

Mr. Max of Scotland Yard

by Charles Oliver

IV. Tang Corner



THE next morning Doidge came to my room at eight o'clock.

"Mister - know - everything - there - is - to - be - known - and - something - else - besides was right, and I could have been right too, if I liked to talk," he said, drawing back the curtain to let the sun come streaming in. "The wind's got bang round to the north, and I expect we're in for a fine

spell. Not that you'll be able to get on the river inside of a couple of days; it's coming down pea-soup. And how's the head?"

"Much better, thanks," I answered. "It's like everything else: it only wants sun. There's something I want to ask you, Mr. Doidge. You won't be offended? Why are you so down on Mr. Max?"

"Look here, Captain," said the old man, solemnly, "it isn't Max I'm down on; it's Max's confounded tongue. Did you ever hear such a jabber-pot? Talk, talk, talk; well, there, sometimes I can't sit still. I have to take and go right out of my bar. And I tell you, Captain, I'm not best pleased with myself for havin' sent you up to him. These yarns of his ain't no good at all for a gentleman with a touch of fever and a sabre-cut across his head. Now, are they?"

"Come, Mr. Doidge," I remonstrated. "You aren't serious!"

"Oh, I am, though," he said, "right serious. You don't sleep well, and you lie thinkin' and thinkin' till you get as nervous as nervous. What was that you were tellin' me about a dream, or some foolishness, the other night? I didn't know when I sent you to him that it was to be stories. I thought he'd give you a book or two, though what you want with them books is more'n I can make out."

"And that's all you've got against Mr. Max?" I asked.

"Yes, that's all," he replied. "For I don't make no objection to a man's being a teetotaler, though when it comes to spoutin' his new-fangled notions in a respectable bar, Captain, I don't call it gentlemanly. Now I ask you?"

"It is certainly inconsiderate," I answered. "I'm sure it's nothing more."

"A man has got no call to be inconsiderate, grumbled my old host. "It isn't much of an excuse to say a fellow's only inconsiderate. You might just as well say of a murderer that he is only bloodthirsty."

This happy illustration restored Doidge to his customary good temper, and he left me with his usual cheery "All hands on deck!"

I smiled to myself several times during the morning over the old man's solemn harangue, which I could not take seriously at all. For the dream in which I had been haunted by a persistent Max was only a concomitant of my fever, which presented to me in an alarming form the last person whom I had seen in the evening. If it had been an Archbishop, it would have been the same. His Grace would have pursued me through dreamland with a monstrous crozier and an exaggerated mitre. It was always so with me, and I could not hold Mr. Max and his stories responsible for my feverish nights.

After lunch I went out on to the moor. Doidge was at his bar-room window.

"Max again, I s'pose?" he called out to me. "I wish you wouldn't. I tell you, you'll have those bad nights again. Go for a good walk; it's better for you than jabber."

"Perhaps I may combine the two," I suggested.

The old man shook his head. "Well, I've warned you, and I can't do any more," he said. "You must act as you please."

I was feeling rather slack and weak when I left the house, but the keen air of the moor soon put life into me. It was a glorious day—a brilliant blue sky and the earth full of colour. The ground was still soaked, and the air was alive with the chatter of a thousand unseen watercourses, but the wind had dried the heather, and it was pleasant going. I found Mr. Max at his door, engaged in some little gardening job. Salewski was in his usual place on the threshold.

"Good-afternoon," I called out from the road. "I wondered if you were inclined for a walk?"

"You quite startled me," he said, turning round slowly.

"I should never have thought so," I remarked.

"Oh, of course, I don't shew it," he replied. "You learn that very young in our profession. And now you see what an imprudent thing I have done in putting you on cordial terms with Salewski. You might have got right up to me without my seeing you."

"And where does the imprudence come in?" I asked.

"I am not one of your old clients, you know."

"That's true," he answered, "and I was only joking."

"How about the walk?" I asked.

"I've got to finish this potting, and can't come out to-day," he said.

"Shall I be in your way if I stop here a little?" I asked.

"Delighted," he answered. "I shall be an hour over this job, and then we can have a talk."

He got me a chair, and I sat watching him and admiring his deftness.

"Oh, yes," he said in reply to a remark of mine, "I know all about it. I caught it from a client of mine who was great at potting, and combined this art with a mania for gold watches—other people's gold watches. I could not for a long time discover where the watches went, but at last I managed to connect the watches with the potting. And now," he went on, straightening his back and rubbing the soil off his hands, "I am at your service. What shall it be? A reminiscence?"

"Doidge thinks that your reminiscences are not good for me," I said. "Too exciting; disturb my slumbers."

"Disturb fiddlesticks!" cried Mr. Max, indignantly. "You are not a child, Captain Grensley. A man who was through Spion Kop is not so easily disturbed, I should say. Besides, I don't tell you any horrors, only my lighter cases. Exciting, indeed! Doidge is an old idiot. Don't you mind about him. Look here, while I wash my hands, you might run through my index and see if any name has an attraction for you. There is the book on the top shelf."

"What is this 'Tang Corner'?" I asked, when he came in.

"Ah! Tang Corner," he answered, settling himself down in his chair. "Yes, that will do. It's mild enough to satisfy old Doidge himself, you'll see."

"A few years ago a large town in the west—I need not specify—was troubled by a band of ruffians, on which the police found it difficult to lay their hands. The band worked at irregular intervals, and all over the city; it was impossible to know when or where they would turn up next. Their specialty consisted in throwing their man backwards and bringing him on to his head; then, while he was half stunned, they relieved him of everything he had on him. The police could not discover the details of their method, as most of the victims were so dazed by the shock that they could remember nothing at all. Almost all that was known was that the confederacy had adopted the appropriate name of 'The Rips.'

"The chief fixed on me to go down, 'For,' says he, 'it's a stiff job, and needs a man of some class. Besides, there's a very fair chance of getting killed by that