'ole come through my luck,' thinks I. Why, mister, you 'aven't got a glass of anythink."

I poured out a liberal dose of whisky.

"Well?" I said.

He continued:

"Can I slip darn and art through the 'all-door?"

I says. 'The 'all's 'ome,' says she, 'an' Mr. 'Iggins is a-sittin' there along of 'is friend seein' all fair.' 'I must 'ide,' says I, 'like the rest of 'em.' Then she began to cry and go on as 'ow they was comin' immediate, and she couldn't git things straight without a light, and dursn't light one, and I was leavin' 'er in the lurch. The room was rather untidy on account o' my experiments, and I saw that we was abart done if any of 'em came up and 'ad the idea of 'idin' there. We 'eard 'em gigglin' and whisperin' on the stairs, silly idjits. Then an idea struck me on a sudden. 'I 'ave it,' says I. "We must have a conflagration."

"The fire!" I exclaimed. I had forgotten it.

"You've guessed it in once. 'If you think they're comin', says I, 'you put a light to them 'ere curtains and run darnstairs. The room'll be burnt out, and no one won't know anythink abart them things bein' missin'. I'll look after myself.' 'What'll you do?' says she. 'I'm hanged if I know!' says I. 'There's a trap-door on top of the 'ouse in case o' fire,' says she, 'and you can let darn the ladder and unbolt the door, and there'll you be.' 'Yes, there I'll be,' says I; 'but 'ow am I to git darn again?' 'I'll let you know when all's quiet again,' she says, and then we 'eard 'em coming up to look for them as 'ad 'id, so I runs up the stairs and waits a bit. They must 'a' come up to the second floor, for I heard Mary 'oller 'Fire!' and them rushin, abart' so I let darn the ladder, undid the trap, and was on the roof in a jiffy."

I began to feel as excited as if I had been escaping myself.

"I don't know if you're the same as me," he continued, "but I think a fire's a most interestin' and amusin' occurrence. I knew I was pretty safe on top, and could soon slip along if the 'eat got 'otter than what I like, so I enjoyed myself. 'Luck come right again,' thinks I. But then the idea come into my 'ead that firemen usually git on top of 'ouses, 'Eaven only knows why, but I'd noticed it, 'avin' bin at a good many fires professionally. Not wishin' to interfere with dooties, I moves along a bit your way. Now I'll tell yer somethink. The trap-door on the top of your 'ouse ain't in what I should call proper condition. I come through it quite easy. I thought I'd come darn through your 'ouse and art into the street, but I 'eard talk at the front from over the bannisters, and I thought of a noo idea."

"You'd better think of the old one again, then," said I. "That seems to me to be the safest thing you could do."

"You speak without thinkin'; that's where you make the mistake," said he, helping himself to another whisky-and-soda. "You go to the winder and 'ave a look."

He had taken the command so thoroughly that I simply did as he said. I went to the window and saw that there were still people about, including three or four policemen. I told him so.

"Suppose," said he, "that my little game of fire-works didn't work quite right, and they've found the things missin', they'll 'ave a description of 'oo as in the 'ouse to-night, and perhaps out there there is one or two would know me as I don't know. I'm like the Prince of Wales that way—more knows me than I know. And comin' out at this time o' night looks curious to anyone waitin' outside, don't it? They'd as like as not look me up and down. No, I think I'll 'ave to look a bit different than what I went in like, and then I'll step out in the mornin' and 'ave all open and above-board."

"What are you going to look like?" I asked.

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