

DOUBLOONS

A Thrilling Novel of Mystery, Tragedy
and a Stolen Fortune

By Eden Phillpotts and Arnold Bennett

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CHAPTER IV. An Old Sea Captain.

They dined together that evening at Sir Anthony's usual table in the Louis Quatorze Restaurant on the first floor of the Devonshire Mansions. It was the table between the second and third pillars on the left as you enter by the grand entrance—not the entrance from the suite of the Half Moon Club. They had spent a curious and interesting day. It had rained most of the time. After Philip, in his laconic way, had finished reciting his Odyssey to the young baronet he had announced his intention of going out to get three suits of clothes; three suits and no more—a lounge suit, a frock coat with the latest in trousers and waist-coats, and a dress suit. Philip meant to be economical, strictly so; but with two hundred and fifty pounds in his pocket he could not deny himself the satisfaction of replacing the dress suit which he had abandoned a few days before to a pawnbroker in Gray's Inn road. Sir Anthony had replied that, having regard to the weather, it was wiser to go out to get a suit, and the mountain, summoned by telephone, would certainly come to Mahomet. The mountain did come; in fact, several mountains came, including a Mont Blanc of a tailor, and a respectable Ben Nevis of a hosier. Nor was that the only miracle. By the intervention of Oswald and the baronet Philip had his dress suit within eight hours.

After lunch they had both, with one accord, fallen asleep, and slept for two hours. Then there had been tea, cucumber sandwiches, trying-on, and a visit to an acquaintance of Sir Anthony's who had flat in the mansion—Miss Kitty Sartorius, the renowned star of the Regency Theatre. It was Kitty's day, and half the genius and all the golden youth of London were there.

And then Philip had refused to dine with Sir Anthony, but had consented to remain and dine in the restaurant if Sir Anthony would be his guest. Philip had explained that all the hospitality could not be on one side. Moreover, had he not relieved Sir Anthony of five days' income? And lastly, though he meant to be strictly economical, he did not intend that the era of economy should set in with full severity until the morrow.

"Look here," said Tony suddenly, during the timbale de macaroni, "we'll go for a run in the car to-morrow if it's fine."

"No," answered Philip firmly. "Tony, I sleep at my corner house in the corner reserved for me by Mr. Hilguy. To-morrow I begin to look for my living."

"Suppose you don't find it? Not so easy, you know. You've been trying some time."

"Ah," said Philip. "But then I hadn't got three good suits of clothes, and money enough to keep me for a year. I was in a pretty nearly anywhere."

"Then you abandon me to my fate?"

"What fate?"

"Why, I haven't got a friend in the world, except you. I'm not in love. I'm not even in debt. I'm only bored." Sir Anthony sighed. "You don't fancy I'm happy, do you?"

"Not in love! You always used to be."

"The fact is," said the baronet, self-consciously, "I've had a serious reverse in my life, my boy. I shall never be the same again."

"No, I know you won't," Philip smiled. "But next time. Tell me about it. You've told me nothing really exciting yet about yourself. The tableau of the gay and irresponsible Tony ruined for eternity by a hopeless passion amused Philip."

"It was a—"

"Well, go on."

"No, I won't talk about it. I can't tell you only that I had a stall seventy-three nights running to see her. What do you think of that?"

"Sublime!"

"It's all very well for you to laugh—Ha! Mr. Varcoe! You here! Come and have coffee, will you?"

Sir Anthony turned quickly to a little, dark, spectacled man, who was passing the table.

Mr. Varcoe stopped and bent the gaze of his spectacles on the baronet.

"A charming idea," said Mr. Varcoe. "With pleasure. I'll be with you in an instant."

"And who is Mr. Varcoe?" Philip demanded, while the latter was away.

"Dashed if I know. Met him at Kitty's this afternoon. Didn't you see him? Secured a very decent, agreeable, jury of chap. Awful keen on swimming. Swims all through the year, he says as I do. Challenged me to a race in the Serpentine on Christmas morning, but I wasn't having any. I should think he must be one of the cracks. Doesn't talk about anything else, you know."

"I suppose that's why you invited him to my dinner-party," Philip observed.

"Awfully sorry, old chap. I was thinking for the moment it was my party."

However when Mr. Varcoe returned and had been introduced to Philip, he mentioned no word of swimming. He held in his hand a copy of the special edition of the "Westminster Gazette," and for a few seconds its contents seemed to make him nervous.

"Anything in the paper?" Philip inquired nonchalantly.

Mr. Varcoe stared hard at Philip, fixing him with those spectacles.

"Yes," said he; "the murder of that old sea captain."

"What old sea captain?" Philip asked.

Mr. Varcoe glanced around the glittering room, which was now chiefly occupied by waiters. The little trio of two young, fair Anglo-Saxons, one dandified, and the dark man who might have been any age and of any nationality, was isolated in a sea of empty white tables.

"Captain Pollexfen," said Mr. Varcoe in a low calm voice.

He appeared to wait for the effect of his words. They had no effect.

"And who was Captain Pollexfen?" Sir Anthony idly demanded, opening his cigarette case.

"He was just a sea captain. That is almost all that's known."

"Where was he murdered? How was he murdered?"

"Back of his head smashed in."

"But where?"

"It isn't ascertained."

"But I suppose they've found the corpse?" said the baronet as he set fire to an R. P. Maria.

"Yes," replied Mr. Varcoe, still in the same low voice. "It was found this morning buried near a sewer in an open trench near Kingsway."

Philip's heart gave a jump, and the ash of his cigarette fell.

"Nice sort of a cemetery!" Tony commented before Philip could put a word in.

"Any clue?"

"One. There was a scheme to get rid

were a handful of persons who, being out of a job, were representing the great and enlightened British public. Two policemen, who struck the eye unfamiliarly because they were without their helmets, dominated the scene.

Then there was a movement: everybody rose, and the coroner, the celebrated Mr. Acrefair, known by name to all newspaper readers, entered. He was a thin, active man of forty-five or so, dressed like a stock broker, and he carried a brown bag. In a fraction of time he had doffed his eyeglasses, ransacked his bag, and assumed his seat at the knee-hole desk, which served as the judicial stall. And almost before Philip could realize the fact, the inquest on one of the overland children had begun.

Mr. Acrefair did nothing but hold inquests. He passed his days in an atmosphere of sudden, violent, and mysterious death. He was impassive, disillusioned, unchangeable, and his methods were very rapid because he invariably had rather more work than he could do. "I'll an hour and a quarter he had dealt with a fall?"

"With what kind of an instrument do you suppose the blow was delivered?"

"Something solid and heavy. Probably a bag of wet sand."

"The injury could not have been caused by a fall?"

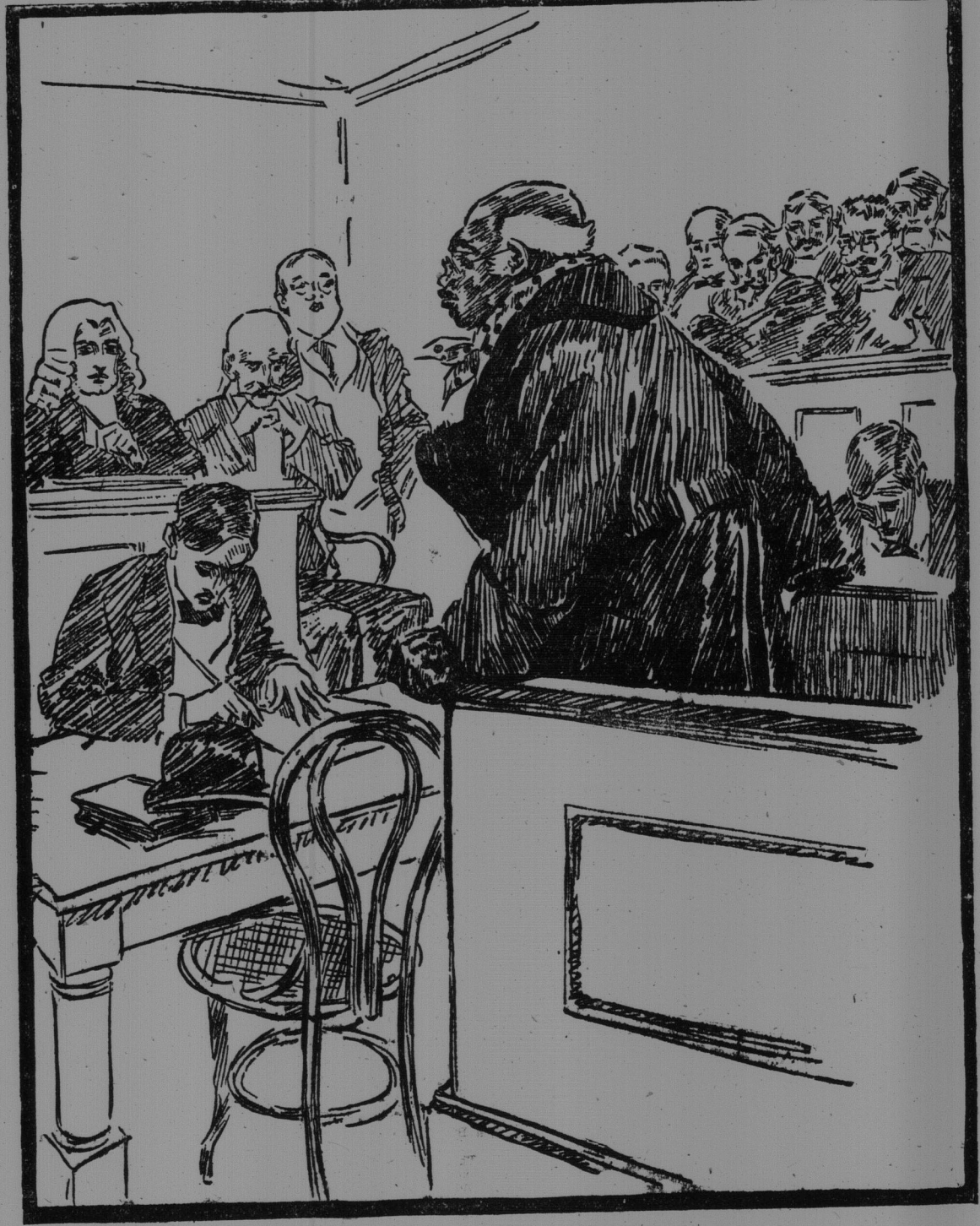
"No."

"Why not?"

"It would have needed a fall of thirty or forty feet, and such a fall would have broken half the bones in the body."

"Was the body well nourished?"

"Fairly well."



"What was her name?" "Giralda, sah."

"What did it weigh?"

"At a guess."

"Perhaps eleven stone."

"Have you any questions?" the coroner demanded of the foreman of the jury.

"No, sir."

The coroner finished writing, and resumed his seat at the portrait of the Prince of Wales.

Mr. Adam Hilguy, who followed the doctor, was the first of the witnesses and was asked to state the facts of the case. The respectability of the coroner had been shaken to its very basis by the murder. The coroner eyed him sharply.

"Your lodging house is a philanthropic undertaking, Mr. Hilguy?" he asked, after the preliminary questions.

"No, sir. It is a business."

"You not trouble to correct my phraseology," interrupted the coroner. "I said lodging house."

"Mr. Hilguy flushed. 'It pays its way.'"

"What do you charge?"

"Sixpence or a shilling a night."

"And that pays? Rent? Interest on capital? Managerial expenses? Deterioration?"

"There is no rent. I am the manager. I accept no salary. I make a present of my capital to the concern. I haven't had time yet to think of deterioration."

"When you say it pays its way, then, you mean that it pays for cleaning and service and that the meals are not served at an actual loss?"

"Yes."

"You are new to philanthropy?"

"Yes, must all begin," said Mr. Hilguy. "Just so," said the coroner. "You think you are alleviating the poverty of London by your venture?"

"Ah! What is your age, Mr. Hilguy?"

"I do not see."

"What did you do, sir?"

"Twenty-six."

"You have identified the body of the deceased?"

"Yes, it is the body of Captain Pollexfen, who took a room in my house about ten days ago."

"The exact date?"

"The tenth October, I am nearly sure."

"What was his Christian name?"

"I do not know."

"Of what ship was the Captain?"

"I do not know."

"He had retired from service?"

"I believe so."

"What were his habits?"

"For a week past he had been unwell and stayed in his room, except occasionally to see his meals."

"Did he strike you as being poor—in reduced circumstances?"

"I imagined him to be like most of my boarders—hard put to it, but respectable."

"He didn't talk at all?"

"Never chatted with you?"

"Never, except about the weather. He would usually mention the precise direction of the wind."

"At meals did he join in the conversation?"

"Very little."

"And he had no friends, no acquaintances?"

"There was a negro named Coco, who came to see him sometimes."

"In his room?"

"You agree now that it would after all have been possible for the captain to have been only a modest man, with a little house without your knowledge at the time of the evening?"

"Yes," said Mr. Hilguy. "Only the best of us are not used by my boarders."

"Doubtless," snapped the coroner. "Still as he didn't probably jump out of the window—"

"He must have walked down the back stairs after the staff had retired."

"But why should he do that?"

"I cannot guess. There could be no reason. He was a man of irreproachable respectability."

"Then it appears most probable that he was carried out the possibility of foul play having occurred in my house."

"How many lodgers have you?"

"About sixty."

"You satisfy yourself that all are respectable?"

"I use my judgment."

The coroner put his lips together. "Any questions?" he abruptly turned to the jury.

The foreman of the jury, who was a retired chemist, would have given a guinea to have been able to think of a few shrewd questions to put to Mr. Hilguy. But he could evolve nothing, and Mr. Hilguy stepped down, wondering why a philanthropist should receive the treatment of a suspected criminal.

The coroner resumed the contemplation of the chronophore, and then an old negro, dressed in ample shining broadcloth, with a red necktie, was manoeuvred by a policeman into the witness box. He was clearly in a high state of nervous excitement, and the tears were already starting from his eyes.

"What is your name, my man?" began the coroner.

"My name, Judge? Massa Coco, sah."

"But your real name?"

"My name Massa Coco, sah; I've been called Massa Coco since I was a child at de Ice-house." He spoke in a thin, whining, high-pitched voice—the voice of his race.

"The Ice-house?"

"Yes, sah. In Broad street, Bridgetown, Judge."

"Bridgetown—Devonshire?"

"No, sah. Bim, sah."

"Barbados, sah. You see, sah. Ice-house, big restaurant, sah. I was de head cook, sah. And de older niggers dey call me Massa Coco because I was so respectable, Judge. Captain Pollexfen tuck me away from dere, sah."

"Oh, yes, sah. I was one of his best friends, sah. We was intimate, sah."

"And he took you away from the Ice House?"

"Yes, sah. He took Massa Coco to be cook on his ship—de Colrus, sah."

"What line?"

"No line, sah. Just a damn tramp, sah."

"Do not swear, my man."

"I've so sorry I spoke disrespectful, sah. But she was just a damn tramp, sah."

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"Yes, sah. I stood by dat 'bominable ship sixteen years, Judge. Because I like de Captain."

"And then you left the ship?"

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