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THE CASE OF THE WARD LANE TABERNACLE.....-1

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Arthur Morrison

I.

AMONG the few personal friendships that Martin Hewitt has allowed himself to make there is one for an eccentric but very excellent old lady named Mrs. Mallett. She must be more than seventy now, but she is of robust and active, not to say masculine, habits, and her relations with Hewitt are irregular and curious. He may not see her for many weeks, perhaps for months, until one day she will appear in the office, push Kerrett (who knows better than to attempt to stop her) into the inner room, and salute Hewitt with a shake of the hand and a savage glare of the eye which would appal a stranger, but which is quite amiably meant. As for myself, it was long ere I could find any resource but instant retreat before her gaze, though we are on terms of moderate toleration now.

After her first glare she sits in the chair by the window and directs her glance at Hewitt's small gas grill and kettle in the fireplace—a glance which Hewitt, with all expedition, translates into tea. Slightly mollified by the tea, Mrs. Mallett condescends to remark in tones of tragic truculence, on passing matters of conventional interest—the weather, the influenza, her own health, Hewitt's health, and so forth, any reply of Hewitt's being commonly received with either disregard or contempt. In half an hour's time or so she leaves the office with a stern command to Hewitt to attend at her house and drink tea on a day and at a time named—a command which Hewitt obediently fulfils, when he passes through a similarly exhilarating experience in Mrs. Mallett's back drawing-room at her little freehold house in Fulham. Altogether Mrs. Mallett, to a stranger, is a singularly uninviting personality, and indeed, except Hewitt, who has learnt to appreciate her hidden good qualities, I doubt if she has a friend in the world. Her studiously concealed charities are a matter of as much amusement as gratification to Hewitt, who naturally, in the course of his peculiar profession, comes across many sad examples of poverty and suffering, commonly among the decent sort, who hide their troubles from strangers' eyes and suffer in secret. When such a case is in his mind it is Hewitt's practice to inform Mrs. Mallett of it at one of the tea ceremonies. Mrs. Mallett receives the story with snorts of incredulity and scorn but takes care, while expressing the most callous disregard and contempt of the troubles of the sufferers, to ascertain casually their names and addresses; twenty-four hours after which Hewitt need only make a visit to find their difficulties in some mysterious way alleviated.

Mrs. Mallett never had any children, and was early left a widow. Her appearance, for some reason or another, commonly leads strangers to believe her an old maid. She lives in her little detached house with its square piece of ground, attended by a house-keeper older than herself and one maid-servant. She lost her only sister by death soon after the events I am about to set down, and now has, I believe, no relations in the world. It was also soon after these events that her present housekeeper first came to her in place of an older and very deaf woman, quite useless, who had been with her before. I believe she is moderately rich, and that one or two charities will benefit considerably at her death; also I should be far from astonished to find Hewitt's own name in her will, though this is no more than idle conjecture. The one possession to which she clings with all her soul—her one pride and treasure—is her great-uncle Joseph's snuff-box, the lid of which she steadfastly believes to be made of a piece of Noah's original ark discovered on the top of Mount Ararat by some intrepid explorer of vague identity about a hundred years ago. This is her one weakness, and woe to the unhappy creature who dares hint a suggestion that possibly the wood of

the ark rotted away to nothing a few thousand years before her great-uncle Joseph ever took snuff. I believe he would be bodily assaulted. The box is brought for Hewitt's admiration at every tea ceremony at Fulham, when Hewitt handles it reverently and expresses as much astonishment and interest as if he had never seen or heard of it before. It is on these occasions only that Mrs. Mallett's customary stiffness relaxes. The sides of the box are of cedar of Lebanon, she explains (which very possibly they are), and the gold mountings were worked up from spade guineas (which one can believe without undue strain on the reason). And it is usually these times, when the old lady softens under the combined influence of tea and uncle Joseph's snuff-box, that Hewitt seizes to lead up to his hint of some starving governess or distressed clerk, with the full confidence that the more savagely the story is received the better will the poor people be treated as soon as he turns his back.

It was her jealous care of uncle Joseph's snuff-box that first brought Mrs. Mallett into contact with Martin Hewitt, and the occasion, though not perhaps testing his acuteness to the extent that some did, was nevertheless one of the most curious and fantastic on which he has ever been engaged. She was then some ten or twelve years younger than she is now, but Hewitt assures me she looked exactly the same; that is to say, she was harsh, angular, and seemed little more than fifty years of age. It was before the time of Kerrett, and another youth occupied the outer office. Hewitt sat late one afternoon with his door ajar when he heard a stranger enter the outer office, and a voice, which he afterwards knew well as Mrs. Mallett's, ask "Is Mr. Martin Hewitt in?"

"Yes, ma'am, I think so. If you will write your name and----"

"Is he in there?" And with three strides Mrs. Mallett was at the inner door and stood before Hewitt himself, while the routed office-lad stared helplessly in the rear.

"Mr. Hewitt," Mrs. Mallett said, "I have come to put an affair into your hands, which I shall require to be attended to at once."

Hewitt was surprised, but he bowed politely, and said, with some suspicion of a hint in his tone, "Yes--I rather supposed you were in a hurry."

She glanced quickly in Hewitt's face and went on: "I am not accustomed to needless ceremony, Mr. Hewitt. My name is Mallett--Mrs. Mallett--and here is my card. I have come to consult you on a matter of great annoyance and some danger to myself. The fact is I am being watched and followed by a number of persons."

Hewitt's gaze was steadfast, but he reflected that possibly this curious woman was a lunatic, the delusion of being watched and followed by unknown people being perhaps the most common of all; also it was no unusual thing to have a lunatic visit the office with just such a complaint. So he only said soothingly, "Indeed? That must be very annoying."

"Yes, yes, the annoyance is bad enough perhaps," she answered shortly, "but I am chiefly concerned about my great-uncle Joseph's snuff-box."

This utterance sounded a trifle more insane than the other, so Hewitt answered, a little more soothingly still: "Ah, of course. A very important thing, the snuff-box, no doubt."

"It is, Mr. Hewitt--it is important, as I think you will admit when you have seen it. Here it is," and she produced from a small handbag the article that Hewitt was destined so often again to see and affect an interest in. "You may be incredulous, Mr. Hewitt, but it is nevertheless a fact that the lid of

this snuff-box is made of the wood of the original ark that rested on Mount Ararat."

She handed the box to Hewitt, who murmured, "Indeed! Very interesting--very wonderful, really," and returned it to the lady immediately.

"That, Mr. Hewitt, was the property of my great-uncle, Joseph Simpson, who once had the honour of shaking hands with his late Majesty King George the Fourth. The box was presented to my uncle by ----," and then Mrs. Mallett plunged into the whole history and adventures of the box, in the formula wherewith Hewitt subsequently became so well acquainted, and which need not be here set out in detail. When the box had been properly honoured Mrs. Mallett proceeded with her business.

"I am convinced, Mr. Hewitt," she said, "that systematic attempts are being made to rob me of this snuff-box. I am not a nervous or weak-minded woman, or perhaps I might have sought your assistance before. The watching and following of myself I might have disregarded, but when it comes to burglary I think it is time to do something."

"Certainly," Hewitt agreed.

"Well, I have been pestered with demands for the box for some time past. I have here some of the letters which I have received, and I am sure I know at whose instigation they were sent." She placed on the table a handful of papers of various sizes, which Hewitt examined one after another. They were mostly in the same handwriting, and all were unsigned. Every one was couched in a fanatically toned imitation of scriptural diction, and all sorts of threats were expressed with many emphatic underlinings. The spelling was not of the best, the writing was mostly uncouth, and the grammar was in ill shape in many places, the "thous" and "thees" and their accompanying verbs falling over each other disastrously. The purport of the messages was rather vaguely expressed, but all seemed to make a demand for the restoration of some article held in extreme veneration. This was alluded to in many figurative ways as the "token of life," the "seal of the woman," and so forth, and sometimes Mrs. Mallett was requested to restore it to the "ark of the covenant." One of the least vague of these singular documents ran thus:--

"Thou of no faith put the bond of the woman clothed with the sun on the stoan sete in thy back garden this night or thy blood beest on your own hed. Give it back to us the five righteous only in this citty, give us that what saves the faithful when the erth is swallowed up."

Hewitt read over these fantastic missives one by one till he began to suspect that his client, mad or not, certainly corresponded with mad Quakers. Then he said, "Yes, Mrs. Mallett, these are most extraordinary letters. Are there any more of them?"

"Bless the man, yes, there were a lot that I burnt. All the same crack-brained sort of thing."

"They are mostly in one handwriting," Hewitt said, "though some are in another. But I confess I don't see any very direct reference to the snuff-box."

"Oh, but it's the only thing they can mean," Mrs. Mallett replied with great positiveness. "Why, he wanted me to sell it him; and last night my house was broken into in my absence and everything ransacked and turned over, but not a thing was taken. Why? Because I had the box with me at my sister's; and this is the only sacred relic in my possession. And what saved the faithful when the world was swallowed up? Why, the ark of course."

The old lady's manner was odd, but notwithstanding the bizarre and disjointed character of her complaint Hewitt had now had time to observe that she had none of the unmistakable signs of the lunatic. Her eye was steady and clear, and she had none of the restless habits of the mentally deranged. Even at that time Hewitt had met with curious adventures enough to teach him not to be astonished at a new one, and now he set himself seriously to get at his client's case in full order and completeness.

"Come, Mrs. Mallett," he said, "I am a stranger, and I can never understand your case till I have it, not as it presents itself to your mind, in the order of importance of events, but in the exact order in which they happened. You had a great-uncle, I understand, living in the early part of the century, who left you at his death the snuff-box which you value so highly. Now you suspect that somebody is attempting to extort or steal it from you. Tell me as clearly and simply as you can whom you suspect and the whole story of the attempts."

"That's just what I'm coming to," the old lady answered, rather pettishly. "My uncle Joseph had an old housekeeper, who of course knew all about the snuff-box, and it is her son Reuben Penner who is trying to get it from me. The old woman was half crazy with one extraordinary religious superstition and another, and her son seems to be just the same. My great-uncle was a man of strong common-sense and a churchman (though he did think he could write plays), and if it hadn't been for his restraint I believe--that is I have been told--Mrs. Penner would have gone clean demented with religious mania. Well, she died in course of time, and my great-uncle died some time after, leaving me the most important thing in his possession (I allude to the snuff-box of course), a good bit of property, and a tin box full of his worthless manuscript. I became a widow at twenty-six, and since then I have lived very quietly in my present house in Fulham.

"A couple of years ago I received a visit from Reuben Penner. I didn't recognise him, which wasn't wonderful, since I hadn't seen him for thirty years or more. He is well over fifty now, a large heavy-faced man with uncommonly wild eyes for a greengrocer--which is what he is, though he dresses very well, considering. He was quite respectful at first, and very awkward in his manner. He took a little time to get his courage, and then he began questioning me about my religious feelings. Well, Mr. Hewitt, I am not the sort of person to stand a lecture from a junior and an inferior, whatever my religious opinions may be, and I pretty soon made him realise it. But somehow he persevered. He wanted to know if I would go to some place of worship that he called his 'Tabernacle.' I asked him who was the pastor. He said himself. I asked him how many members of the congregation there were, and (the man was as solemn as an owl. I assure you, Mr. Hewitt) he actually said five! I kept my countenance and asked why such a small number couldn't attend church, or at any rate attach itself to some decent Dissenting chapel. And then the man burst out; mad--mad as a hatter. He was as incoherent as such people usually are, but as far as I could make out he talked, among a lot of other things, of some imaginary woman--a woman standing on the moon and driven into a wilderness on the wings of an eagle. The man was so madly possessed of his fancies that I assure you for a while he almost ceased to look ridiculous. He was so earnest in his rant. But I soon cut him short. It's best to be severe with these people--it's the only chance of bringing them to their senses. 'Reuben Penner,' I said 'shut up! Your mother was a very decent person in her way, I believe, but she was half a lunatic with her superstitious notions, and you're a bigger fool than she was. Imagine a grown man, and of your age, coming and asking me, of all people in the world, to leave my church and make another fool in a congregation of five, with you to rave at me about women in the moon! Go away and look after your greengrocery, and go to church or chapel like a sensible man. Go away and don't play the fool any longer; I won't hear another word!'

"When I talk like this I am usually attended to, and in this case Penner went away with scarcely

another word. I saw nothing of him for about a month or six weeks and then he came and spoke to me as I was cutting roses in my front garden. This time he talked--to begin with, at least--more sensibly. 'Mrs. Mallett,' he said, 'you have in your keeping a very sacred relic.'

"I have,' I said, 'left me by my great-uncle Joseph. And what then?'

"Well"--he hummed and hawed a little--'I wanted to ask if you might be disposed to part with it.'

"What?' I said, dropping my scissors-- 'sell it?'

"Well, yes,' he answered, putting on as bold a face as he could.

"The notion of selling my uncle Joseph's snuff-box in any possible circumstances almost made me speechless. 'What!' I repeated. 'Sell it?--sell it? It would be a sinful sacrilege!'

"His face quite brightened when I said this, and he replied, 'Yes, of course it would; I think so myself, ma'am; but I fancied you thought otherwise. In that case, ma'am, not being a believer yourself, I'm sure you would consider it a graceful and a pious act to present it to my little Tabernacle, where it would be properly valued. And it having been my mother's property-----'

"He got no further. I am not a woman to be trifled with, Mr. Hewitt, and I believe I beat him out of the garden with my basket. I was so infuriated I can scarcely remember what I did. The suggestion that I should sell my uncle Joseph's snuff-box to a greengrocer was bad enough; the request that I should actually give it to his 'Tabernacle' was infinitely worse. But to claim that it had belonged to his mother--well I don't know how it strikes you, Mr. Hewitt, but to me it seemed the last insult possible."

"Shocking, shocking, of course," Hewitt said, since she seemed to expect a reply. "And he called you an unbeliever, too. But what happened after that?"

"After that he took care not to bother me personally again; but these wretched anonymous demands came in, with all sorts of darkly hinted threats as to the sin I was committing in keeping my own property. They didn't trouble me much. I put 'em in the fire as fast as they came, until I began to find I was being watched and followed, and then I kept them."

"Very sensible," Hewitt observed, "very sensible indeed to do that. But tell me as to these papers. Those you have here are nearly all in one handwriting, but some, as I have already said, are in another. Now before all this business, did you ever see Reuben Penner's handwriting?"

"No, never."

"Then you are not by any means sure that he has written any of these things?"

"But then who else could?"

"That of course is a thing to be found out. At present, at any rate, we know this: that if Penner has anything to do with these letters he is not alone, because of the second handwriting. Also we must not bind ourselves past other conviction that he wrote any one of them. By the way, I am assuming that they all arrived by post?"

"Yes, they did."

"But the envelopes are not here. Have you kept any of them?"

"I hardly know; there may be some at home. Is it important?"

"It may be; but those I can see at another time. Please go on."

"These things continued to arrive, as I have said, and I continued to burn them till I began to find myself watched and followed, and then I kept them. That was two or three months ago. It is a most unpleasant sensation, that of feeling that some unknown person is dogging your footsteps from corner to corner and observing all your movements for a purpose you are doubtful of. Once or twice I turned suddenly back, but I never could catch the creatures, of whom I am sure Penner was one."

"You saw these people, of course?"

"Well, yes, in a way---with the corner of my eye, you know. But it was mostly in the evening. It was a woman once, but several times I feel certain it was Penner. And once I saw a man come into my garden at the back in the night, and I feel quite sure that was Penner."

"Was that after you had this request to put the article demanded on the stone seat in the garden?"

"The same night. I sat up and watched from the bath-room window, expecting someone would come. It was a dark night, and the trees made it darker, but I could plainly see someone come quietly over the wall and go up to the seat."

"Could you distinguish his face?"

"No, it was too dark. But I feel sure it was Penner."

"Has Penner any decided peculiarity of form or gait?"

"No, he's just a big common sort of man. But I tell you I feel certain it was Penner."

"For any particular reason?"

"No, perhaps not. But who else could it have been? No, I'm very sure it must have been Penner."

Hewitt repressed a smile and went on. "Just so," he said. "And what happened then?"

"He went up to the seat, as I said, and looked at it, passing his hand over the top. Then I called out to him. I said if I found him on my premises again by day or night I'd give him in charge of the police. I assure you he got over the wall the second time a good deal quicker than the first. And then I went to bed, though I got a shocking cold in the head sitting at that open bath-room window. Nobody came about the place after that till last night. A few days ago my only sister was taken ill. I saw her each day, and she got worse. Yesterday she was so bad that I wouldn't leave her. I sent home for some things and stopped in her house for the night. To-day I got an urgent message to come home, and when I went I found that an entrance had been made by a kitchen window and the whole house had been ransacked, but not a thing was missing."

"Were drawers and boxes opened?"

"Everywhere. Most seemed to have been opened with keys, but some were broken. The place was

turned upside down, but, as I said before, not a thing was missing. A very old woman, very deaf, who used to be my housekeeper, but who does nothing now, was in the house, and so was my general servant. They slept in rooms at the top and were not disturbed. Of course the old woman is too deaf to have heard anything, and the maid is a very heavy sleeper. The girl was very frightened, but I pacified her before I came away. As it happened, I took the snuff-box with me. I had got very suspicious of late, of course, and something seemed to suggest that I had better so I took it. It's pretty strong evidence that they have been watching me closely, isn't it, that they should break in the very first night I left the place?"

"And are you quite sure that nothing has been taken?"

"Quite certain. I have spent a long time in a very careful search."

"And you want me, I presume, to find out definitely who these people are, and get such evidence as may ensure their being punished?"

"That is the case. Of course I know Reuben Penner is the moving spirit--I'm quite certain of that. But still I can see plainly enough that as yet there's no legal evidence of it. Mind, I'm not afraid of him--not a bit. That is not my character. I'm not afraid of all the madmen in England; but I'm not going to have them steal my property--this snuff-box especially."

"Precisely. I hope you have left the disturbance in your house exactly as you found it?"

"Oh, of course, and I have given strict orders that nothing is to be touched. To-morrow morning I should like you to come and look at it."

"I must look at it, certainly," Hewitt said, "but I would rather go at once."

"Pooh--nonsense!" Mrs. Mallett answered, with the airy obstinacy that Hewitt afterwards knew so well. "I'm not going home again now to spend an hour or two more. My sister will want to know what has become of me, and she mustn't suspect that anything is wrong, or it may do all sorts of harm. The place will keep till the morning, and I have the snuff-box safe with me. You have my card, Mr. Hewitt, haven't you? Very well. Can you be at my house to-morrow morning at half-past ten? I will be there, and you can see all you want by daylight. We'll consider that settled. Good-day."

Hewitt saw her to his office door and waited till she had half descended the stairs. Then he made for a staircase window which gave a view of the street. The evening was coming on murky and foggy, and the street lights were blotchy and vague. Outside a four-wheeled cab stood, and the driver eagerly watched the front door. When Mrs. Mallett emerged he instantly began to descend from the box with the quick invitation, "Cab, mum, cab?" He seemed very eager for his fare, and though Mrs. Mallett hesitated a second she eventually entered the cab. He drove off, and Hewitt tried in vain to catch a glimpse of the number of the cab behind. It was always a habit of his to note all such identifying marks throughout a case, whether they seemed important at the time or not, and he has often had occasion to be pleased with the outcome. Now, however, the light was too bad. No sooner had the cab started than a man emerged from a narrow passage opposite, and followed. He was a large, rather awkward, heavy-faced man of middle age, and had the appearance of a respectable artisan or small tradesman in his best clothes. Hewitt hurried downstairs and followed the direction the cab and the man had taken, toward the Strand. But the cab by this time was swallowed up in the Strand traffic, and the heavy-faced man had also disappeared. Hewitt returned to his office a little disappointed, for the man seemed rather closely to

answer Mrs. Mallett's description of Reuben Penner.

II.

Punctually at half-past ten the next morning Hewitt was at Mrs. Mallett's house at Fulham. It was a pretty little house, standing back from the road in a generous patch of garden, and had evidently stood there when Fulham was an outlying village. Hewitt entered the gate, and made his way to the front door, where two young females, evidently servants, stood. They were in a very disturbed state, and when he asked for Mrs. Mallett, assured him that nobody knew where she was, and that she had not been seen since the previous afternoon.

"But," said Hewitt, "she was to stay at her sister's last night, I believe." "Yes, sir," answered the more distressed of the two girls--she in a cap--"but she hasn't been seen there. This is her sister's servant, and she's been sent over to know where she is, and why she hasn't been there."

This the other girl--in bonnet and shawl--corroborated. Nothing had been seen of Mrs. Mallett at her sister's since she had received the message the day before to the effect that the house had been broken into.

"And I'm so frightened," the other girl said, whimperingly. "They've been in the place again last night."

"Who have?"

"The robbers. When I came in this morning-----"

"But didn't you sleep here?"

"I--I ought to ha' done sir, but--but after Mrs. Mallett went yesterday I got so frightened I went home at ten." And the girl showed signs of tears, which she had apparently been already indulging in.

"And what about the old woman--the deaf woman; where was she?"

"She was in the house, sir. There was nowhere else for her to go, and she was deaf and didn't know anything about what happened the night before, and confined to her room, and--and so I didn't tell her."

"I see," Hewitt said with a slight smile. "You left her here. She didn't see or hear anything, did she?"

"No sir; she can't hear, and she didn't see nothing."

"And how do you know thieves have been in the house?"

"Everythink's tumbled about worse than ever, sir, and all different from what it was yesterday; and there's a box o' papers in the attic broke open, and all sorts o' things."

"Have you spoken to the police?"

"No, sir; I'm that frightened I don't know what to do. And missis was going to see a gentleman about it yesterday, and-----"

"Very well, I am that gentleman--Mr. Martin Hewitt. I have come down now to meet her by appointment. Did she say she was going anywhere else as well as to my office and to her sister's?"

"No, sir. And she--she's got the snuff-box with her and all." This latter circumstance seemed largely to augment the girl's terrors for her mistress's safety.

"Very well," Hewitt said, "I think I'd better just look over the house now, and then consider what has become of Mrs. Mallett--if she isn't heard of in the meantime."

The girl found a great relief in Hewitt's presence in the house, the deaf old house-keeper, who seldom spoke and never heard, being, as she said, "worse than nobody."

"Have you been in all the rooms?" Hewitt asked.

"No, sir; I was afraid. When I came in I went straight upstairs to my room, and as I was coming away I see the things upset in the other attic. I went into Mrs. Perks' room, next to mine (she's the deaf old woman), and she was there all right, but couldn't hear anything. Then I came down and only just peeped into two of the rooms and saw the state they were in, and then I came out into the garden, and presently this young woman came with the message from Mrs. Rudd."

"Very well, we'll look at the rooms now," Hewitt said, and they proceeded to do so. All were in a state of intense confusion. Drawers, taken from chests and bureaux, littered about the floor, with their contents scattered about them. Carpets and rugs had been turned up and flung into corners, even pictures on the walls had been disturbed, and while some hung awry others rested on the floor and on chairs. The things, however, appeared to have been fairly carefully handled, for nothing was damaged except one or two framed engravings, the brown paper on the backs of which had been cut round with a knife and the wooden slats shifted so as to leave the backs of the engravings bare. This, the girl told Hewitt, had not been done on the night of the first burglary; the other articles also had not on that occasion been so much disturbed as they now were.

Mrs. Mallett's bedroom was the first floor front. Here the confusion was, if possible, greater than in the other rooms. The bed had been completely unmade and the clothes thrown separately on the floor, and everything else was displaced. It was here indeed that the most noticeable features of the disturbance were observed, for on the side of the looking-glass hung a very long old-fashioned gold chain untouched, and on the dressing-table lay a purse with the money still in it. And on the looking-glass, stuck into the crack of the frame, was a half sheet of notepaper with this inscription scrawled in pencil:--

To Mr. Martin Hewitt.

Mrs. Mallett is alright and in frends hands. She will return soon alright, if you ke
folloe her or take any steps the conseqinses will be very serious.

This paper was not only curious in itself, and curious as being addressed to Hewitt, but it was plainly in the same handwriting as were the most of the anonymous letters which Mrs. Mallett had produced the day before in Hewitt's office. Hewitt studied it attentively for a few moments and then thrust it in his pocket and proceeded to inspect the rest of the rooms. All were the same--simply well-furnished rooms turned upside down. The top floor consisted of three comfortable attics, one used as a lumber-room and the others used respectively as bedrooms for the servant and the deaf old woman. None of these rooms appeared to have been entered, the girl said, on the first night, but now the lumber-room was almost as confused as the rooms downstairs. Two or three boxes

were opened and their contents turned out. One of these was what is called a steel trunk—a small one—which had held old papers, the others were filled chiefly with old clothes.

The servant's room next this was quite undisturbed and untouched; and then Hewitt was admitted to the room of Mrs. Mallett's deaf old pensioner. The old woman sat propped up in her bed and looked with half-blind eyes at the peak in the bedclothes made by her bent knees. The servant screamed in her ear, but she neither moved nor spoke.

Hewitt laid his hand on her shoulder and said, in the slow and distinct tones he had found best for reaching the senses of deaf people, "I hope you are well. Did anything disturb you in the night?"

But she only turned her head half toward him and mumbled peevishly, "I wish you'd bring my tea. You're late enough this morning."

Nothing seemed likely to be got from her, and Hewitt asked the servant, "Is she altogether bedridden?"

"No," the girl answered; "leastways she needn't be. She stops in bed most of the time, but she can get up when she likes—I've seen her. But missis humours her and lets her do as she likes—and she gives plenty of trouble. I don't believe she's as deaf as she makes out."

"Indeed!" Hewitt answered. "Deafness is convenient sometimes, I know. Now I want you to stay here while I make some inquiries. Perhaps you'd better keep Mrs. Rudd's servant with you if you want company. I don't expect to be very long gone, and in any case it wouldn't do for her to go to her mistress and say that Mrs. Mallett is missing, or it might upset her seriously."

Hewitt left the house and walked till he found a public-house where a post-office directory was kept. He took a glass of whisky and water, most of which he left on the counter, and borrowed the directory. He found "Greengrocers" in the "Trade" section and ran his finger down the column till he came on this address:—

"Penner, Reuben, 8, Little Marsh Row, Hammersmith, W."

Then he returned the directory and found the best cab he could to take him to Hammersmith.

Little Marsh Row was not a vastly prosperous sort of place, and the only shops were three—all small. Two were chandlers', and the third was a sort of semi-shed of the greengrocery and coal persuasion, with the name "Penner" on a board over the door.

The shutters were all up, though the door was open, and the only person visible was a very smudgy boy who was in the act of wheeling out a sack of coals. To the smudgy boy Hewitt applied himself. "I don't see Mr. Penner about," he said; "will he be back soon?"

The boy stared hard at Hewitt. "No," he said, "he won't. 'E's guv' up the shop. 'E paid 'is next week's rent this mornin' and retired."

"Oh!" Hewitt answered sharply. "Retired, has he? And what's become of the stock, eh! Where are the cabbages and potatoes?"

"'E told me to give 'em to the pore, an' I did. There's lots o' pore lives round 'ere. My mother's one, an' these 'ere coals is for 'er, an' I'm goin' to 'ave the trolley for myself."

"Dear me!" Hewitt answered, regarding the boy with amused interest. "You're a very business-like almoner. And what will the Tabernacle do without Mr. Penner?"

"I dunno," the boy answered, closing the door behind him. "I dunno nothin' about the Tabernacle--only where it is."

"Ah, and where is it? I might find him there, perhaps."

"Ward Lane--fust on left, second on right. It's a shop wot's bin shut up; next door to a stable-yard." And the smudgy boy started off with his trolley.

The Tabernacle was soon found. At some very remote period it had been an unlucky small shop, but now it was permanently shuttered, and the interior was lighted by holes cut in the upper panels of the shutters. Hewitt took a good look at the shuttered window and the door beside it and then entered the stable-yard at the side. To the left of the passage giving entrance to the yard there was a door, which plainly was another entrance to the house, and a still damp mud-mark on the step proved it to have been lately used. Hewitt rapped sharply at the door with his knuckles.

Presently a female voice from within could be heard speaking through the keyhole in a very loud whisper. "Who is it?" asked the voice.

Hewitt stooped to the keyhole and whispered back, "Is Mr. Penner here now?"

"No."

"Then I must come in and wait for him. Open the door."

A bolt was pulled back and the door cautiously opened a few inches. Hewitt's foot was instantly in the jamb, and he forced the door back and entered. "Come," he said in a loud voice, "I've come to find out where Mr. Penner is, and to see whoever is in here."

Immediately there was an assault of fists on the inside of a door at the end of the passage, and a loud voice said, "Do you hear? Whoever you are I'll give you five pounds if you'll bring Mr. Martin Hewitt here. His office is 25 Portsmouth Street, Strand. Or the same if you'll bring the police." And the voice was that of Mrs. Mallett.

Hewitt turned to the woman who had opened the door, and who now stood, much frightened, in the corner beside him. "Come," he said, "your keys, quick, and don't offer to stir, or I'll have you brought back and taken to the station."

The woman gave him a bunch of keys without a word. Hewitt opened the door at the end of the passage, and once more Mrs. Mallett stood before him, prim and rigid as ever, except that her bonnet was sadly out of shape and her mantle was torn. "Thank you, Mr. Hewitt," she said. "I thought you'd come, though where I am I know no more than Adam. Somebody shall smart severely for this. Why, and that woman--that woman," she pointed contemptuously at the woman in the corner, who was about two-thirds her height, "was going to search me--me! Why----" Mrs. Mallett, blazing with suddenly revived indignation, took a step forward and the woman vanished through the outer door.

"Come," Hewitt said, "no doubt you've been shamefully treated; but we must be quiet for a little. First I will make quite sure that nobody else is here, and then we'll get to your house."

Nobody was there. The rooms were dreary and mostly empty. The front room, which was lighted by the holes in the shutters, had a rough reading-desk and a table, with half a dozen wooden chairs. "This," said Hewitt, "is no doubt the Tabernacle proper, and there is very little to see in it. Come back now, Mrs. Mallett, to your house, and we'll see if some explanation of these things is not possible. I hope your snuff-box is quite safe?"

Mrs. Mallett drew it from her pocket and exhibited it triumphantly. "I told them they should never get it," she said, "and they saw I meant it, and left off trying."

As they emerged in the street she said: "The first thing, of course, is to bring the police into this place."

"No, I think we won't do that yet," Hewitt said. "In the first place the case is one of assault and detention, and your remedy is by summons or action; and then there are other things to speak of. We shall get a cab in the High Street, and you shall tell me what has happened to you."

Mrs. Mallett's story was simple. The cab in which she left Hewitt's office had travelled west, and was apparently making for the locality of her sister's house; but the evening was dark, the fog increased greatly, and she shut the windows and took no particular notice of the streets through which she was passing. Indeed with such a fog that would have been impossible. She had a sort of undefined notion that some of the streets were rather narrow and dirty, but she thought nothing of it, since all cabmen are given to selecting unexpected routes. After a time, however, the cab slowed, made a sharp turn, and pulled up. The door was opened, and "Here you are mum," said the cabby. She did not understand the sharp turn, and had a general feeling that the place could not be her sister's, but as she alighted she found she had stepped directly upon the threshold of a narrow door into which she was immediately pulled by two persons inside. This, she was sure, must have been the side-door in the stable-yard, through which Hewitt himself had lately obtained entrance to the Tabernacle. Before she had recovered from her surprise the door was shut behind her. She struggled stoutly and screamed, but the place she was in was absolutely dark; she was taken by surprise, and she found resistance useless. They were men who held her, and the voice of the only one who spoke she did not know. He demanded in firm and distinct tones that the "sacred thing" should be given up, and that Mrs. Mallett should sign a paper agreeing to prosecute nobody before she was allowed to go. She however, as she asserted with her customary emphasis, was not the sort of woman to give in to that. She resolutely declined to do anything of the sort, and promised her captors, whoever they were, a full and legal return for their behaviour. Then she became conscious that a woman was somewhere present, and the man threatened that this woman should search her. This threat Mrs. Mallett met as boldly as the others. She should like to meet the woman who would dare attempt to search her, she said. She defied anybody to attempt it. As for her uncle Joseph's snuff-box, no matter where it was, it was where they would not be able to get it. That they should never have, but sooner or later they should have something very unpleasant for their attempts to steal it. This declaration had an immediate effect. They importuned her no more, and she was left in an inner room and the key was turned on her. There she sat, dozing occasionally, the whole night, her indomitable spirit remaining proof through all those doubtful hours of darkness. Once or twice she heard people enter and move about, and each time she called aloud to offer, as Hewitt had heard, a reward to anybody who should bring the police or communicate her situation to Hewitt. Day broke and still she waited, sleepless and unfed, till Hewitt at last arrived and released her.

On Mrs. Mallett's arrival at her house Mrs. Rudd's servant was at once despatched with reassuring news and Hewitt once more addressed himself to the question of the burglars. "First, Mrs. Mallett," he said, "did you ever conceal anything--anything at all mind--in the frame of an engraving?"

"No, never."

"Were any of your engravings framed before you had them?"

"Not one that I can remember. They were mostly uncle Joseph's, and he kept them with a lot of others in drawers. He was rather a collector, you know."

"Very well. Now come up to the attic. Something has been opened there that was not touched at the first attempt."

"See now," said Hewitt, when the attic was reached, "here is a box full of papers. Do you know everything that was in it?"

"No, I don't," Mrs. Mallett replied. "There were a lot of my uncle's manuscript plays. Here you see 'The Dead Bridegroom, or the Drum of Fortune,' and so on; and there were a lot of autographs. I took no interest in them, although some were rather valuable, I believe."

"Now bring your recollection to bear as strongly as you can," Hewitt said. "Do you ever remember seeing in this box a paper bearing nothing whatever upon it but a wax seal?"

"Oh yes, I remember that well enough. I've noticed it each time I've turned the box over--which is very seldom. It was a plain slip of vellum paper with a red seal, cracked and rather worn--some celebrated person's seal, I suppose. What about it?"

Hewitt was turning the papers over one at a time. "It doesn't seem to be here now," he said. "Do you see it?"

"No," Mrs. Mallett returned, examining the papers herself, "it isn't. It appears to be the only thing missing. But why should they take it?"

"I think we are at the bottom of all this mystery now," Hewitt answered quietly. "It is the Seal of the Woman."

"The what? I don't understand."

The fact is, Mrs. Mallett, that these people have never wanted your uncle Joseph's snuff-box at all, but that seal.

"Not wanted the snuff-box? Nonsense! Why, didn't I tell you Penner asked for it--wanted to buy it?"

"Yes, you did, but so far as I can remember you never spoke of a single instance of Penner mentioning the snuff-box by name. He spoke of a sacred relic, and you, of course, very naturally assumed he spoke of the box. None of the anonymous letters mentioned the box, you know, and once or twice they actually did mention a seal, though usually the thing was spoken of in a roundabout and figurative way. All along, these people--Reuben Penner and the others--have been after the seal, and you have been defending the snuff-box."

"But why the seal?"

"Did you never hear of Joanna Southcott?"

"Oh yes, of course; she was an ignorant visionary who set up as prophetess eighty or ninety years ago or more."

"Joanna Southcott gave herself out as a prophetess in 1790. She was to be the mother of the Messiah, she said, and she was the woman driven into the wilderness, as foretold in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation. She died at the end of 1814, when her followers numbered more than 100,000, all fanatic believers. She had made rather a good thing in her lifetime by the sale of seals, each of which was to secure the eternal salvation of the holder. At her death, of course, many of the believers fell away, but others held on as faithfully as ever, asserting that 'the holy Joanna would rise again and fulfil all the prophecies. These poor people dwindled in numbers gradually, and although they attempted to bring up their children in their own faith, the whole belief has been practically extinct for years now. You will remember that you told me of Penner's mother being a superstitious fanatic of some sort, and that your uncle Joseph possessed her extravagances. The thing seems pretty plain now. Your uncle Joseph possessed himself of Joanna Southcott's seal by way of removing from poor old Mrs. Penner an object of a sort of idolatry, and kept it as a curiosity. Reuben Penner grew up strong in his mother's delusions, and to him and the few believers he had gathered round him at his Tabernacle, the seal was an object worth risking anything to get. First he tried to convert you to his belief. Then he tried to buy it; after that, he and his friends tried anonymous letters, and at last, grown desperate, they resorted to watching you, burglary and kidnapping. Their first night's raid was unsuccessful, so last night they tried kidnapping you by the aid of a cabman. When they had got you, and you had at last given them to understand that it was your uncle Joseph's snuff-box you were defending, they tried the house again, and this time were successful. I guessed they had succeeded then, from a simple circumstance. They had begun to cut out the backs of framed engravings for purposes of search, but only some of the engravings were so treated. That meant either that the article wanted was found behind one of them, or that the intruders broke off in their picture-examination to search somewhere else, and were then successful, and so under no necessity of opening the other engravings. You assured me that nothing could have been concealed in any of the engravings, so I at once assumed that they had found what they were after in the only place wherein they had not searched the night before--the attic--and probably among the papers in the trunk."

"But then if they found it there why didn't they return and let me go?"

"Because you would have found where they had brought you. They probably intended to keep you there till the dark of the next evening, and then take you away in a cab again and leave you some distance off. To prevent my following and possibly finding you they left here on your looking-glass this note" (Hewitt produced it) "threatening all sorts of vague consequences if you were not left to them. They knew you had come to me, of course, having followed you to my office. And now Penner feels himself anything but safe. He has relinquished his greengrocery and dispensed his stock in charity, and probably, having got the seal he has taken himself off. Not so much perhaps from fear of punishment as for fear the seal may be taken from him, and with it the salvation his odd belief teaches him it will confer."

Mrs. Mallett sat silently for a little while and then said in a rather softened voice, "Mr. Hewitt, I am not what is called a woman of sentiment, as you may have observed, and I have been most shamefully treated over this wretched seal. But if all you tell me has been actually what has happened I have a sort of perverse inclination to forgive the man in spite of myself. The thing probably had been his mother's--or at any rate he believed so--and his giving up his little all to attain the object of his ridiculous faith, and distributing his goods among the poor people and all that--really it's worthy of an old martyr, if only it were done in the cause of a faith a little less stupid--though of course he thinks his is the only religion, as others do of theirs. But then"--Mrs.

Mallett stiffened again—"there's not much to prove your theories, is there?"

Hewitt smiled. "Perhaps not," he said, "except that, to my mind at any rate, everything points to my explanation being the only possible one. The thing presented itself to you, from the beginning, as an attempt on the snuff-box you value so highly, and the possibility of the seal being the object aimed at never entered your mind. I saw it whole from the outside, and on thinking the thing over after our first interview I remembered Joanna Southcott. I think I am right."

"Well, if you are, as I said, I half believe I shall forgive the man. We will advertise if you like, telling him he has nothing to fear if he can give an explanation of his conduct consistent with what he calls his religious belief, absurd as it may be."

That night fell darker and foggier than the last. The advertisement went into the daily papers, but Reuben Penner never saw it. Late the next day a bargeman passing Old Swan Pier struck some large object with his boat-hook and brought it to the surface. It was the body of a drowned man, and it was afterwards identified as that of Reuben Penner, late greengrocer, of Hammersmith. How he came into the water there was nothing to show. There was no money nor any valuables found on the body, and there was a story of a large, heavy-faced man who had given a poor woman—a perfect stranger—a watch and chain and a handful of money down near Tower Hill on that foggy evening. But this again was only a story, not definitely authenticated. What was certain was that, tied securely round the dead man's neck with a cord, and gripped and crumpled tightly in his right hand, was a soddened piece of vellum paper, blank, but carrying an old red seal, of which the device was almost entirely rubbed and cracked away. Nobody at the inquest quite understood this.

