

ON SECRET SERVICE

By John Mowbray

A Detective Story in Two Parts

CHAPTER 1

The Hunt Begins

BEHIND the locked door of the Government office in London the man who had been speaking in grave and anxious undertones now paused to fix a searching look on his companion, a boy occupying a chair drawn close to the table.

The boy held his breath beneath that considering look, which seemed reading every thought of his. At last, with a restless movement, "Uncle Richard," he broke out, "you are wondering whether I'm old enough to be trusted?"

"Old enough to be trusted?" echoed the man. "No, I should hardly have summoned you here had I felt doubts on that score. Especially, David, as you belong to a family which has served the State so faithfully for so long. Oh, no! It isn't your trustworthiness I'm debating."

"Then, what, please?" the boy urged.

"I'm asking myself: should I send you into such peril?"

"But I don't count, Uncle Richard." It was uttered simply, without any show or bravado, and at the utterance the man inclined his head.

"No, David," he answered; "beside the safety of the country neither your safety nor that of any one of us counts. Well, you know what we're up against," he continued more briskly. "As I have told you, I am responsible for the recovery of those documents. And I wish I could employ one of our usual agents. But we have been given cause to suspect that those who are working against us have discovered the identity of our trustiest agents in London." Sir Richard Wakeling frowned. "And directly a secret-service man is known his utility ceases."

David nodded. "So your very best chance of throwing the thief off his guard is to slip someone on to his track whom he'd never suspect!"

"It is that consideration which weighs with me, David. But I cannot tell you, because we have no idea who the thieves are or for whom they are acting. I can only tell you that the papers they have stolen are so vital that at any and every hazard Great Britain must recover them."

The boy's eyes were shining.

"I should furnish you, David, with our usual secret material, with money, with the names and addresses of foreign spies in London and of their haunts, and so forth. But otherwise you would have to play a lone hand."

"I see, sir," the boy said.

"I doubt if you do quite," Sir Richard continued, with great earnestness. "By playing a lone hand I mean this, precisely: that on no account, whatever befalls, must you get into direct touch either with me or this department. For if you try to do that you may expose both yourself and your mission."

David thrilled with the chance that was being held out to him.

"Sir, you'll trust me?" he craved.

"Yes," Sir Richard responded; "my mind is made up. I shall trust you because I know you have plenty of courage and uncommonly sharp wits. But mainly do I trust you because, as I have said, you hail from a family which has served the State long and never let it down yet. Succeed and your country will have reason to thank you. That's a proud trust, David. Keep your lips sealed." Then he rose, and after adding some further instructions he conducted the lad to the door, and, having unlocked it, he stood in the doorway and watched the strong, resolute figure growing smaller and smaller as it receded down the long corridor.

As David stepped out into the street a broad sun was shining, men and women swung cheerfully by on their business, the omnibuses rolled past, the shop windows beckoned. It seemed to him as he came back into this scene so usual, so commonplace, so familiar that his interview with his uncle had been all a dream.

He glanced at his watch. Little more than an hour ago he, David Renwick, had been a mere boy and a nobody. A mere boy he remained and a nobody to all appearances—but how his world had changed in 65 minutes!

He was carrying his head high. As he jumped on a bus he debated how much to tell his people at home, having received Sir Richard's permission at the last moment to take his father and mother into his confidence. He had next to debate with himself how to start on his task. That

night he shut himself up and learned off by heart all the names and addresses Sir Richard Wakeling had given him. This done, he destroyed every scrap of such paper he had.

In the morning he changed some of Sir Richard's treasury notes for readier money of smaller denominations, and was coming away and passing beneath a scaffolding on which labourers were engaged demolishing a building when a heavy balk of timber crashed down on the pavement. Had he not chanced to pause for the barest instant, he reckoned, before stepping onward from under the scaffolding's shelter, that falling timber could hardly have missed him. But he thought no more of it till the afternoon incident.

And that gave him much food for thought, and for apprehension. He had entered a little eating-house down by the docks, this being one of the places appearing on Sir Richard's list, and, strolling across to a table, had called for some coffee, with bread and cheese to simulate genuine hunger, when as he sipped his coffee, steaming and fragrant, first he noticed the other customers slipping out, next his head dropped forward and consciousness faded away.

They had drugged him. That fragrant coffee was drugged. What saved him? At first, as his senses returned, he could not have said. He was then aware that the room was filled with a party of sight-seers whom chance had brought to the place on a tour of the docks. They thought he was fast asleep. They roused him and chafed him. With a splitting headache and bitter taste on his tongue, he went off but as he went he perceived, from the corner of his eye, the swarthy proprietor, arms folded on breast, regarding him with thwarted malevolence.

"Phew! A narrow squeak!" David decided when he reached home.

Both these disquieting incidents caused him to wonder how his enemies had got so soon on his track. And that speculation immediately started another. Did Sir Richard's office harbour a traitor who had stealthily passed the word along for his shadowing? In which event it seemed a reasonable assumption that the documents had been abstracted by that same traitor. Had the rogue conveyed them already to the unknown purchaser? Or might he be waiting till the search had died down?

Round this contingency did David's mind hover. But the fog in which he was groping had lifted sufficiently to reveal one aspect he would rather have been without. It showed him in fact that not only was he the hunter but also the hunted. This unpleasant realisation prompted his next step. Without delay he moved from his home into lodgings in the most unlikely quarter his wits could devise. Thus did David Renwick vanish into the void.

CHAPTER 2

Three Fifties

AND soon someone else began to speculate also. This was Sir Richard Wakeling in his room in Whitehall.

As day followed day without any indication that the missing documents had passed into the wrong hands the anxious man's musings dwelt constantly on that slim figure which he had watched from his door on its way down his long silent corridor. What was David doing now? Had he failed? Had it been wise to use him?

As he finished his work this evening a glance at the calendar reminded him that eleven full days had passed since David's departure on the quest. Eleven days, while every hour was vital! The suspense was an agony. But his manner betrayed nothing of his feelings when, taking his hat and his umbrella so beautifully rolled—Whitehall never saw an umbrella so creaseless as Sir Richard's—he passed from the building with a cheerful goodnight to the janitor and strode to the Underground Railway for his train home.

And how his neighbours in that train would have gasped had they known what cares and responsibilities made up the daily life of this staid, well-dressed individual who presently was seating himself in their midst. He might have been any prosperous professional man with a lucrative day's work behind him. He might have known no more of the secrets of State than any of the strap-hangers who crowded in.

Sir Richard's particular strap-hanger, that is to say, the man clinging on to the strap immediately above him, was a pasty-faced creature with a cigarette behind his ear and a shabby overcoat. Every time the burdened train swung round a curve this person lost balance and was precipitated almost into Sir Richard's lap. At last the victim considered he'd had enough of it.

"Confound you, man!" he protested.

"Can't you move further forward!"

JACKO CURES A COLD

THE floods were still causing Monkeyville a great deal of inconvenience.

It didn't worry Father Jacko very much, for Adolphus was out and about again, and his little car ran the two of them into the town in no time.

"Atishoo!" said Baby at breakfast one morning. "Atishoo!"

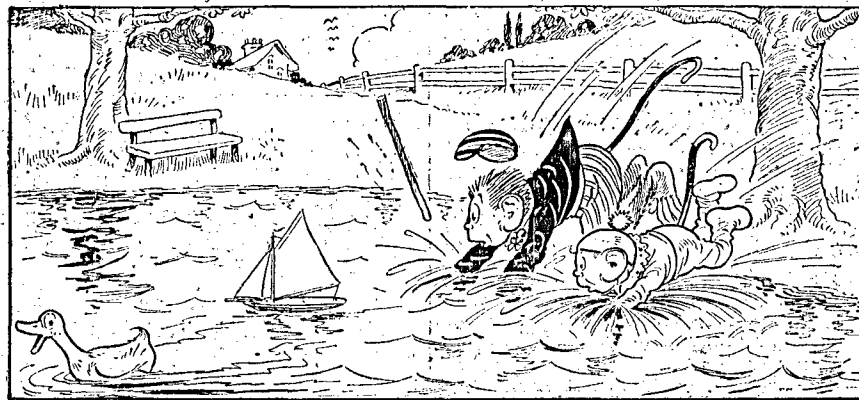
"Just hark at the child!" cried Mother Jacko. "I do hope he hasn't

"No fear!" said Jacko stoutly. "Come on!" And away they went.

"This isn't the way to the pond," said Baby, as they ran along.

"Pond!" scoffed Jacko. "We're going to the river. Lots more fun."

It was. But the water was moving swiftly in places and they had to move fast to keep up with it. It was almost too swift for Baby's little craft.



In a second they were both in the water

taken Adolphus's cold. You'd better not go out today, darling," she added.

But Baby hated being indoors, and when Mother Jacko ran out to see a neighbour he set up a howl that brought Jacko downstairs at a gallop.

"Who's murdering you?" he asked.

"Want to sail my boat on the pond!" sobbed Baby.

"Well, come on then," said Jacko, who rather enjoyed playing about with boats himself.

Baby's sobs ceased. "I haven't got a cold, have I?" he said.

Jacko had it firmly on a string. Baby thought he had had it long enough. He tried to snatch it out of his hand.

"Look out!" cried Jacko, holding on.

Baby tugged. The string snapped, and away went the boat!

Jacko leaned over and tried to grab it, bumped into Baby—and in a second they were both in the water.

They were soaked. Mother Jacko was in a terrible state when she saw them. But the curious thing was that if Baby had ever had a cold the wetting seemed to have cured it.

"Sorry, gov'nor," muttered the man, as he straightened himself.

Stations were reached, and were left behind; the crush thinned, but it did not thin appreciably at this rush hour, for as some passengers struggled out others came pushing in. Many of these newcomers went squeezing past Sir Richard's man, who clutched doggedly to the same wretched strap all the time.

Sir Richard was losing his temper. "Please get off my toes!" he snapped.

"Sorry, gov'nor!" "Sorry!" the man replied affably, as he managed to lift his disengaged hand to his car and remove the cigarette to its place between his lips.

"This isn't a smoking compartment," Sir Richard said tartly.

A grin was the only rejoinder.

"And," continued Sir Richard, more and more nettled, "I might suggest that you are travelling in the wrong class."

The man appeared unabashed. "Right first pop, gov'nor, but there ain't no room in the thirds." Then, freeing a box of safety matches from his coat pocket, he displayed it in a companionable way to Sir Richard. "Now, look here, gov'nor. I ask you," he uttered. "Would you reckon that the manufacturers give us a square deal? How many matches ought there to be in a box, gov'nor?"

"I can't say, I'm sure," Sir Richard answered indifferently.

"I says as they ought to give us 100." "Then you'd better write and tell them so," smiled Sir Richard.

"There are 50 safety matches in this box, gov'nor."

As the man finished speaking the train slowed down for a station. He grunted, released his strap, and pushed his way out, while Sir Richard leaned back with a sigh of hearty relief.

A few days afterwards, having stepped into his club, he popped his head into the card-room in search of a friend, to find no one there except the senior card-waiter, who stood at the window watching the traffic go by. So Sir Richard withdrew his head, and was closing the door again when the waiter swung round and called out to him.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Richard," the waiter apologised. "I saw your reflection in the glass. Is there anything I can do for you, sir?" he requested.

"Have you seen Mr Carfax?"

"No. He hasn't been in yet, sir. Could you spare me one moment, Sir Richard?"

Then, leading the way across the room, the man slowly took a pack of cards out of the cupboard. He extended it. "This is one of the last lot supplied, sir. But, Sir Richard, there are only 50 cards in this pack!"

"Instead of the usual 52, eh?" laughed Sir Richard.

"Precisely, sir. Merely 50, sir," answered the waiter.

"Well, I can't help it," Sir Richard declared, with another laugh.

But he did not feel like laughing; he felt like shouting with rage. For here was he, worried almost out of his senses, being bothered about a trifle like two missing playing-cards. Controlling himself, he remarked, "I am not on the card-room committee. Tell Mr Carfax about it. And tell him as well I've been looking for him. Good-day."

"Good-day, sir. Thank you, sir. Yes, I'll tell Mr Carfax."

The waiter closed the door and returned to the window.

There was no abatement of the hideous suspense. Each longer than its forerunner, seven more days passed. So alarmed Sir Richard became that nightly now on his way home he bought every late edition of the evening papers on the feverish chance that some scrap of news concerning the missing papers might have escaped him. Yet, in fact, what a hopeless chance! Aye, the drowning man's straw. For did not that muffled telephone in his room whisper all in his ear before any newspaper had it.

Still, the chance of straw must be clutched at. In some corner of some paper he might find, tucked away, an insignificant paragraph that to him, and to him alone, might seem with significance.

And always he bought from the same old man on the kerb. Tonight, when this man had supplied him and was fumbling for change, he looked up at Sir Richard from under his eyebrows; then, glancing furtively round him, spoke in a hoarse, hurried whisper: "I have only 50 papers left to sell now, sir."

"That's fine!" said Sir Richard. "Oh, keep the change. And goodnight to you."

And presently, in his study at home, he sat pondering. "Fifty matches. Fifty playing-cards. Fifty newspapers. Now, that's very odd—that's very odd."

TO BE CONCLUDED