

THE MAN IN THE BASEMENT

By BARON PALLE ROSENKRANTZ

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CHAPTER I.

"It's dirt cheap, sir—dirt cheap. Three and a half guineas a week for the whole house, completely furnished, studio at the top, two reception rooms, large dining room, and three bedrooms. Kitchen with gas stove, electric light, not to mention the garden. Dirt cheap it is. It is only a fortunate combination of circumstances that enables me to offer you the house—to offer it to you for three and a half guineas a week."

Mr. Sydney Armstrong gave a smack of the tongue and a twist to his brown leggings.

Mr. Sydney Armstrong's get-up was sporting—a covert coat, tweed knickerbockers, and tan leggings.

But his game at present was house-hunting. That was how he made his living. The business was still young, and the staff consisted of himself and a lady clerk.

His office was in Gloucester road, South Kensington, close to the District Railway station.

Mr. Sydney Armstrong, however, was now standing in the hall of a neat little house in Cranbourne Grove—it was No. 48—a little detached house in a garden, behind a high wall. A regular country house in the middle of South Kensington, close to the Museum, handy for omnibuses and for the Underground, altogether very convenient.

Mr. Sydney Armstrong was doing a bit of business. He tried to appear as if it did not matter in the least whether it came off or not. But it did matter, for there were five pounds to be made, and five pounds is something to a young agent.

That was why Mr. Sydney Armstrong was vigorously chewing his mustache, while doing his best to look as if he did not care.

The bird was almost caught; it was fluttering already in Mr. Sydney Armstrong's net. It was dirt cheap for such a house. Three months furnished for three and a half guineas a week.

It was a Danish bird, and he was working it out in Danish money. "Three and a half guineas is more than a pound and a half pence," he said to himself. "A guinea is an obsolete tradition of former days, and it means a pound and a shilling, goodness knows why. If he let the house for three and a half guineas a week, that would be three pounds, thirteen shillings and six pence, or sixty-five crowns in Danish money."

That was more than Holger Nielsen had thought of paying. But then there was a studio, and it was altogether a charming little house. Besides, Holger Nielsen was not the only person in it. It was arranged between him and Doctor Jens Koldby that they should take a house in London—a proper English house, not a flat in one of the huge new buildings with a hundred tenants apiece, but a regular old-fashioned English house—with a garden. And Madam Sivertsen was to live in the house for three months. Madam Sivertsen had been fourteen years a stewardess on an Atlantic liner and was perfect in English. There must be a studio, as Dr. Koldby was an artist and was going to paint.

Holger Nielsen also bit his mustache, which was a small pale brown one, and looked at Mr. Sydney Armstrong to see whether there was anything to be knocked off.

"Shall we say three pounds ten?" said Holger Nielsen.

"In London we always reckon in guineas," said Mr. Sydney Armstrong. "It's dirt cheap. I have a number of houses to let, but I have no orders. It ought to be four guineas—I may go three and a half, but not a half penny less."

Mr. Sydney Armstrong took stock of his game. He tried to look superior, but the attempt recoiled on his thin yellow mustache.

"It's too much," said Holger Nielsen.

Mr. Sydney Armstrong shrugged his shoulders. "Let us go, then!" He was not going to give in. If he let the house for three and a half guineas he was to have five pounds; for if less, it only gave him three pounds. So he was firm.

Holger Nielsen was taken with the house. He hesitated. Mr. Sydney let go his mustache and began to hope again.

"Let me have another look at the house," said Holger Nielsen. They went in.

The entrance was small and narrow; it led to a passage about twelve feet long and four broad, from which a staircase went up; beyond that the passage became narrower, leading to the kitchen in the basement. On either side of the corridor there was a door leading to a room. The first of which had a window of the full height of the walls, and at the back was a door to the little garden with two oblong grass plots and a few fig trees and laurels. The two rooms on the ground floor were large, richly carpeted, and filled with old furniture and low, comfortable chairs. Light was the chief thing in the house, and for that reason there was plenty of wall space. From the room on the right as one entered a door led to a passage at the back, and across that to a large and lofty dining room, which was lighted entirely by a skylight. It was quite a hall, but it was dark. The furniture was of old oak, heavy and dark, and the floor was covered with linoleum. This was new, and Mr. Sydney Armstrong was proud of it.

"It's rather dark here," said Holger Nielsen.

"It always is on the ground floor of a London house," said Mr. Sydney Armstrong. "But look upstairs."

Upstairs it was really bright and nice. There were two bedrooms close to the staircase, looking out on the garden, on the sunny side, and the sun was obliging enough to assist Mr. Sydney Armstrong; it shone quite powerfully through the pretty little windows, and the sparrows chirruped outside in the trees of the garden. They wanted to help their countryman.

And then the studio. It was bathed in sunlight from a large window in the roof. This sunshine finished Holger Nielsen's hesitation. He tried to keep to his points, but the time-honored English guineas carried the day. The sun had given Mr. Sydney Armstrong his advantage; for the sun is rare in London, especially in South Kensington, with its low position near the foggy river.

"Shall I sign the agreement?" asked Holger Nielsen.

A great sigh of relief took the form of a "Yes." The bird was no longer struggling in the net.

Holger Nielsen signed in agreement with Mr. Sydney Armstrong and paid half a crown for the stamp. Nothing more.

"The owner pays all costs," said Mr.

Sydney Armstrong; he had won now and could afford to be amiable.

"Who's the owner?" asked Nielsen.

"He's gone to Burma. Just sailed. I have a power of attorney. It's a strange story; a pure piece of luck that you have this charming house. Major Johnson only bought it a week ago. That's a fact; bought it of a friend, who had inherited it from his mother—I forget the name. I never can remember names; it's a great disadvantage to me in my business, but I can't remember names. This Mr. —, whatever his name was, sold the house to Major Johnson, and the next day the major had to go abroad. No help for it. He had to go. He was to have been married, his fiancée broke off, and he had to go. That sort of thing happens in countries that have colonies. You may be glad Denmark has no colonies except Spitzbergen. Well, that's all about it. Major Johnson had to leave. He's gone. His friends say he was ready to jump for joy at getting rid of his mother-in-law that was to be and his former intended. That's quite likely."

Mr. Sydney Armstrong became popular. It was the five pounds he had succeeded in landing that had this effect on him.

"But the furniture?" asked Holger Nielsen.

"The Major bought the furniture with the house. What's his name, the heir, the former owner, or his sister, had been living here until a week ago. Then he believed. The whole thing was settled on the spot, and off he went."

"What became of him?" asked Holger Nielsen.

"I don't know," was the answer. "I don't know him. But he was unmarried."

Holger Nielsen looked about him. "The furniture looks as if there had been a lady in the house. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," thought Mr. Sydney Armstrong. "It must have been the former owner's sister and her husband. He it was who arranged the studio. He painted, I believe. But, as I said, I don't know anything about the family. Major Johnson's my client. He's good enough; he's of course, so that three and a half guineas a week to three pounds, thirteen shillings and six pence, or sixty-five crowns in Danish money."

So he accompanied Mr. Sydney Armstrong to the latter's office in Gloucester road, and the agreement was signed.

It was a first-rate house, and it would come to about thirty-two crowns a week each for twelve weeks, for him and Dr. Koldby.

They could afford that, and Holger Nielsen had a right to conclude the affair; in fact, he had undertaken to do so before the right of May. For on that day Dr. Koldby and Madam Sivertsen were to move into the house and to find everything in order.

It was now the 29th of April, so it was high time the business was ended. Then there must be a studio, as Dr. Koldby was an artist and was going to paint.

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his easel and got his canvases ready. He wanted to make sketches of the river and the docks; that was the object of his journey. He also wished to study Turner at the National Gallery.

Koldby was a marine painter and doctor of medicine.

The latter against his will—his father had forced him into the profession thirty years ago or more. When the old country doctor was obliged to give up the practice, he had taken to Thisted in Jutland, Hans Koldby threw his stethoscope and instruments into a corner and invested the old man's hard earned dollars in colors and canvases. The sea attracted him. He sailed in a bark to Mexico, was wrecked on the coast of Florida, grew pineapples there, and gradually came north to New York, painting and wandering about; reached home again, exhibited, got into hot water with the fine art professors, went to Egypt and painted sphinxes and pyramids as a four merchant, came home with the professors. Meanwhile he had grown into an old fogey of about sixty. But he kept his back stiff and his spirits young. One Christmas eve in Rome he met Holger Nielsen, and they took a liking to one another. It developed into a friendship such as two rather bluff men can form; and the friendship lasted.

Dr. Koldby loved sunshine; it warmed his stiff back, as he said. He was a sun worshiper, with a bias toward Mohammedanism, which he had acquired in Egypt. There he had also learned to detect wine. In many ways he was a good Muslim. The only fault he found with the doctrine of the Prophet was in polygamy. Dr. Koldby detected women; his stiff back, as he said. He was a sun worshiper, with a bias toward Mohammedanism, which he had acquired in Egypt. There he had also learned to detect wine. In many ways he was a good Muslim. The only fault he found with the doctrine of the Prophet was in polygamy.

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hours with a dull sound, but the voices of the night grew faint and finally silent. It was a quiet night, with no moon—perfectly still; and yet Holger Nielsen seemed to hear something in the darkness. Something he could not recognize, could not explain.

It was like a child crying—or a cat whining. Not a loud caterwauling or meowing, but a low wailing, pitiable and hopeless, that came from far away. He tried to go to sleep and forget it, but the sound grew louder, more miserable. Now he knew that every house in London had at least one cat; but these were superior, well treated cats, who have rights of citizenship and a certain share of authority. They are under no restraint, and are able to enjoy life, both by day and by night. This cat, if it was a cat, must be a wretched, oppressed cat, mourning in the depths of the house. For it was in the house, it must be in the house.

Holger Nielsen listened. At last he got up, put on some clothes, lit a candle and stole out into the passage. But where the sound came from he could not make out; it arose insidiously from the deep silence, creeping along the paneling of the walls, he could approach it or retire from it, but never locate it.

Now he was in the kitchen. He stepped lightly so as not to wake his companion; then he was aware of a rustling in Madam Sivertsen's cabin, and saw a gleam of light under her door.

"Madam Sivertsen," he called softly. "Is that you, Mr. Nielsen?" came her voice. "Thank God!"

"Aren't you asleep?" asked Holger Nielsen.

"No," was the answer; "I can't sleep—there's something moving."

There was something moving, Holger Nielsen could hear it now. Like the rest of the house it was built of brown brick with a foundation of concrete. To admit air under the floor, grooves were cut in this concrete, covered with an iron grating. Nielsen went round and tested them with a rod, to see if they were level. They were.

Steadily he stopped. "Doctor," he said, "this leads somewhere. There's a room under the floor; it must be below the dining room, in the corner nearest the corridor. You'll see, the cat's there."

"Crawl in then," said the doctor; "make yourself thin and crawl in; for there's no way down from inside."

"The floor's covered with linoleum," said Nielsen.

"What are you going to tear it up?" asked Nielsen.

"I'm going to see what there is. I don't intend to have my night's rest disturbed—besides it's cruel to the animal."

"The animal?" asked the doctor.

"The cat! Well, how do you imagine it got in? That hole there is scarcely large enough for a mouse."

But the door under the linoleum, for instance, said Nielsen, with his hand on the door to the corridor.

The doctor followed him—rather petted. It was not like Nielsen, to be so restive; that was usually the doctor's own part.

The linoleum was removed—there was a trap door in the floor; it was a cellar, without stairs, but as soon as the light from the skylight fell through the little square hole in the floor there jumped out a long, thin, gray cat; a stiff-legged, disheveled cat, full of fear, but with little vitality; an old cat, lethargic cat, that limped through the corridor out into the garden and was gone.

"That was the cat," said