

THE OPEN DOOR by Francis Marlowe Author of 'The Secret of the Sandhills,' etc

CHAPTER I. The Brown Bag.

An accident to a goods train had blocked the line, and passengers travelling by the night express from the North to London, faced by the dreary prospect of waiting a couple of hours till the line was cleared by the breakdown gang, were offered the alternative of putting up at a hotel in York and resuming their journey next morning.

John Malcolm, junior partner of Malcolm & Fitzroy, Bond street jewellers, was among those who chose to spend the night at York. He was annoyed at the interruption of his journey, naturally. As for the delay, that was not a matter of extreme importance, and could be explained by a telegram to his partner. There was no business that demanded his presence in London in the morning, and by catching an early train from York he could reach Bond street comfortably during the afternoon.

One thing only caused him to hesitate before deciding to spend the night at a hotel; that was that he had with him a valuable customer who had travelled to Newcastle-on-Tyne with a valuable selection from the stock of the firm's Bond street show cases, but to his great disappointment scarcely any of the articles he had brought with him had met with the customer's approval. In the end a consolingly trifling sale was the only result of his long journey, and the plain brown travelling bag that he carried with him as he left the train was practically as rich in its contents as when he left London.

His responsibility, however, did not weigh heavily on him; he has travelled in safety many times before with jewelry quite as valuable and had no reason to fear that he was now in danger of being robbed. His hesitation, therefore, was only momentary. The prospect of supper and a comfortable night's rest was too alluring to be dismissed until traffic could be resumed. He accepted the station master's offer to provide him with a bed at the company's hotel.

The warm and cosy coffee room of the railway hotel was a welcome change from the bleak platform. Few of the passengers of the delayed train had elected to wait in their carriages while the breakdown gang was doing its work, and when John Malcolm entered the room he found that practically every table was filled and that the many sharp set appetites were keeping the waiters busy in every direction. Taking a closer survey of the room, Malcolm had already set his mind on the fact that there was a small table for two in a corner of the room, and that at that moment only one of the seats there was occupied.

Crossing the hall to reach the vacant chair, he did not notice until he reached the table that its solitary occupant was a man who had shared the same first class carriage with him in the journey from Newcastle-on-Tyne to York. Malcolm had already set his mind on the fact that there was a small table for two in a corner of the room, and that at that moment only one of the seats there was occupied.

He took it from the waiter's hand and put it on a shelf that projected from the wall at one end of the table. As he did so he glanced at the man who was seated at the other side of the table and surprised him in the act of staring with unfeigned curiosity at the brown bag. Malcolm could not forbear an interrogatory lift of his eyebrows at this unwelcome interest in his property, but the stranger's only reply was to look furtively at him for a moment and then push back his chair and leave the room. About two minutes afterward he returned and resumed his interrupted meal without betraying any further interest in Malcolm or the brown bag.

Interested somewhat by the peculiarity of the man, Malcolm, in the course of his meal, looked him over rather more carefully than he would otherwise have done. The man was evidently well over fifty, but still in the prime of his vigor, and

judging by his massive build, of considerable physical strength. His face was ruddy and weather beaten, and his hair and moustache, both worn closely cropped, were perfectly gray. Fierce looking, reddish eyes were deep-sunken under gray, heavy eyebrows, and the bullet-shaped head and square, ugly looking underjaw gave him a particularly pugnacious appearance. Probably a well-to-do bookmaker, Malcolm evidently decided, but certainly a very ugly customer to have a quarrel with.

When Malcolm left the table to adjourn to the smoking room for a cigar before retiring the stranger was still sitting there, but the jeweller's interest in him had grown cold and all thought of the man had passed from his mind when he finished his cigar and sought his bedroom.

CHAPTER II. The Door of Room 35.

John Malcolm's bedroom was No. 42 in the second floor corridor, and as the rest of the staff of the hotel had disappeared for the night he offered to show him the way to it. Malcolm declined the offer, however, confident of being able to find the room unaided. As it turned out it was a matter of no difficulty, for though the corridors and staircases were almost in darkness, they were dimly lighted by a small jet of gas at each landing, when he got to the head of the second stairway he saw that number 42 was among the doors on the left hand side of the door on the gas jet, and that there was a painted hand that directed him to turn to the left in search of his room.

As he took the turning indicated he noticed the absolute stillness of his surroundings. The silence was so complete that he was almost startled for even his own footsteps were deadened by the thick druggery that covered the floor of the gloomy corridor from end to end.

A momentary inspection of the numbers on the doors immediately right and left of him told him that 42 was the fourth door on the left hand side of the door on the gas jet, and that there was a painted hand that directed him to turn to the left in search of his room.

Impressed rather more than he would have thought possible by the sepulchral gloom and quiet of the corridor, he experienced a distinct feeling of relief when he at last drew abreast of the door of room 42. He gripped the handle of the door and turned it. The door yielded to his pressure without a sound. As he swung it open a strange feeling that there was some one close behind him caused him to glance hastily over his shoulder. As he did so his nerves received a curious shock, his grip on the door handle grew tense and every muscle of his body stiffened as though impressed by the need to prepare for some unexpected encounter.

The door opposite to room 42 was moving slowly, noiselessly back. With an uneasy feeling that something queer was about to happen Malcolm stood motionless, watching the moving door. Then suddenly his common sense reasserted itself and he turned fully around to make sure that he had not been deceived by the gloom into an illusion for which the shadows were responsible.

But no! The door opposite to him was certainly receding, and if the movement was due to human agency there was neither sound nor sign to support this explanation of the curious occurrence. For at least a minute Malcolm watched the door to make sure that he had not been deceived by the gloom into an illusion for which the shadows were responsible.

For a brief space longer he watched the opposite door, but it showed no further sign of movement. Thoroughly on his guard now, he closed the door and again lighted the gas. Then he examined the lock of the door and found that it was strong and in good order. He turned the key, made sure that the door was locked and then began to undress himself. His last action before getting into bed was to place the bag of jewelry at the bedside, within reach of his hand. Five minutes later he was asleep.

CHAPTER III. Robbed!

Malcolm awoke suddenly, with all his senses alert and impressed vividly with the feeling that some one had either called him or touched him. He had just raised himself on one elbow when a cold draught of air blew straight across his face. Amazed at this, for he knew that his window was shut when he went to sleep, he turned his head and saw that the window curtains were fluttering. Plainly the window was open.

Malcolm heard the clock of an adjacent church ring out the hour of six while he still stared toward the window. As the last peal died away he sat upright suddenly, for his ears had caught the sound of some stealthy movement in his room. He peered toward where he fancied the sound came from, but his eyes could not pierce the darkness that surrounded him. The heavy blind that shrouded the window completely obscured the dim morning light.

This time he did not spend a moment in speculation. He stepped instantly into his room, turned off the gas and placed himself so that, himself unseen, he could watch the door of room 35.

That the door had opened quietly at his first approach and had then been shut, to reopen stealthily when he returned to his room, brought it into range as a suspicious circumstance that might reasonably be supposed to have some connection with the fact that there was £10,000 worth of jewelry in his brown bag. He peered from the dense blackness of his room across the gloomy corridor, determined to get to the bottom of the mystery of the moving door of room 35.

Malcolm still stood watching. His eyes never shifted their steady stare at the opposite door, but nothing occurred to reward his scrutiny. The door again hung at rest, as if it had never been touched. Malcolm was on the point of crossing the corridor to boldly seek an explanation when he was thrilled by the discovery that two Malcom's eyes were gleaming from the opposite doorway.

In the shock of the discovery Malcolm saw that the man who had shared the carriage with him and he made an involuntary movement to step further back, but he realized in time to check himself that he was actually shrouded by the gloom. But the brown bag was still in his hand, so to prepare himself for what was to follow he bent and laid it noiselessly on the floor.

Being young, strong and athletic, he felt quite able to cope with any attack that might be made on him.

The gleaming eyes advanced out of the darkness of room 35, and Malcolm realized with a quiver of excitement that the silent watcher was the man who had shared the same carriage with him from Newcastle-on-Tyne, the man with whom he had shared the table at supper.

He saw the lady figure of this man advance until it almost filled the doorway of room 35; he saw the massive head thrust forward and knew that the fierce eyes were staring from under their shaggy brows in an effort to pierce the darkness of room 42. Then the man moved forward with a threatening gesture.

Malcolm braced himself for the struggle that he felt was coming, but half way across the corridor the man halted, stood motionless for a moment and then stepped swiftly back into his own room and noiselessly closed the door.

The man's long breath and the tension of his muscles relaxed. His first impulse at this unexpected trace was to hurry down stairs and deposit his bag of jewelry in the hotel safe. Then he recollected that there was no one down stairs but the night porter. He decided that the jewelry would be safer in his own charge.

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Malcolm curiously, looking out his arm toward room 35. Then the big man's powers of speech returned and he broke out into a furious outburst.

"I'm going to catch a train at twenty past six," he belittled. "You can do what you like with the room then, but no one enters it until I leave it and if I miss my train some one will pay heavily for it."

Malcolm answered him. He had been peering just the busy figure into the room behind him.

"I'm afraid you won't catch that train today," he remarked indignantly, for he had caught sight of a brown bag lying on a chair inside room 35.

"Will you send for the police?" he added, turning to the manager, and handing him one of his business cards.

The manager, who was looking from accuser to accused with a pale, worried face, took the card and glanced at it. He looked from it to the big man at the door of room 35.

"Will you let us search your room?" he asked.

"No, I will not," roared the other angrily, and gazing around into his room, slammed the door behind him and locked it.

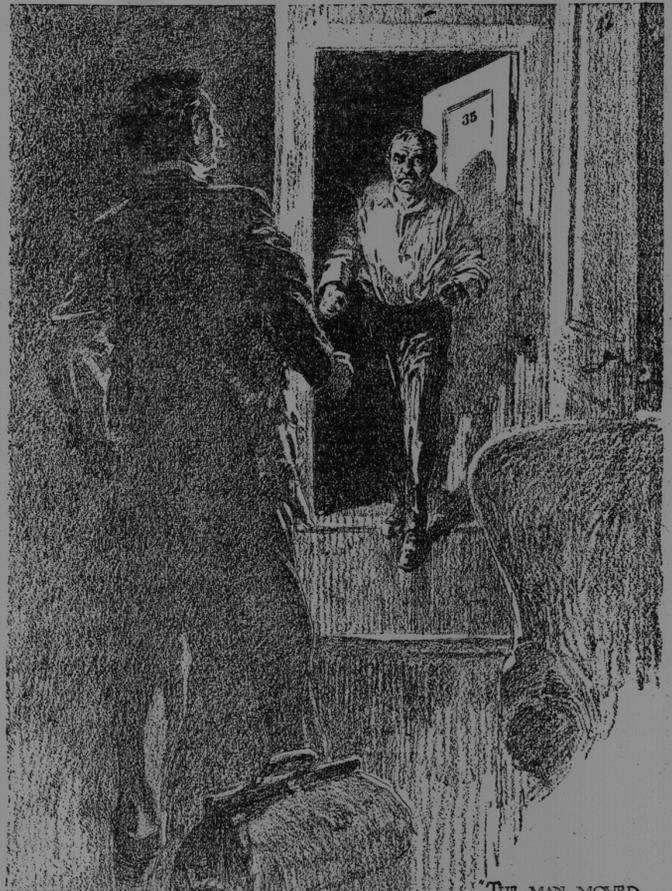
Two policemen were walking heavily along the corridor when the occupant of room 35 stepped out to catch the 6.20 train. He was clad in a cap and a heavy overcoat, he carried a travelling rug over his left arm and underneath the folds of the rug the end of the brown bag was just visible. His face was still blazing with anger.

Malcolm impulsively snatched the bag when he caught sight of it, but the big man swung it back and his right hand caught the jeweller a staggering blow on the chest. The next moment the policeman intervened and the brown bag was in their possession.

"You say this is your bag, sir?" said one of the policemen to Malcolm, while the big man belittled forth a volley of profanity. "Will you give me some description of the contents?"

"I want that room searched," replied Malcolm curtly, clinging out his arm toward room 35.

Malcolm quickly and briefly gave sufficient particulars to identify his property. The policeman opened the bag and within it was the jewelry as the jeweller described it.



THE MAN MOVED FORWARD WITH A THREATENING GESTURE.

CHAPTER IV. A Painful Situation.

"The police seem to think there has been some very strange mistake, Malcolm," said Mr. Fitzroy. "I hope it does not turn out that they are right."

"What mistake can there possibly be?" questioned Malcolm irritably. "The man was certainly caught with the jewelry in his possession. What clearer proof can the police want that he was the thief?"

One of Malcolm's first acts after the recovery of the jewelry was to telegraph to his senior partner, at Bond street, and ask him to take the first train to York. Mr. Fitzroy, wondering at the urgency of the message, arrived at York late in the afternoon. He had seen the police who had taken possession of the jewelry until the case should be dealt with by a magistrate, and had corroborated Malcolm's identification of it. The two partners were now sitting in room 35 discussing the unfortunate business. Room 35 was the only unoccupied room at the hotel when Mr. Fitzroy arrived, and though he was told that the jewel robber had occupied it on the previous night he had raised no objection to having it assigned to him.

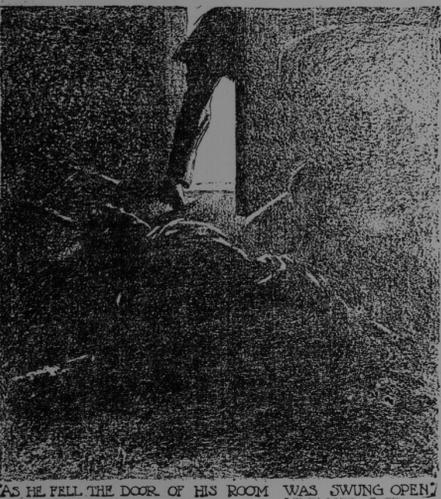
"Personally I do not see how there can be any mistake," said the senior partner. "You caught the man redhanded. The police, however, have discovered that their prisoner is a Mr. Ivor Watson, a well known, wealthy and highly respected Northumbrian solicitor. They still have him under arrest, of course, and he will be brought before a magistrate to-morrow."

"Extraordinary!" ejaculated Malcolm. "Why, the man dogged me like a professional thief."

Mr. Fitzroy was evidently much perturbed. "It's curious, very curious," he remarked, as he stared thoughtfully at his junior partner. "It would be a very painful matter if it turned out that he was charging an innocent man."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Malcolm testily. As he spoke he rose from his chair. The door of the room had just swung open and he stepped toward it to see who wished to enter. He found no one there, however, so he shut the door sharply and turned again to his partner.

"The man had the jewelry and was on the point of leaving the hotel when I caught him," he said. "The senior partner found this remarkable man's possession of the jewelry until he was silent."



AS HE FELT THE DOOR OF HIS ROOM WAS SWUNG OPEN

MRS. GOLIGHTLY'S CHESS LESSON

BY LONNE STEVENS

"Now, dear, I'll teach you how to play chess," said Mr. Golightly, as he settled himself for the evening. "Get the board and men, and you may bring my pipe too."

"I'll put a book on my lap. I've been studying the rules, but I didn't see anything about jiggling."

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