

THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY IN NEW YORK

Algernon Blackwood

First Published: 'Pall Mall Magazine' Dec 1900

I

It was never quite clear to me how Jim Shorthouse managed to get his private secretaryship; but, once he got it, he kept it, and for some years he led a steady life and put money in the savings bank.

One morning his employer sent for him into the study, and it was evident to the secretary's trained senses that there was something unusual in the air.

"Mr. Shorthouse," he began, somewhat nervously, "I have never yet had the opportunity of observing whether or not you are possessed of personal courage."

Shorthouse gasped, but he said nothing. He was growing accustomed to the eccentricities of his chief. Shorthouse was a Kentish man; Sidebotham was "raised" in Chicago; New York was the present place of residence.

"But," the other continued, with a puff at his very black cigar, "I must consider myself a poor judge of human nature in future, if it is not one of your strongest qualities."

The private secretary made a foolish little bow in modest appreciation of so uncertain a compliment. Mr. Jonas B. Sidebotham watched him narrowly, as the novelists say, before he continued his remarks.

"I have no doubt that you are a plucky fellow and--" He hesitated, and puffed at his cigar as if his life depended upon it keeping alight.

"I don't think I'm afraid of anything in particular, sir--except women," interposed the young man, feeling that it was time for him to make an observation of some sort, but still quite in the dark as to his chief's purpose.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Well, there are no women in this case so far as I know. But there may be other things that--that hurt more."

"Wants a special service of some kind, evidently," was the secretary's reflection. "Personal violence?" he asked aloud.

"Possibly (puff), in fact (puff, puff) probably."

Shorthouse smelt an increase of salary in the air. It had a stimulating effect.

"I've had some experience of that article, sir," he said shortly; "but I'm ready to undertake anything in reason."

"I can't say how much reason or unreason there may prove to be in this particular case. It all depends."

Mr. Sidebotham got up and locked the door of his study and drew down the blinds of both windows. Then he took a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened a black tin box. He ferreted about among blue and white papers for a few seconds, enveloping himself as he did so in a cloud of blue tobacco smoke.

"I feel like a detective already," Shorthouse laughed.

"Speak low, please," returned the other, glancing round the room. "We must observe the utmost secrecy. Perhaps you would be kind enough to close the registers," he went on in a still lower voice. "Open registers have betrayed conversations before now."

Shorthouse began to enter into the spirit of the thing. He tiptoed across the floor and shut the two iron gratings in the wall that in American houses supply hot air and are termed "registers." Mr. Sidebotham had meanwhile found the paper he was looking for. He held it in front of him and tapped it once or twice with the back of his right hand as if it were a stage letter and himself the villain of the melodrama.

"This is a letter from Joel Garvey, my old partner," he said at length. "You have heard me speak of him."

The other bowed. He knew that many years before Garvey & Sidebotham had been well known in the Chicago financial world. He knew that the amazing rapidity with which they accumulated a fortune had only been surpassed by the amazing rapidity with which they had immediately afterwards disappeared into space. He was further aware--his position afforded facilities--that each partner was still to some extent in the other's power, and that each wished most devoutly that the other would die.

The sins of his employer's early years did not concern him, however. The man was kind and just, if eccentric; and Shorthouse, being in New York, did not probe to discover more particularly the sources whence his salary was so regularly paid.

Moreover, the two men had grown to like each other and there was a genuine feeling of trust and respect between them.

"I hope it's a pleasant communication, sir," he said in a low voice.

"Quite the reverse," returned the other, fingering the paper nervously as he stood in front of the fire.

"Blackmail, I suppose."

"Precisely." Mr. Sidebotham's cigar was not burning well; he struck a match and applied it to the uneven edge, and presently his voice spoke through clouds of wreathing smoke.

"There are valuable papers in my possession bearing his signature. I cannot inform you of their nature; but they are extremely valuable *to me*. They belong, as a matter of fact, to Garvey as much as to me. Only I've got them--"

"I see."

"Garvey writes that he wants to have his signature removed--wants to cut it out with his own hand. He gives reasons which incline me to consider his request--"

"And you would like me to take him the papers and see that he does it?"

"And bring them back again with you," he whispered, screwing up his eyes into a shrewd grimace.

"And bring them back again with me," repeated the secretary. "I understand perfectly."

Shorthouse knew from unfortunate experience more than a little of the horrors of blackmail. The pressure Garvey was bringing to bear upon his old enemy must be exceedingly strong. That was quite clear. At the same time, the commission that was being entrusted to him seemed somewhat quixotic in its nature. He had already "enjoyed" more than one experience of his employer's eccentricity, and he now caught himself wondering whether this same eccentricity did not sometimes go--further than eccentricity.

"I cannot read the letter to you," Mr. Sidebotham was explaining, "but I shall give it into your hands. It will prove that you are my--er--my accredited representative. I shall also ask you not to read the package of papers. The signature in question you will find, of course, on the last page, at the bottom."

There was a pause of several minutes during which the end of the cigar glowed eloquently.

"Circumstances compel me," he went on at length almost in a whisper, "or I should never do this. But you understand, of course, the thing is a ruse. Cutting out the signature is a mere pretence. It is nothing. *What Garvey wants are the papers themselves.*"

The confidence reposed in the private secretary was not misplaced. Shorthouse was as faithful to Mr. Sidebotham as a man ought to be to the wife that loves him.

The commission itself seemed very simple. Garvey lived in solitude in the remote part of Long Island. Shorthouse was to take the papers to him, witness the cutting out of the signature, and to be specially on his guard against any attempt, forcible or otherwise, to gain possession of them. It seemed to him a somewhat ludicrous adventure, but he did not know all the facts and perhaps was not the best judge.

The two men talked in low voices for another hour, at the end of which Mr. Sidebotham drew up the blinds, opened the registers and unlocked the door.

Shorthouse rose to go. His pockets were stuffed with papers and his head with instructions; but when he reached the door he hesitated and turned.

"Well?" said his chief.

Shorthouse looked him straight in the eye and said nothing.

"The personal violence, I suppose?" said the other. Shorthouse bowed.

"I have not seen Garvey for twenty years," he said; "all I can tell you is that I believe him to be occasionally of unsound mind. I have heard strange rumours. He lives alone, and in his lucid intervals studies chemistry. It was always a hobby of his. But the chances are twenty to one against his attempting violence. I only wished to warn you--in case--I mean, so that you may be on the watch."

He handed his secretary a Smith and Wesson revolver as he spoke. Shorthouse slipped it into his hip pocket and went out of the room.

A drizzling cold rain was falling on fields covered with half-melted snow when Shorthouse stood, late in the afternoon, on the platform of the lonely little Long Island station and watched the train he had just left vanish into the distance.

It was a bleak country that Joel Garvey, Esq., formerly of Chicago, had chosen for his residence and on this particular afternoon it presented a more than usually dismal appearance. An expanse of flat fields covered with dirty snow stretched away on all sides till the sky dropped down to meet them. Only occasional farm buildings broke the monotony, and the road wound along muddy lanes and beneath dripping trees swathed in the cold raw fog that swept in like a pall of the dead from the sea.

It was six miles from the station to Garvey's house, and the driver of the rickety buggy Shorthouse had found at the station was not communicative. Between the dreary landscape and the drearier driver he fell back upon his own thoughts, which, but for the spice of adventure that was promised, would themselves have been even drearier than either. He made up his mind that he would waste no time over the transaction. The moment the signature was cut out he would pack up and be off. The last train back to Brooklyn was 7.15; and he would have to walk the six miles of mud and snow, for the driver of the buggy had refused point-blank to wait for him.

For purposes of safety, Shorthouse had done what he flattered himself was rather a clever thing. He had made up a second packet of papers identical in outside appearance with the first. The inscription, the blue envelope, the red elastic band, and even a blot in the lower left-hand corner had been exactly reproduced. Inside, of course, were only sheets of blank paper. It was his intention to change the packets and to let Garvey see him put the sham one into the bag. In case of violence the bag would be the point of attack, and he intended to lock it and throw away the key. Before it could be forced open and the deception discovered there would be time to increase his chances of escape with the real packet.

It was five o'clock when the silent Jehu pulled up in front of a half-broken gate and pointed with his whip to a house that stood in its own grounds among trees and was just visible in the gathering gloom. Shorthouse told him to drive up to the front door but the man refused.

"I ain't runnin' no risks," he said; "I've got a family."

This cryptic remark was not encouraging, but Shorthouse did not pause to decipher it. He paid the man, and then pushed open the rickety old gate swinging on a single hinge, and proceeded to walk up the drive that lay dark between close-standing trees.

The house soon came into full view. It was tall and square and had once evidently been white, but now the walls were covered with dirty patches and there were wide yellow streaks where the plaster had fallen away. The windows stared black and uncompromising into the night. The garden was overgrown with weeds and long grass, standing up in ugly patches beneath their burden of wet snow. Complete silence reigned over all. There was not a sign of life. Not even a dog barked. Only, in the distance, the wheels of the retreating carriage could be heard growing fainter and fainter.

As he stood in the porch, between pillars of rotting wood, listening to the rain dripping from the roof into the puddles of slushy snow, he was conscious of a sensation of utter desertion and loneliness such as he had never before experienced. The forbidding aspect of the house had the immediate effect of lowering his spirits. It might well have been the abode of monsters or demons in a child's wonder tale, creatures that only dared to come out under cover of darkness. He groped for the bell-handle, or knocker, and finding neither, he raised his stick and beat a loud tattoo on the door. The sound echoed away in an empty space on the other side and the wind moaned past him between the pillars as if startled at his audacity. But there was no sound of approaching footsteps and no one came to open the door. Again he beat a tattoo, louder and longer than the first one; and, having done so, waited with his back to the house and stared across the unkempt garden into the fast gathering shadows.

Then he turned suddenly, and saw that the door was standing ajar. It had been quietly opened and a pair of eyes were peering at him round the edge. There was no light in the hall beyond and he could only just make out the shape of a dim human face.

"Does Mr. Garvey live here?" he asked in a firm voice.

"Who are you?" came in a man's tones.

"I'm Mr. Sidebotham's private secretary. I wish to see Mr. Garvey on important business."

"Are you expected?"

"I suppose so," he said impatiently, thrusting a card through the opening. "Please take my name to him at once, and say I come from Mr. Sidebotham on the matter Mr. Garvey wrote about."

The man took the card, and the face vanished into the darkness, leaving Shorthouse standing in the cold porch with mingled feelings of impatience and dismay. The door, he now noticed for the first time, was on a chain and could not open more than a few inches. But it was the manner of his reception that caused uneasy reflections to stir within him--reflections that continued for some minutes before they were interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps and the flicker of a light in the hall.

The next instant the chain fell with a rattle, and gripping his bag tightly, he walked into a large ill-smelling hall of which he could only just see the ceiling. There was no light but the nickering taper held by the man, and by its uncertain glimmer Shorthouse turned to examine him. He saw an undersized man of middle age with brilliant, shifting eyes, a curling black beard, and a nose that at once proclaimed him a Jew. His shoulders were bent, and, as he watched him replacing the chain, he saw that he wore a peculiar black gown like a priest's cassock reaching to the feet. It was altogether a lugubrious figure of a man, sinister and funereal, yet it seemed in perfect harmony with the general character of its surroundings. The hall was devoid of furniture of any kind, and against the dingy walls stood rows of old picture frames, empty and disordered, and odd-looking bits of wood-work that appeared doubly fantastic as their shadows danced queerly over the floor in the shifting light.

"If you'll come this way, Mr. Garvey will see you presently," said the Jew gruffly, crossing the floor and shielding the taper with a bony hand. He never once raised his eyes above the level of the visitor's waistcoat, and, to Shorthouse, he somehow suggested a figure from the dead rather than a man of flesh and blood. The hall smelt decidedly ill.

All the more surprising, then, was the scene that met his eyes when the Jew opened the door at the further end and he entered a room brilliantly lit with swinging lamps and furnished with a degree of taste and comfort that amounted to luxury. The walls were lined with handsomely bound books, and armchairs were arranged round a large mahogany desk in the middle of the room. A bright fire burned in the grate and neatly framed photographs of men and women stood on the mantelpiece on either side of an elaborately carved clock. French windows that opened like doors were partially concealed by warm red curtains, and on a sideboard against the wall stood decanters and glasses, with several boxes of cigars piled on top of one another. There was a pleasant odour of tobacco about the room. Indeed, it was in such glowing

contrast to the chilly poverty of the hall that Shorthouse already was conscious of a distinct rise in the thermometer of his spirits.

Then he turned and saw the Jew standing in the doorway with his eyes fixed upon him, somewhere about the middle button of his waistcoat. He presented a strangely repulsive appearance that somehow could not be attributed to any particular detail, and the secretary associated him in his mind with a monstrous black bird of prey more than anything else.

"My time is short," he said abruptly; "I hope Mr. Garvey will not keep me waiting."

A strange flicker of a smile appeared on the Jew's ugly face and vanished as quickly as it came. He made a sort of deprecating bow by way of reply. Then he blew out the taper and went out, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

Shorthouse was alone. He felt relieved. There was an air of obsequious insolence about the old Jew that was very offensive. He began to take note of his surroundings. He was evidently in the library of the house, for the walls were covered with books almost up to the ceiling. There was no room for pictures. Nothing but the shining backs of well-bound volumes looked down upon him. Four brilliant lights hung from the ceiling and a reading lamp with a polished reflector stood among the disordered masses of papers on the desk.

The lamp was not lit, but when Shorthouse put his hand upon it he found it was *warm*. The room had evidently only just been vacated.

Apart from the testimony of the lamp, however, he had already felt, without being able to give a reason for it, that the room had been occupied a few moments before he entered. The atmosphere over the desk seemed to retain the disturbing influence of a human being; an influence, moreover, so recent that he felt as if the cause of it were still in his immediate neighbourhood. It was difficult to realise that he was quite alone in the room and that somebody was not in hiding. The finer counterparts of his senses warned him to act as if he were being observed; he was dimly conscious of a desire to fidget and look round, to keep his eyes in every part of the room at once, and to conduct himself generally as if he were the object of careful human observation.

How far he recognised the cause of these sensations it is impossible to say; but they were sufficiently marked to prevent his carrying out a strong inclination to get up and make a search of the room. He sat quite still, staring alternately at the backs of

the books, and at the red curtains; wondering all the time if he was really being watched, or if it was only the imagination playing tricks with him.

A full quarter of an hour passed, and then twenty rows of volumes suddenly shifted out towards him, and he saw that a door had opened in the wall opposite. The books were only sham backs after all, and when they moved back again with the sliding door, Shorthouse saw the figure of Joel Garvey standing before him.

Surprise almost took his breath away. He had expected to see an unpleasant, even a vicious apparition with the mark of the beast unmistakably upon its face; but he was wholly unprepared for the elderly, tall, fine-looking man who stood in front of him--well-groomed, refined, vigorous, with a lofty forehead, clear grey eyes, and a hooked nose dominating a clean shaven mouth and chin of considerable character--a distinguished looking man altogether.

"I'm afraid I've kept you waiting, Mr. Shorthouse," he said in a pleasant voice, but with no trace of a smile in the mouth or eyes. "But the fact is, you know, I've a mania for chemistry, and just when you were announced I was at the most critical moment of a problem and was really compelled to bring it to a conclusion."

Shorthouse had risen to meet him, but the other motioned him to resume his seat. It was borne in upon him irresistibly that Mr. Joel Garvey, for reasons best known to himself, was deliberately lying, and he could not help wondering at the necessity for such an elaborate misrepresentation. He took off his overcoat and sat down.

"I've no doubt, too, that the door startled you," Garvey went on, evidently reading something of his guest's feelings in his face. "You probably had not suspected it. It leads into my little laboratory. Chemistry is an absorbing study to me, and I spend most of my time there." Mr. Garvey moved up to the armchair on the opposite side of the fireplace and sat down.

Shorthouse made appropriate answers to these remarks, but his mind was really engaged in taking stock of Mr. Sidebotham's old-time partner. So far there was no sign of mental irregularity and there was certainly nothing about him to suggest violent wrong-doing or coarseness of living. On the whole, Mr. Sidebotham's secretary was most pleasantly surprised, and, wishing to conclude his business as speedily as possible, he made a motion towards the bag for the purpose of opening it, when his companion interrupted him quickly--

"You are Mr. Sidebotham's *private* secretary, are you not?" he asked.

Shorthouse replied that he was. "Mr. Sidebotham," he went on to explain, "has entrusted me with the papers in the case and I have the honour to return to you your letter of a week ago." He handed the letter to Garvey, who took it without a word and deliberately placed it in the fire. He was not aware that the secretary was ignorant of its contents, yet his face betrayed no signs of feeling. Shorthouse noticed, however, that his eyes never left the fire until the last morsel had been consumed. Then he looked up and said, "You are familiar then with the facts of this most peculiar case?"

Shorthouse saw no reason to confess his ignorance.

"I have all the papers, Mr. Garvey," he replied, taking them out of the bag, "and I should be very glad if we could transact our business as speedily as possible. If you will cut out your signature I--"

"One moment, please," interrupted the other. "I must, before we proceed further, consult some papers in my laboratory. If you will allow me to leave you alone a few minutes for this purpose we can conclude the whole matter in a very short time."

Shorthouse did not approve of this further delay, but he had no option than to acquiesce, and when Garvey had left the room by the private door he sat and waited with the papers in his hand. The minutes went by and the other did not return. To pass the time he thought of taking the false packet from his coat to see that the papers were in order, and the move was indeed almost completed, when something--he never knew what--warned him to desist. The feeling again came over him that he was being watched, and he leaned back in his chair with the bag on his knees and waited with considerable impatience for the other's return. For more than twenty minutes he waited, and when at length the door opened and Garvey appeared, with profuse apologies for the delay, he saw by the clock that only a few minutes still remained of the time he had allowed himself to catch the last train.

"Now I am completely at your service," he said pleasantly; "you must, of course, know, Mr. Shorthouse, that one cannot be too careful in matters of this kind--especially," he went on, speaking very slowly and impressively, "in dealing with a man like my former partner, whose mind, as you doubtless may have discovered, is at times very sadly affected."

Shorthouse made no reply to this. He felt that the other was watching him as a cat watches a mouse.

"It is almost a wonder to me," Garvey added, "that he is still at large. Unless he has greatly improved it can hardly be safe for those who are closely associated with him."

The other began to feel uncomfortable. Either this was the other side of the story, or it was the first signs of mental irresponsibility.

"All business matters of importance require the utmost care in my opinion, Mr. Garvey," he said at length, cautiously.

"Ah! then, as I thought, you have had a great deal to put up with from him," Garvey said, with his eyes fixed on his companion's face. "And, no doubt, he is still as bitter against me as he was years ago when the disease first showed itself?"

Although this last remark was a deliberate question and the questioner was waiting with fixed eyes for an answer, Shorthouse elected to take no notice of it. Without a word he pulled the elastic band from the blue envelope with a snap and plainly showed his desire to conclude the business as soon as possible. The tendency on the other's part to delay did not suit him at all.

"But never personal violence, I trust, Mr. Shorthouse," he added.

"Never."

"I'm glad to hear it," Garvey said in a sympathetic voice, "very glad to hear it. And now," he went on, "if you are ready we can transact this little matter of business before dinner. It will only take a moment."

He drew a chair up to the desk and sat down, taking a pair of scissors from a drawer. His companion approached with the papers in his hand, unfolding them as he came. Garvey at once took them from him, and after turning over a few pages he stopped and cut out a piece of writing at the bottom of the last sheet but one.

Holding it up to him Shorthouse read the words "Joel Garvey" in faded ink.

"There! That's my signature," he said, "and I've cut it out. It must be nearly twenty years since I wrote it, and now I'm going to burn it."

He went to the fire and stooped over to burn the little slip of paper, and while he watched it being consumed Shorthouse put the real papers in his pocket and slipped the imitation ones into the bag. Garvey turned just in time to see this latter movement.

"I'm putting the papers back," Shorthouse said quietly; "you've done with them, I think."

"Certainly," he replied as, completely deceived, he saw the blue envelope disappear into the black bag and watched Shorthouse turn the key. "They no longer have the slightest interest for me." As he spoke he moved over to the sideboard, and pouring himself out a small glass of whisky asked his visitor if he might do the same for him. But the visitor declined and was already putting on his overcoat when Garvey turned with genuine surprise on his face.

"You surely are not going back to New York to-night, Mr. Shorthouse?" he said, in a voice of astonishment.

"I've just time to catch the 7.15 if I'm quick."

"But I never heard of such a thing," Garvey said. "Of course I took it for granted that you would stay the night."

"It's kind of you," said Shorthouse, "but really I must return to-night. I never expected to stay."

The two men stood facing each other. Garvey pulled out his watch.

"I'm exceedingly sorry," he said; "but, upon my word, I took it for granted you would stay. I ought to have said so long ago. I'm such a lonely fellow and so little accustomed to visitors that I fear I forgot my manners altogether. But in any case, Mr. Shorthouse, you cannot catch the 7.15, for it's already after six o'clock, and that's the last train to-night." Garvey spoke very quickly, almost eagerly, but his voice sounded genuine.

"There's time if I walk quickly," said the young man with decision, moving towards the door. He glanced at his watch as he went. Hitherto he had gone by the clock on the mantelpiece. To his dismay he saw that it was, as his host had said, long after six. The clock was half an hour slow, and he realised at once that it was no longer possible to catch the train.

Had the hands of the clock been moved back intentionally? Had he been purposely detained? Unpleasant thoughts flashed into his brain and made him hesitate before taking the next step. His employer's warning rang in his ears. The alternative was six miles along a lonely road in the dark, or a night under Garvey's roof. The former seemed a direct invitation to catastrophe, if catastrophe there was planned to be. The

latter--well, the choice was certainly small. One thing, however, he realised, was plain--he must show neither fear nor hesitancy.

"My watch must have gained," he observed quietly, turning the hands back without looking up. "It seems I have certainly missed that train and shall be obliged to throw myself upon your hospitality. But, believe me, I had no intention of putting you out to any such extent."

"I'm delighted," the other said. "Defer to the judgment of an older man and make yourself comfortable for the night. There's a bitter storm outside, and you don't put me out at all. On the contrary it's a great pleasure. I have so little contact with the outside world that it's really a god-send to have you."

The man's face changed as he spoke. His manner was cordial and sincere. Shorthouse began to feel ashamed of his doubts and to read between the lines of his employer's warning. He took off his coat and the two men moved to the armchairs beside the fire.

"You see," Garvey went on in a lowered voice, "I understand your hesitancy perfectly. I didn't know Sidebotham all those years without knowing a good deal about him--perhaps more than you do. I've no doubt, now, he filled your mind with all sorts of nonsense about me--probably told you that I was the greatest villain unhung, eh? and all that sort of thing? Poor fellow! He was a fine sort before his mind became unhinged. One of his fancies used to be that everybody else was insane, or just about to become insane. Is he still as bad as that?"

"Few men," replied Shorthouse, with the manner of making a great confidence, but entirely refusing to be drawn, "go through his experiences and reach his age without entertaining delusions of one kind or another."

"Perfectly true," said Garvey. "Your observation is evidently keen."

"Very keen indeed," Shorthouse replied, taking his cue neatly; "but, of course, there are some things"--and here he looked cautiously over his shoulder--"there are some things one cannot talk about too circumspectly."

"I understand perfectly and respect your reserve."

There was a little more conversation and then Garvey got up and excused himself on the plea of superintending the preparation of the bedroom.

"It's quite an event to have a visitor in the house, and I want to make you as comfortable as possible," he said. "Marx will do better for a little supervision. And," he added with a laugh as he stood in the doorway, "I want you to carry back a good account to Sidebotham."

II

The tall form disappeared and the door was shut. The conversation of the past few minutes had come somewhat as a revelation to the secretary. Garvey seemed in full possession of normal instincts. There was no doubt as to the sincerity of his manner and intentions. The suspicions of the first hour began to vanish like mist before the sun. Sidebotham's portentous warnings and the mystery with which he surrounded the whole episode had been allowed to unduly influence his mind. The loneliness of the situation and the bleak nature of the surroundings had helped to complete the illusion. He began to be ashamed of his suspicions and a change commenced gradually to be wrought in his thoughts. Anyhow a dinner and a bed were preferable to six miles in the dark, no dinner, and a cold train into the bargain.

Garvey returned presently. "We'll do the best we can for you," he said, dropping into the deep armchair on the other side of the fire. "Marx is a good servant if you watch him all the time. You must always stand over a Jew, though, if you want things done properly. They're tricky and uncertain unless they're working for their own interest. But Marx might be worse, I'll admit. He's been with me for nearly twenty years--cook, valet, housemaid, and butler all in one. In the old days, you know, he was a clerk in our office in Chicago."

Garvey rattled on and Shorthouse listened with occasional remarks thrown in. The former seemed pleased to have somebody to talk to and the sound of his own voice was evidently sweet music in his ears. After a few minutes, he crossed over to the sideboard and again took up the decanter of whisky, holding it to the light. "You will join me this time," he said pleasantly, pouring out two glasses, "it will give us an appetite for dinner," and this time Shorthouse did not refuse. The liquor was mellow and soft and the men took two glasses apiece.

"Excellent," remarked the secretary.

"Glad you appreciate it," said the host, smacking his lips. "It's very old whisky, and I rarely touch it when I'm alone. But this," he added, "is a special occasion, isn't it?"

Shorthouse was in the act of putting his glass down when something drew his eyes suddenly to the other's face. A strange note in the man's voice caught his attention and communicated alarm to his nerves. A new light shone in Garvey's eyes and there flitted momentarily across his strong features the shadow of something that set the secretary's nerves tingling. A mist spread before his eyes and the unaccountable belief rose strong in him that he was staring into the visage of an untamed animal. Close to his heart there was something that was wild, fierce, savage. An involuntary shiver ran over him and seemed to dispel the strange fancy as suddenly as it had come. He met the other's eye with a smile, the counterpart of which in his heart was vivid horror.

"It *is* a special occasion," he said, as naturally as possible, "and, allow me to add, very special whisky."

Garvey appeared delighted. He was in the middle of a devious tale describing how the whisky came originally into his possession when the door opened behind them and a grating voice announced that dinner was ready. They followed the cassocked form of Marx across the dirty hall, lit only by the shaft of light that followed them from the library door, and entered a small room where a single lamp stood upon a table laid for dinner. The walls were destitute of pictures, and the windows had Venetian blinds without curtains. There was no fire in the grate, and when the men sat down facing each other Shorthouse noticed that, while his own cover was laid with its due proportion of glasses and cutlery, his companion had nothing before him but a soup plate, without fork, knife, or spoon beside it.

"I don't know what there is to offer you," he said; "but I'm sure Marx has done the best he can at such short notice. I only eat one course for dinner, but pray take your time and enjoy your food."

Marx presently set a plate of soup before the guest, yet so loathsome was the immediate presence of this old Hebrew servitor, that the spoonfuls disappeared somewhat slowly. Garvey sat and watched him.

Shorthouse said the soup was delicious and bravely swallowed another mouthful. In reality his thoughts were centred upon his companion, whose manners were giving evidence of a gradual and curious change. There was a decided difference in his demeanour, a difference that the secretary *felt* at first, rather than saw. Garvey's quiet self-possession was giving place to a degree of suppressed excitement that seemed so far inexplicable. His movements became quick and nervous, his eye shifting and strangely brilliant, and his voice, when he spoke, betrayed an occasional deep

tremor. Something unwonted was stirring within him and evidently demanding every moment more vigorous manifestation as the meal proceeded.

Intuitively Shorthouse was afraid of this growing excitement, and while negotiating some uncommonly tough pork chops he tried to lead the conversation on to the subject of chemistry, of which in his Oxford days he had been an enthusiastic student. His companion, however, would none of it. It seemed to have lost interest for him, and he would barely condescend to respond. When Marx presently returned with a plate of steaming eggs and bacon the subject dropped of its own accord.

"An inadequate dinner dish," Garvey said, as soon as the man was gone; "but better than nothing, I hope."

Shorthouse remarked that he was exceedingly fond of bacon and eggs, and, looking up with the last word, saw that Garvey's face was twitching convulsively and that he was almost wriggling in his chair. He quieted down, however, under the secretary's gaze and observed, though evidently with an effort--

"Very good of you to say so. Wish I could join you, only I never eat such stuff. I only take one course for dinner."

Shorthouse began to feel some curiosity as to what the nature of this one course might be, but he made no further remark and contented himself with noting mentally that his companion's excitement seemed to be rapidly growing beyond his control. There was something uncanny about it, and he began to wish he had chosen the alternative of the walk to the station.

"I'm glad to see you never speak when Marx is in the room," said Garvey presently. "I'm sure it's better not. Don't you think so?"

He appeared to wait eagerly for the answer.

"Undoubtedly," said the puzzled secretary.

"Yes," the other went on quickly. "He's an excellent man, but he has one drawback--a really horrid one. You may--but, no, you could hardly have noticed it yet."

"Not drink, I trust," said Shorthouse, who would rather have discussed any other subject than the odious Jew.

"Worse than that a great deal," Garvey replied, evidently expecting the other to draw him out. But Shorthouse was in no mood to hear anything horrible, and he declined to step into the trap.

"The best of servants have their faults," he said coldly.

"I'll tell you what it is if you like," Garvey went on, still speaking very low and leaning forward over the table so that his face came close to the flame of the lamp, "only we must speak quietly in case he's listening. I'll tell you what it is--if you think you won't be frightened."

"Nothing frightens me," he laughed. (Garvey must understand that at all events.) "Nothing can frighten me," he repeated.

"I'm glad of that; for it frightens *me* a good deal sometimes."

Shorthouse feigned indifference. Yet he was aware that his heart was beating a little quicker and that there was a sensation of chilliness in his back. He waited in silence for what was to come.

"He has a horrible predilection for vacuums," Garvey went on presently in a still lower voice and thrusting his face farther forward under the lamp.

"Vacuums!" exclaimed the secretary in spite of himself. "What in the world do you mean?"

"What I say of course. He's always tumbling into them, so that I can't find him or get at him. He hides there for hours at a time, and for the life of me I can't make out what he does there."

Shorthouse stared his companion straight in the eyes. What in the name of Heaven was he talking about?

"Do you suppose he goes there for a change of air, or--or to escape?" he went on in a louder voice.

Shorthouse could have laughed outright but for the expression of the other's face.

"I should not think there was much air of any sort in a vacuum," he said quietly.

"That's exactly what *I* feel," continued Garvey with ever growing excitement. "That's the horrid part of it. How the devil does he live there? You see--"

"Have you ever followed him there?" interrupted the secretary. The other leaned back in his chair and drew a deep sigh.

"Never! It's impossible. You see I can't follow him. There's not room for two. A vacuum only holds one comfortably. Marx knows that. He's out of my reach

altogether once he's fairly inside. He knows the best side of a bargain. He's a regular Jew."

"That is a drawback to a servant, of course--" Shorthouse spoke slowly, with his eyes on his plate.

"A drawback," interrupted the other with an ugly chuckle, "I call it a draw-in, that's what I call it."

"A draw-in does seem a more accurate term," assented Shorthouse. "But," he went on, "I thought that nature abhorred a vacuum. She used to, when I was at school--though perhaps--it's so long ago--"

He hesitated and looked up. Something in Garvey's face--something he had *felt* before he looked up--stopped his tongue and froze the words in his throat. His lips refused to move and became suddenly dry. Again the mist rose before his eyes and the appalling shadow dropped its veil over the face before him. Garvey's features began to burn and glow. Then they seemed to coarsen and somehow slip confusedly together. He stared for a second--it seemed only for a second--into the visage of a ferocious and abominable animal; and then, as suddenly as it had come, the filthy shadow of the beast passed off, the mist melted out, and with a mighty effort over his nerves he forced himself to finish his sentence.

"You see it's so long since I've given attention to such things," he stammered. His heart was beating rapidly, and a feeling of oppression was gathering over it.

"It's my peculiar and special study on the other hand," Garvey resumed. "I've not spent all these years in my laboratory to no purpose, I can assure you. Nature, I know for a fact," he added with unnatural warmth, "does *not* abhor a vacuum. On the contrary, she's uncommonly fond of 'em, much too fond, it seems, for the comfort of my little household. If there were fewer vacuums and more abhorrence we should get on better--a damned sight better in my opinion."

"Your special knowledge, no doubt, enables you to speak with authority," Shorthouse said, curiosity and alarm warring with other mixed feelings in his mind; "but how *can* a man tumble into a vacuum?"

"You may well ask. That's just it. How can he? It's preposterous and I can't make it out at all. Marx knows, but he won't tell me. Jews know more than we do. For my part I have reason to believe--" He stopped and listened. "Hush! here he comes," he added, rubbing his hands together as if in glee and fidgeting in his chair.

Steps were heard coming down the passage, and as they approached the door Garvey seemed to give himself completely over to an excitement he could not control. His eyes were fixed on the door and he began clutching the tablecloth with both hands. Again his face was screened by the loathsome shadow. It grew wild, wolfish. As through a mask, that concealed, and yet was thin enough to let through a suggestion of, the beast crouching behind, there leaped into his countenance the strange look of the animal in the human--the expression of the were-wolf, the monster. The change in all its loathsomeness came rapidly over his features, which began to lose their outline. The nose flattened, dropping with broad nostrils over thick lips. The face rounded, filled, and became squat. The eyes, which, luckily for Shorthouse, no longer sought his own, glowed with the light of untamed appetite and bestial greed. The hands left the cloth and grasped the edges of the plate, and then clutched the cloth again.

"This is *my* course coming now," said Garvey, in a deep guttural voice. He was shivering. His upper lip was partly lifted and showed the teeth, white and gleaming.

A moment later the door opened and Marx hurried into the room and set a dish in front of his master. Garvey half rose to meet him, stretching out his hands and grinning horribly. With his mouth he made a sound like the snarl of an animal. The dish before him was steaming, but the slight vapour rising from it betrayed by its odour that it was not born of a fire of coals. It was the natural heat of flesh warmed by the fires of life only just expelled. The moment the dish rested on the table Garvey pushed away his own plate and drew the other up close under his mouth. Then he seized the food in both hands and commenced to tear it with his teeth, grunting as he did so. Shorthouse closed his eyes, with a feeling of nausea. When he looked up again the lips and jaw of the man opposite were stained with crimson. The whole man was transformed. A feasting tiger, starved and ravenous, but without a tiger's grace--this was what he watched for several minutes, transfixed with horror and disgust.

Marx had already taken his departure, knowing evidently what was not good for the eyes to look upon, and Shorthouse knew at last that he was sitting face to face with a madman.

The ghastly meal was finished in an incredibly short time and nothing was left but a tiny pool of red liquid rapidly hardening. Garvey leaned back heavily in his chair and sighed. His smeared face, withdrawn now from the glare of the lamp, began to

resume its normal appearance. Presently he looked up at his guest and said in his natural voice--

"I hope you've had enough to eat. You wouldn't care for this, you know," with a downward glance.

Shorthouse met his eyes with an inward loathing, and it was impossible not to show some of the repugnance he felt. In the other's face, however, he thought he saw a subdued, cowed expression. But he found nothing to say.

"Marx will be in presently," Garvey went on. "He's either listening, or in a vacuum."

"Does he choose any particular time for his visits?" the secretary managed to ask.

"He generally goes after dinner; just about this time, in fact. But he's not gone yet," he added, shrugging his shoulders, "for I think I hear him coming."

Shorthouse wondered whether vacuum was possibly synonymous with wine cellar, but gave no expression to his thoughts. With chills of horror still running up and down his back, he saw Marx come in with a basin and towel, while Garvey thrust up his face just as an animal puts up its muzzle to be rubbed.

"Now we'll have coffee in the library, if you're ready," he said, in the tone of a gentleman addressing his guests after a dinner party.

Shorthouse picked up the bag, which had lain all this time between his feet, and walked through the door his host held open for him. Side by side they crossed the dark hall together, and, to his disgust, Garvey linked an arm in his, and with his face so close to the secretary's ear that he felt the warm breath, said in a thick voice--

"You're uncommonly careful with that bag, Mr. Shorthouse. It surely must contain something more than the bundle of papers."

"Nothing but the papers," he answered, feeling the hand burning upon his arm and wishing he were miles away from the house and its abominable occupants.

"Quite sure?" asked the other with an odious and suggestive chuckle. "Is there any meat in it, fresh meat--raw meat?"

The secretary felt, somehow, that at the least sign of fear the beast on his arm would leap upon him and tear him with his teeth.

"Nothing of the sort," he answered vigorously. "It wouldn't hold enough to feed a cat."

"True," said Garvey with a vile sigh, while the other felt the hand upon his arm twitch up and down as if feeling the flesh. "True, it's too small to be of any real use. As you say, it wouldn't hold enough to feed a cat."

Shorthouse was unable to suppress a cry. The muscles of his fingers, too, relaxed in spite of himself and he let the black bag drop with a bang to the floor. Garvey instantly withdrew his arm and turned with a quick movement. But the secretary had regained his control as suddenly as he had lost it, and he met the maniac's eyes with a steady and aggressive glare.

"There, you see, it's quite light. It makes no appreciable noise when I drop it." He picked it up and let it fall again, as if he had dropped it for the first time purposely. The ruse was successful.

"Yes. You're right," Garvey said, still standing in the doorway and staring at him. "At any rate it wouldn't hold enough for two," he laughed. And as he closed the door the horrid laughter echoed in the empty hall.

They sat down by a blazing fire and Shorthouse was glad to feel its warmth. Marx presently brought in coffee. A glass of the old whisky and a good cigar helped to restore equilibrium. For some minutes the men sat in silence staring into the fire. Then, without looking up, Garvey said in a quiet voice--

"I suppose it was a shock to you to see me eat raw meat like that. I must apologise if it was unpleasant to you. But it's all I can eat and it's the only meal I take in the twenty-four hours."

"Best nourishment in the world, no doubt; though I should think it might be a trifle strong for some stomachs."

He tried to lead the conversation away from so unpleasant a subject, and went on to talk rapidly of the values of different foods, of vegetarianism and vegetarians, and of men who had gone for long periods without any food at all. Garvey listened apparently without interest and had nothing to say. At the first pause he jumped in eagerly.

"When the hunger is really great on me," he said, still gazing into the fire, "I simply cannot control myself. I must have raw meat--the first I can get--" Here he raised his shining eyes and Shorthouse felt his hair beginning to rise.

"It comes upon me so suddenly too. I never can tell when to expect it. A year ago the passion rose in me like a whirlwind and Marx was out and I couldn't get meat. I

had to get something or I should have bitten myself. Just when it was getting unbearable my dog ran out from beneath the sofa. It was a spaniel."

Shorthouse responded with an effort. He hardly knew what he was saying and his skin crawled as if a million ants were moving over it.

There was a pause of several minutes.

"I've bitten Marx all over," Garvey went on presently in his strange quiet voice, and as if he were speaking of apples; "but he's bitter. I doubt if the hunger could ever make me do it again. Probably that's what first drove him to take shelter in a vacuum." He chuckled hideously as he thought of this solution of his attendant's disappearances.

Shorthouse seized the poker and poked the fire as if his life depended on it. But when the banging and clattering was over Garvey continued his remarks with the same calmness. The next sentence, however, was never finished. The secretary had got upon his feet suddenly.

"I shall ask your permission to retire," he said in a determined voice; "I'm tired to-night; will you be good enough to show me to my room?"

Garvey looked up at him with a curious cringing expression behind which there shone the gleam of cunning passion.

"Certainly," he said, rising from his chair. "You've had a tiring journey. I ought to have thought of that before."

He took the candle from the table and lit it, and the fingers that held the match trembled.

"We needn't trouble Marx," he explained. "That beast's in his vacuum by this time."

III

They crossed the hall and began to ascend the carpetless wooden stairs. They were in the well of the house and the air cut like ice. Garvey, the flickering candle in his hand throwing his face into strong outline, led the way across the first landing and opened a door near the mouth of a dark passage. A pleasant room greeted the visitor's eyes, and he rapidly took in its points while his host walked over and lit two candles that stood on a table at the foot of the bed. A fire burned brightly in the

grate. There were two windows, opening like doors, in the wall opposite, and a high canopied bed occupied most of the space on the right. Panelling ran all round the room reaching nearly to the ceiling and gave a warm and cosy appearance to the whole; while the portraits that stood in alternate panels suggested somehow the atmosphere of an old country house in England. Shorthouse was agreeably surprised.

"I hope you'll find everything you need," Garvey was saying in the doorway. "If not, you have only to ring that bell by the fireplace. Marx won't hear it of course, but it rings in my laboratory, where I spend most of the night."

Then, with a brief good-night, he went out and shut the door after him. The instant he was gone Mr. Sidebotham's private secretary did a peculiar thing. He planted himself in the middle of the room with his back to the door, and drawing the pistol swiftly from his hip pocket levelled it across his left arm at the window. Standing motionless in this position for thirty seconds he then suddenly swerved right round and faced in the other direction, pointing his pistol straight at the keyhole of the door. There followed immediately a sound of shuffling outside and of steps retreating across the landing.

"On his knees at the keyhole," was the secretary's reflection. "Just as I thought. But he didn't expect to look down the barrel of a pistol and it made him jump a little."

As soon as the steps had gone downstairs and died away across the hall, Shorthouse went over and locked the door, stuffing a piece of crumpled paper into the second keyhole which he saw immediately above the first. After that, he made a thorough search of the room. It hardly repaid the trouble, for he found nothing unusual. Yet he was glad he had made it. It relieved him to find no one was in hiding under the bed or in the deep oak cupboard; and he hoped sincerely it was not the cupboard in which the unfortunate spaniel had come to its vile death. The French windows, he discovered, opened on to a little balcony. It looked on to the front, and there was a drop of less than twenty feet to the ground below. The bed was high and wide, soft as feathers and covered with snowy sheets--very inviting to a tired man; and beside the blazing fire were a couple of deep armchairs.

Altogether it was very pleasant and comfortable; but, tired though he was, Shorthouse had no intention of going to bed. It was impossible to disregard the warning of his nerves. They had never failed him before, and when that sense of distressing horror lodged in his bones he knew there was something in the wind and that a red flag was flying over the immediate future. Some delicate instrument in his

being, more subtle than the senses, more accurate than mere presentiment, had seen the red flag and interpreted its meaning.

Again it seemed to him, as he sat in an armchair over the fire, that his movements were being carefully watched from somewhere; and, not knowing what weapons might be used against him, he felt that his real safety lay in a rigid control of his mind and feelings and a stout refusal to admit that he was in the least alarmed.

The house was very still. As the night wore on the wind dropped. Only occasional bursts of sleet against the windows reminded him that the elements were awake and uneasy. Once or twice the windows rattled and the rain hissed in the fire, but the roar of the wind in the chimney grew less and less and the lonely building was at last lapped in a great stillness. The coals clicked, settling themselves deeper in the grate, and the noise of the cinders dropping with a tiny report into the soft heap of accumulated ashes was the only sound that punctuated the silence.

In proportion as the power of sleep grew upon him the dread of the situation lessened; but so imperceptibly, so gradually, and so insinuatingly that he scarcely realised the change. He thought he was as wide awake to his danger as ever. The successful exclusion of horrible mental pictures of what he had seen he attributed to his rigorous control, instead of to their true cause, the creeping over him of the soft influences of sleep. The faces in the coals were so soothing; the armchair was so comfortable; so sweet the breath that gently pressed upon his eyelids; so subtle the growth of the sensation of safety. He settled down deeper into the chair and in another moment would have been asleep when the red flag began to shake violently to and fro and he sat bolt upright as if he had been stabbed in the back.

Someone was coming up the stairs. The boards creaked beneath a stealthy weight.

Shorthouse sprang from the chair and crossed the room swiftly, taking up his position beside the door, but out of range of the keyhole. The two candles flared unevenly on the table at the foot of the bed. The steps were slow and cautious--it seemed thirty seconds between each one--but the person who was taking them was very close to the door. Already he had topped the stairs and was shuffling almost silently across the bit of landing.

The secretary slipped his hand into his pistol pocket and drew back further against the wall, and hardly had he completed the movement when the sounds abruptly ceased and he knew that somebody was standing just outside the door and preparing for a careful observation through the keyhole.

He was in no sense a coward. In action he was never afraid. It was the waiting and wondering and the uncertainty that might have loosened his nerves a little. But, somehow, a wave of intense horror swept over him for a second as he thought of the bestial maniac and his attendant Jew; and he would rather have faced a pack of wolves than have to do with either of these men.

Something brushing gently against the door set his nerves tingling afresh and made him tighten his grasp on the pistol. The steel was cold and slippery in his moist fingers. What an awful noise it would make when he pulled the trigger! If the door were to open how close he would be to the figure that came in! Yet he knew it was locked on the inside and could not possibly open. Again something brushed against the panel beside him and a second later the piece of crumpled paper fell from the keyhole to the floor, while the piece of thin wire that had accomplished this result showed its point for a moment in the room and was then swiftly withdrawn.

Somebody was evidently peering now through the keyhole, and realising this fact the spirit of attack entered into the heart of the beleaguered man. Raising aloft his right hand he brought it suddenly down with a resounding crash upon the panel of the door next the keyhole--a crash that, to the crouching eavesdropper, must have seemed like a clap of thunder out of a clear sky. There was a gasp and a slight lurching against the door and the midnight listener rose startled and alarmed, for Shorthouse plainly heard the tread of feet across the landing and down the stairs till they were lost in the silences of the hall. Only, this time, it seemed to him there were four feet instead of two.

Quickly stuffing the paper back into the keyhole, he was in the act of walking back to the fireplace when, over his shoulder, he caught sight of a white face pressed in outline against the outside of the window. It was blurred in the streams of sleet, but the white of the moving eyes was unmistakable. He turned instantly to meet it, but the face was withdrawn like a flash, and darkness rushed in to fill the gap where it had appeared.

"Watched on both sides," he reflected.

But he was not to be surprised into any sudden action, and quietly walking over to the fireplace as if he had seen nothing unusual he stirred the coals a moment and then strolled leisurely over to the window. Steeling his nerves, which quivered a moment in spite of his will, he opened the window and stepped out on to the balcony. The wind, which he thought had dropped, rushed past him into the room and extinguished one of the candles, while a volley of fine cold rain burst all over his

face. At first he could see nothing, and the darkness came close up to his eyes like a wall. He went a little farther on to the balcony and drew the window after him till it clashed. Then he stood and waited.

But nothing touched him. No one seemed to be there. His eyes got accustomed to the blackness and he was able to make out the iron railing, the dark shapes of the trees beyond, and the faint light coming from the other window. Through this he peered into the room, walking the length of the balcony to do so. Of course he was standing in a shaft of light and whoever was crouching in the darkness below could plainly see him. *Below?*--That there should be anyone *above* did not occur to him until, just as he was preparing to go in again, he became aware that something was moving in the darkness over his head. He looked up, instinctively raising a protecting arm, and saw a long black line swinging against the dim wall of the house. The shutters of the window on the next floor, whence it depended, were thrown open and moving backwards and forwards in the wind. The line was evidently a thickish cord, for as he looked it was pulled in and the end disappeared in the darkness.

Shorthouse, trying to whistle to himself, peered over the edge of the balcony as if calculating the distance he might have to drop, and then calmly walked into the room again and closed the window behind him, leaving the latch so that the lightest touch would cause it to fly open. He relit the candle and drew a straight-backed chair up to the table. Then he put coal on the fire and stirred it up into a royal blaze. He would willingly have folded the shutters over those staring windows at his back. But that was out of the question. It would have been to cut off his way of escape.

Sleep, for the time, was at a disadvantage. His brain was full of blood and every nerve was tingling. He felt as if countless eyes were upon him and scores of stained hands were stretching out from the corners and crannies of the house to seize him. Crouching figures, figures of hideous Jews, stood everywhere about him where shelter was, creeping forward out of the shadows when he was not looking and retreating swiftly and silently when he turned his head. Wherever he looked, other eyes met his own, and though they melted away under his steady, confident gaze, he knew they would wax and draw in upon him the instant his glances weakened and his will wavered.

Though there were no sounds, he knew that in the well of the house there was movement going on, *and preparation*. And this knowledge, inasmuch as it came to him irresistibly and through other and more subtle channels than those of the senses kept the sense of horror fresh in his blood and made him alert and awake.

But, no matter how great the dread in the heart, the power of sleep will eventually overcome it. Exhausted nature is irresistible, and as the minutes wore on and midnight passed, he realised that nature was vigorously asserting herself and sleep was creeping upon him from the extremities.

To lessen the danger he took out his pencil and began to draw the articles of furniture in the room. He worked into elaborate detail the cupboard, the mantelpiece, and the bed, and from these he passed on to the portraits. Being possessed of genuine skill, he found the occupation sufficiently absorbing. It kept the blood in his brain, and that kept him awake. The pictures, moreover, now that he considered them for the first time, were exceedingly well painted. Owing to the dim light, he centred his attention upon the portraits beside the fireplace. On the right was a woman, with a sweet, gentle face and a figure of great refinement; on the left was a full-size figure of a big handsome man with a full beard and wearing a hunting costume of ancient date.

From time to time he turned to the windows behind him, but the vision of the face was not repeated. More than once, too, he went to the door and listened, but the silence was so profound in the house that he gradually came to believe the plan of attack had been abandoned. Once he went out on to the balcony, but the sleet stung his face and he only had time to see that the shutters above were closed, when he was obliged to seek the shelter of the room again.

In this way the hours passed. The fire died down and the room grew chilly. Shorthouse had made several sketches of the two heads and was beginning to feel overpoweringly weary. His feet and his hands were cold and his yawns were prodigious. It seemed ages and ages since the steps had come to listen at his door and the face had watched him from the window. A feeling of safety had somehow come to him. In reality he was exhausted. His one desire was to drop upon the soft white bed and yield himself up to sleep without any further struggle.

He rose from his chair with a series of yawns that refused to be stifled and looked at his watch. It was close upon three in the morning. He made up his mind that he would lie down with his clothes on and get some sleep. It was safe enough, the door was locked on the inside and the window was fastened. Putting the bag on the table near his pillow he blew out the candles and dropped with a sense of careless and delicious exhaustion upon the soft mattress. In five minutes he was sound asleep.

There had scarcely been time for the dreams to come when he found himself lying side-ways across the bed with wide open eyes staring into the darkness. Someone

had touched him, and he had writhed away in his sleep as from something unholy. The movement had awakened him.

The room was simply black. No light came from the windows and the fire had gone out as completely as if water had been poured upon it. He gazed into a sheet of impenetrable darkness that came close up to his face like a wall.

His first thought was for the papers in his coat and his hand flew to the pocket. They were safe; and the relief caused by this discovery left his mind instantly free for other reflections.

And the realisation that at once came to him with a touch of dismay was, that during his sleep some definite *change* had been effected in the room. He felt this with that intuitive certainty which amounts to positive knowledge. The room was utterly still, but the corroboration that was speedily brought to him seemed at once to fill the darkness with a whispering, secret life that chilled his blood and made the sheet feel like ice against his cheek.

Hark! This was it; there reached his ears, in which the blood was already buzzing with warning clamour, a dull murmur of something that rose indistinctly from the well of the house and became audible to him without passing through walls or doors. There seemed no solid surface between him, lying on the bed, and the landing; between the landing and the stairs, and between the stairs and the hall beyond.

He knew that the door of the room *was standing open!* Therefore it had been opened from the *inside*. Yet the window was fastened, also on the inside.

Hardly was this realised when the conspiring silence of the hour was broken by another and a more definite sound. A step was coming along the passage. A certain bruise on the hip told Shorthouse that the pistol in his pocket was ready for use and he drew it out quickly and cocked it. Then he just had time to slip over the edge of the bed and crouch down on the floor when the step halted on the threshold of the room. The bed was thus between him and the open door. The window was at his back.

He waited in the darkness. What struck him as peculiar about the steps was that there seemed no particular desire to move stealthily. There was no extreme caution. They moved along in rather a slipshod way and sounded like soft slippers or feet in stockings. There was something clumsy, irresponsible, almost reckless about the movement.

For a second the steps paused upon the threshold, but only for a second. Almost immediately they came on into the room, and as they passed from the wood to the carpet Shorthouse noticed that they became wholly noiseless. He waited in suspense, not knowing whether the unseen walker was on the other side of the room or was close upon him. Presently he stood up and stretched out his left arm in front of him, groping, searching, feeling in a circle; and behind it he held the pistol, cocked and pointed, in his right hand. As he rose a bone cracked in his knee, his clothes rustled as if they were newspapers, and his breath seemed loud enough to be heard all over the room. But not a sound came to betray the position of the invisible intruder.

Then, just when the tension was becoming unbearable, a noise relieved the gripping silence. It was wood knocking against wood, and it came from the farther end of the room. The steps had moved over to the fireplace. A sliding sound almost immediately followed it and then silence closed again over everything like a pall.

For another five minutes Shorthouse waited, and then the suspense became too much. He could not stand that open door! The candles were close beside him and he struck a match and lit them, expecting in the sudden glare to receive at least a terrific blow. But nothing happened, and he saw at once that the room was entirely empty. Walking over with the pistol cocked he peered out into the darkness of the landing and then closed the door and turned the key. Then he searched the room--bed, cupboard, table, curtains, everything that could have concealed a man; but found no trace of the intruder. The owner of the footsteps had disappeared like a ghost into the shadows of the night. But for one fact he might have imagined that he had been dreaming: *the bag had vanished!*

There was no more sleep for Shorthouse that night. His watch pointed to 4 a.m. and there were still three hours before daylight. He sat down at the table and continued his sketches. With fixed determination he went on with his drawing and began a new outline of the man's head. There was something in the expression that continually evaded him. He had no success with it, and this time it seemed to him that it was the eyes that brought about his discomfiture. He held up his pencil before his face to measure the distance between the nose and the eyes, and to his amazement he saw that a change had come over the features. The eyes were no longer open. *The lids had closed!*

For a second he stood in a sort of stupefied astonishment. A push would have toppled him over. Then he sprang to his feet and held a candle close up to the picture. The eye-lids quivered, the eye-lashes trembled. Then, right before his gaze, the eyes

opened and looked straight into his own. Two holes were cut in the panel and this pair of eyes, human eyes, just fitted them.

As by a curious effect of magic, the strong fear that had governed him ever since his entry into the house disappeared in a second. Anger rushed into his heart and his chilled blood rose suddenly to boiling point. Putting the candle down, he took two steps back into the room and then flung himself forward with all his strength against the painted panel. Instantly, and before the crash came, the eyes were withdrawn, and two black spaces showed where they had been. The old huntsman was eyeless. But the panel cracked and split inwards like a sheet of thin cardboard; and Shorthouse, pistol in hand, thrust an arm through the jagged aperture and, seizing a human leg, dragged out into the room--the Jew!

Words rushed in such a torrent to his lips that they choked him. The old Hebrew, white as chalk, stood shaking before him, the bright pistol barrel opposite his eyes, when a volume of cold air rushed into the room, and with it a sound of hurried steps. Shorthouse felt his arm knocked up before he had time to turn, and the same second Garvey, who had somehow managed to burst open the window came between him and the trembling Marx. His lips were parted and his eyes rolled strangely in his distorted face.

"Don't shoot him! Shoot in the air!" he shrieked. He seized the Jew by the shoulders.

"You damned hound," he roared, hissing in his face. "So I've got you at last. That's where your vacuum is, is it? I know your vile hiding-place at last." He shook him like a dog. "I've been after him all night," he cried, turning to Shorthouse, "all night, I tell you, and I've got him at last."

Garvey lifted his upper lip as he spoke and showed his teeth. They shone like the fangs of a wolf. The Jew evidently saw them too, for he gave a horrid yell and struggled furiously.

Before the eyes of the secretary a mist seemed to rise. The hideous shadow again leaped into Garvey's face. He foresaw a dreadful battle, and covering the two men with his pistol he retreated slowly to the door. Whether they were both mad, or both criminal, he did not pause to inquire. The only thought present in his mind was that the sooner he made his escape the better.

Garvey was still shaking the Jew when he reached the door and turned the key, but as he passed out on to the landing both men stopped their struggling and turned to face him. Garvey's face, bestial, loathsome, livid with anger; the Jew's white and

grey with fear and horror;--both turned towards him and joined in a wild, horrible yell that woke the echoes of the night. The next second they were after him at full speed.

Shorthouse slammed the door in their faces and was at the foot of the stairs, crouching in the shadow, before they were out upon the landing. They tore shrieking down the stairs and past him, into the hall; and, wholly unnoticed, Shorthouse whipped up the stairs again, crossed the bedroom and dropped from the balcony into the soft snow.

As he ran down the drive he heard behind him in the house the yells of the maniacs; and when he reached home several hours later Mr. Sidebotham not only raised his salary but also told him to buy a new hat and overcoat, and send in the bill to him.

Story Notes

Let's take a quick look into "The Strange Adventures Of A Private Secretary In New York" by Algernon Blackwood.

This story, first published in 1900, is a fascinating blend of mystery, suspense, and a touch of the supernatural. It follows the adventures of Jim Shorthouse, a private secretary, who gets entangled in a bizarre and dangerous mission involving blackmail, eccentric employers, and a creepy old house.

One of the standout aspects of this story is Blackwood's ability to create an eerie atmosphere. From the moment Shorthouse steps into the gloomy, desolate landscape of Long Island, you can feel the tension building. The descriptions of the house, with its rotting wood pillars and overgrown garden, set the stage for the unsettling events that follow.

The characters are another strong point. Shorthouse is portrayed as a level-headed and brave individual, but even he is not immune to the fear and dread that permeate the story. His employer, Mr. Sidebotham, is eccentric and mysterious, adding to the sense of unease. And then there's Joel Garvey, whose transformation from a seemingly refined gentleman to a madman is both shocking and compelling.

The plot is filled with twists and turns, keeping the reader engaged and on edge. The mission to retrieve and protect the valuable papers from Garvey is fraught with danger, and Shorthouse's clever tactics to outwit Garvey add a layer of intrigue. The climax, where Shorthouse faces the mad Garvey and his sinister servant Marx, is intense and leaves a lasting impression.

Overall, "The Strange Adventures Of A Private Secretary In New York" is a gripping tale that showcases Blackwood's talent for creating suspense and horror. It's a story that keeps you guessing and leaves you with a sense of unease long after you've finished reading.

