

Mr. Max of Scotland Yard

by Charles Oliver

V. The Spison Affair



MR. MAX brought two deck-chairs from their winter quarters, and we installed ourselves comfortably on the sunny side of his house.

"And how's the poor head?" asked my host.

"As sound as yours," I answered.

"Then you've got the best sort of a head on you," he replied, solemnly. "I'm not a boastful man, and I quite under-

stand that we don't make our own heads; they're sorted out to us, and we haven't much to say in the matter. But there's no manner of sense in calling yourself a fool when you're quite at the other end of the scale, is there now? And when you say that your head is as sound as mine, you pay yourself a compliment, Captain Grensley—a compliment, I'll be hanged if you don't!"

"You needn't tell me that," I cried. "A man who forestalled Jiu-Jitsu, who knows many ways of putting his adversary on his back, and more of strangling him artistically, for whom mysteries are no mysteries——"

"Tut! tut! interrupted Mr. Max, deprecatingly, "you make me blush."

"Who will take on seven Hooligans at a time, can use his feet as well as his hands in a tussle, is afraid of nothing and no one, can——"

"Enough, enough, Captain Grensley," said Max, frowning a little. "I shall begin to think you're having me on, and I allow no man to have me on, sir—no man."

I assured my touchy friend that I had spoken in all seriousness, and he allowed himself to be restored to his usual equanimity.

"Between ourselves," he said, when he had accepted my explanations, "I have a weak side, though you wouldn't think it. Perhaps I should say more correctly that I had a weak side once—for twenty minutes approximately. I was in love, as the phrase is, for that space of time."

Here Mr. Max actually did blush.

"If my question is not indiscreet, why did it go no further?" I asked.

"Well, of course, it was my own doing that it stopped where it did, for, if I had wished it, the girl would have had to be Mrs. Max. I should have worked it all right. I'm not a ladies' man, but the business does not want much learning. It seems to me that it's mostly mechanical."

"And she, if I may ask?"

"She was a living waxwork—a Salvation lass. Oh, it wouldn't interest you, Captain Grensley, not a little bit. A man who has been through Spion Kop, doesn't care to listen to sickly romances about women and that—blood and thunder is more in his line—war's alarms—crash! bang!"

"By no means, Mr. Max. Just the contrary, I assure you."

"Excuse me," said Mr. Max, with a firmness that showed beyond miscomprehension that he did not mean to be drawn—"excuse me. The only point of manly interest in the business is that from it dates the split with my chief. He was not best pleased with the way I had worked the thing, and allowed himself to make one or two silly remarks that I wasn't going to forget. He was a regular old stick of a routinist, and he would have all his cases run into moulds, so to speak, of his own choosing. A passably good man, but nothing extraordinary. I am not a bit of a routinist myself; I must have a free hand, just as I should have given a free hand if I had been in the chief's place. In his place,

indeed! I might have waited a hundred years for that to arrive. No, I began to see clearly that I was not a 'persona grata' at headquarters—knew a little too much I suppose—so after the Spison Affair, which I finished off in my own way, not the chief's, I made my bow."

"And what was the Spison Affair?" I asked.

"A mystery," replied Mr. Max, "that is insoluble for all men living at this moment—except myself and another. And it is for the sake of that other, that I shall use fictitious names throughout. The honour of a family is concerned."

"Two years ago, then, the chief sent me down to the little town of Crawton to get at the bottom of an affair which puzzled the local police considerably. It does not, I have observed, take much to do that, but in this case there was more ground than usual for perplexity."

"Quite out on the outskirts of Crawton, in a small cottage, there lived an old gentleman—a Mr. John Spison. He was a retired bank cashier, who had worked with the Hemsteads of Littleford in a neighbouring county. He was nearly seventy at this period, and had been at Crawton for twenty-five years. His wife had died soon after they came there, and since then Mr. John Spison had lived entirely alone. A woman went in every day to do the household work and the cooking; otherwise there were very few visitors to the cottage. Mr. Spison had only one child, a son, Mr. Edward Spison, who went out to the Colonies at the time of his father's retirement from the bank. He had since made his fortune and come home, had married into a very good family, and settled down on an estate at some considerable distance from Crawton. He made regular periodical visits to his father, and had often urged the old gentleman to go and live with him. This Mr. John Spison had always declined, preferring to preserve his independence, as he said; but it was thought that there was no love lost between him and Mrs. Edward Spison, a lady who was, perhaps, too favourably impressed by her own birth and social position."

"It had always been maintained by the gossips of Crawton that Mr. John Spison had retired from Hemstead's bank under a cloud, though what was the exact composition of this cloud the gossips could not more than surmise. The cashier was a strong and comparatively young man when he threw up his position, and on settling at Crawton with his wife had cut himself off almost completely from local society. His son had gone to the Colonies immediately, with the evident intention of being no burden on his father. Then Mrs. Spison had died, and the one or two acquaintances that the widower had made in Crawton saw him to be so broken and despondent that they almost feared for his reason. In fact, it was generally believed that the ex-cashier was developing the preliminary symptoms of mental weakness; but time as it passed brought no aggravation if it brought no amelioration of these symptoms. He lived in his cottage, silent and solitary, and his existence at Crawton was almost entirely unremarked."

"Then he had suddenly come before the world in the most startling and tragic manner. His charwoman, on going up to the house one day at her usual morning hour, had been surprised to see the doors open, for Mr. Spison did not generally rise till later. Entering her employer's study, she had found the old gentleman, fully dressed, sitting at his desk, with his head between his hands, staring down at an object at his feet. The curtains were drawn and the lamp was flickering out. The woman pulled back a curtain, and then, in the broad daylight, she saw that the dark object on the floor was the body of a man."

"When the police came it was ascertained that the stranger had been killed by a revolver bullet through his heart. The weapon had been discharged at close quarters, for the clothes were singed. The man was miserably dressed and wretchedly thin, and bore about him the marks of the habitual drunkard and loafer. I got