

Peter looked round with an extravagant show of caution.

"Any difference since I was there?" he whispered.

"I think C. Hall has been repainted," said Amber gravely.

Peter shook his head in depreciation.

"I don't suppose I'd know the place now," he said regretfully; "is the Governor's room still off A. Hall?"

Amber made no reply other than a nod.

The little man poured out the tea, and handed a cup to the visitor.

"Peter," said Amber, as he stirred the tea slowly, "where can I stay?"

"Here?"

Peter's face lit up and his voice was eager.

Amber nodded.

"They're after you, are they?" the other demanded with a chuckle. "You stay here, my boy. I'll dress you up in the finest disguise you ever saw, whiskers an' wig; I'll smuggle you down to the river, an' we'll get you aboard—"

Amber laughed.

"Oh, my Peter!" he chuckled. "Oh, my law-breaker! No, it's not the police—don't look so sad, you heartless little man—no, I'm avoiding criminals—real wicked criminals, my Peter, not petty hooks like me, or victims of circumstance like you, but men of the big mob—top hole desperadoes, my Peter, worse than Denver Dick or Michigan Mike or Settler Sam, or any of those gallant fellows."

Peter pointed an accusing finger.

"You betrayed 'em, an' they're after you," he said solemnly. "They've sworn a vendetta—"

Amber shook his head.

"I'm after them," he corrected, "and the vendetta swearing has been all on my side. No, my Peter, I'm Vertuous Mike—I'm the great detective from Pank Street, S.W. I want to watch somebody without the annoyance of their watchin' me."

Peter was interested.

His eyes gleamed through his spectacles, and his hands trembled in his excitement.

"I see, I see," he nodded vigorously.

"You're going to frustrate 'em."

"Frustrate" is the very word I should have used," said Amber.

CHAPTER IV.

Lambaire Needs a Chart.

LAMBAIRE had an office in the city, where he conducted a business. No man knew what the business was. There was a brass plate on the door which offered no solution other than that—

J. LAMBAIRE

(and at Paris)

might be found within. He had callers, wrote and received letters, and disappeared at odd intervals, whither none knew, though "and at Paris" might be a plausible explanation.

Some said he was an agent, a vague description which might mean anything; others, a financier, though optimistic folk, with airy projects, requiring a substantial flotation, were considerably disappointed to find he had no money to spare for freakish and adventurous promotions.

So many strange people had offices in the city, with no apparent object, that Lambaire's business did not form the subject of too close an inquiry.

It was announced that once upon a time he had financed an expedition to Central Africa, and if this were true, there was every reason for his presence at No. 1, Flair Lane, E.C. Other men had financed similar expeditions, had established themselves in similar offices, and, through the years, had waited for some return for the money they had spent. Such was a matter of history.

Yet Lambaire had a business, and a very profitable business. He was known by his bankers to be a silver broker, by yet another banker to possess an interest in the firm of Flithenstein & Borris, a firm of printers; he had shares in a line of tramp steamers which had gained an unenviable reputation in shipping circles; he was interested, if truth be told, in a hundred and one affairs, small and large, legitimate or shady.

He owned a horse or two; obliging horses that won when he backed them, and were at the wrong end of the course when he did not.

Two days following the hasty departure of Amber, he was in his office. It

was the luncheon hour, and he pulled on his gloves slowly. A smile lingered at the corners of his mouth, and there was a satisfied twinkle in his eye.

His secretary stood expectantly by the desk, mechanically sorting a sheaf of notes.

MR. LAMBAIRE walked slowly to the door of his private room, then paused, with a show of irresolution.

"Perhaps it would be better to write to-night," he said dubiously. The secretary nodded, and depositing his papers on the desk, opened a note-book.

"Perhaps it would," said Lambaire, as though questioning himself. "Yes, it might as well be done to-night."

"Dear Sir" (he began, and the secretary scribbled furiously),—"Dear Sir, I have to acknowledge your letter re Great Forest Diamond Mine. Full stop. I understand your—er—annoyance—"

"Impatience?" suggested the secretary.

"Impatience," accepted the dictator, but the work is going forward. Full stop. Regarding your offer to take up further shares, comma, I have to inform you that my Board are—"

"Is," corrected the secretary.

"Is," continued Mr. Lambaire, "prepared to allow you the privilege, subject to the approval of our—"

"Its," said the secretary.

"Its brokers. Yours faithfully."

Lambaire lit a cigar.

"How's that?" he asked jovially.

"Very good, sir," said the secretary, rubbing his hands, "a good thing for the Board—"

"For me," said Mr. Lambaire, without embarrassment.

"I said the Board," said the pale-faced secretary, and chuckled at the subtlety of the humour.

Something was pleasing Lambaire today, and the secretary took advantage of the spell of good humour.

"About this letter, there have been all sorts of people here to-day," he said suggestively, and Lambaire, once more on his way to the door, looked round sharply.

"What the devil do you mean, Grene?" he demanded, all the joviality wiped from his face.

His subordinate shifted uneasily; he was on a delicate topic. Lambaire trusted him to a point; it was safe that he should confess his knowledge of Lambaire's affairs—up to that point.

"It is this African affair," said the clerk.

Lambaire stood by the door, his head sunk in thought.

"I suppose you told them—?"

"I told them the usual yarn—that our surveyor was visiting the property, and that we expected to hear from him soon. One chap—Buxteds' clerk—got a bit cheeky, and I—"

"Yes, and—?"

"He said he didn't believe we knew where the mine was ourselves."

Lambaire's smile was a trifle forced.

"Ridiculous," he said, without any great heartiness. "As if one could float a diamond mining company without knowing where the property is—absurd, isn't it, Grene?"

"Very, sir," said the secretary politely.

Lambaire still stood by the door.

"The map was in the prospectus, the mine is just on the edge—Etruri Forest—isn't that the name?"

The secretary nodded, watching him.

"Buxteds' man, eh?" Lambaire was perturbed, for Buxteds are the shadiest and the sharpest solicitors in London, and they did not love him.

"If Buxteds get to know," he stopped—"what I mean is that if Buxteds thought they could blackmail me—"

He went out, thinking deeply.

There is nothing quite as foolish as floating a company, and by specious advertising to attract the money of the speculating public, when the very *raison d'être* of the company is non-existent. If there is one thing in the world that is necessary for the prosperity of a diamond mining concession, it is a diamond mine, and there were reasons why that couldn't be included in the assets of the company. The first reason was that Lambaire did not know within a hundred leagues where the property was situated; the second—and one not without importance—he possessed no certain knowledge that he had the right to dispose of the property, even if he knew where it was.

(To be continued.)

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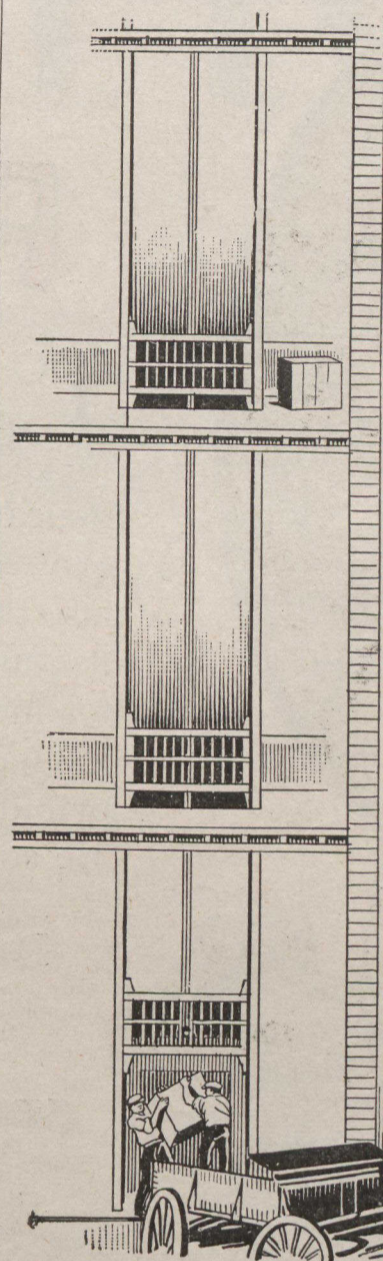
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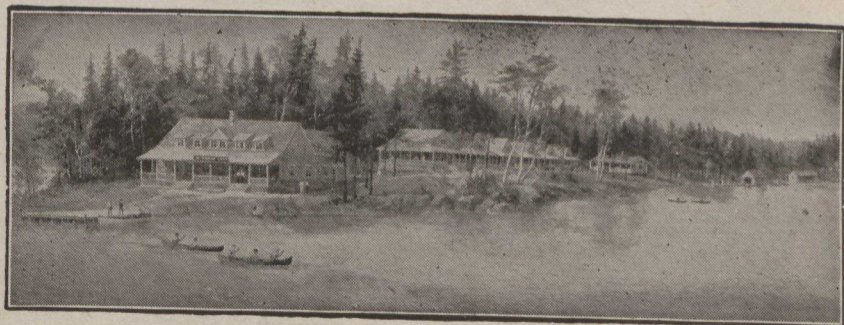
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