The Man With The Cough

Mrs Molesworth

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I am a German by birth and descent. My name is Schmidt. But by education I am quite as much an Englishman as a 'Deutscher', and by affection much more the former. My life has been spent pretty equally between the two countries, and I flatter myself I speak both languages without any foreign accent.

I count England my headquarters now: it is 'home' to me. But a few years ago I was resident in Germany, only going over to London now and then on business. I will not mention the town where I lived. It is unnecessary to do so, and in the peculiar experience I am about to relate I think real names of people and places are just as well, or better avoided.

I was connected with a large and important firm of engineers. I had been bred up to the profession, and was credited with a certain amount of 'talent; and I was considered − and, with all modesty, I think I deserved the opinion − steady and reliable, so that I had already attained a fair position in the house, and was looked upon as a "rising man'. But I was still young, and not quite so wise as I thought myself. I came very near once to making a great mess of a certain affair. It is this story which I am going to tell.

Our house went in largely for patents − rather too largely, some thought. But the head partner's son was a bit of a genius in his way, and his father was growing old, and let Herr Wilhelm − Moritz we will call the family name − do pretty much as he chose. And on the whole Herr Wilhelm did well. He was cautious, and he had the benefit of the still greater caution and larger experience of Herr Gerhardt, the second partner in the firm.

Patents and the laws which regulate them are queer things to have to do with. No one who has not had personal experience of the complications that arise could believe how far these spread and how entangled they become. Great acuteness as well as caution is called for if you would guide your patent bark safely to port − and perhaps more than anything, a power of holding your tongue. I was no chatterbox, nor, when on a mission of importance, did I go about looking as if I were bursting with secrets, which is, in my opinion, almost as dangerous as revealing them. No one, to meet me on the journeys which it often fell to my lot to undertake, would have guessed that I had anything on my mind but an easy−going young fellow's natural interest in his surroundings, though many a time I have stayed awake through a whole night of railway travel if at all doubtful about my fellow−passengers, or not dared to go to sleep in a hotel without a ready−loaded revolver by my pillow. For now and then − though not through me − our secrets did ooze out. And if, as has happened, they were secrets connected with Government orders or contracts, there was, or but for the exertion of the greatest energy and tact on the part of my superiors, there would have been, to put it plainly, the devil to pay.

One morning − it was nearing the end of November − I was sent for to Herr Wilhelm's private room. There I found him and Herr Gerhardt before a table spread with papers covered with figures and calculations, and sheets of beautifully executed diagrams.

'Lutz,' said Herr Wilhelm. He had known me from childhood, and often called me by the abbreviation of my Christian name, which is Ludwig, or Louis. 'Lutz, we are going to confide to you a matter of extreme importance. You must be prepared to start for London tomorrow.'

'All right, sir,' I said, 'I shall be ready.'

'You will take the express through to Calais − on the whole it is the best route, especially at this season. By travelling all night you will catch the boat there, and arrive in London so as to have a good night's rest, and be clear−headed for work the next morning.'

I bowed agreement, but ventured to make a suggestion.

'If, as I infer, the matter is one of great importance,' I said, 'would it not be well for me to start sooner? I can − yes,' throwing a rapid survey over the work I had before me for the next two days − I can be ready tonight.' Herr Wilhelm looked at Herr Gerhardt. Herr Gerhardt shook his head.

'No,' he replied, 'tomorrow it must be,' and then he proceeded to explain to me why.

I need not attempt to give all the details of the matter with which I was entrusted. Indeed, to 'lay' readers it would be impossible. Suffice it to say, the whole concerned a patent − that of a very remarkable and wonderful invention, which it was hoped and believed the Government of both countries would take up. But to secure this being done in a thoroughly satisfactory manner it was necessary that our firm should go about it in concert with an English house of first−rate standing. To this house − the firm of Messrs Bluestone &Fagg I will call them − I was to be sent with full explanations. And the next half−hour or more passed in my superiors going minutely into the details, so as to satisfy themselves that I understood. The mastering of the whole was not difficult, for I was well grounded technically; and like many of the best things the idea was essentially simple, and the diagrams were perfect. When the explanations were over, and my instructions duly noted, I began to gather together the various sheets, which were all numbered. But, to my surprise, Herr Gerhardt, looking over me, withdrew two of the most important diagrams, without which the others were valueless, because inexplicable.

'Stay,' he said; 'these two, Ludwig, must be kept separate. These we send today, by registered post, direct to Bluestone &Fagg. They will receive them a day before they see you, and with them a letter announcing your arrival.'

I looked up in some disappointment. I had known of precautions of the kind being taken, but usually when the employee sent was less reliable than I believed myself to be. Still, I scarcely dared to demur.

'Do you think that necessary?' I said respectfully. 'I can assure you that from the moment you entrust me with the papers they shall never quit me day or night. And if there were any postal delay − you say time is valuable in this case − or if the papers were stolen in the transit − such things have happened − my whole mission would be worthless.

'We do not doubt your zeal and discretion, my good Schmidt,' said Herr Gerhardt. 'But in this case we must take even extra precautions. I had not meant to tell you, fearing to add to the certain amount of nervousness and strain unavoidable in such a case, but still, perhaps it is best that you should know that we have reason for some special anxiety. It has been hinted to us that some breath of this' − and he tapped the papers − 'has reached those who are always on the watch for such things. We cannot be too careful.'

'And yet', I persisted, 'you would trust the post?'

'We do not trust the post,' he replied. 'Even if these diagrams were tampered with, they would be perfectly useless. And tampered with they will not be. But even supposing anything so wild, the rogues in question knowing of your departure (and they are more likely to know of it than of our packet by post), were they in collusion with some traitor in the post office, are sharp enough to guess the truth − that we have made a Masonic secret of it − the two separate diagrams are valueless without your papers; your papers reveal nothing without Nos. 7 and 13.'

I bowed in submission. But I was, all the same, disappointed, as I said, and a trifle mortified.

Herr Wilhelm saw it, and cheered me up.

'All right, Lutz, my boy,' he said. 'I feel just like you − nothing I should enjoy more than a rush over to London, carrying the whole documents, and prepared for a fight with anyone who tried to get hold of them. But Herr Gerhardt here is cooler−blooded than we are.'

The elder man smiled.

'I don't doubt your readiness to fight, nor Ludwig's either. But it would be by no such honestly brutal means as open robbery that we should be outwitted. Make friends readily with no one while travelling, Lutz, yet avoid the appearance of keeping yourself aloof. You understand?'

'Perfectly,' I said. 'I shall sleep well tonight, so as to be prepared to keep awake throughout the journey.'

The papers were then carefully packed up. Those consigned to my care were to be carried in a certain light, black handbag with a very good lock, which had often before been my travelling companion. And the following evening I started by the express train agreed upon. So, at least, I have always believed, but I have never been able to bring forward a witness to the fact of my train at the start being the right one, as no one came with me to see me off. For it was thought best that I should depart in as unobtrusive a manner as possible, as, even in a large town such as ours, the members and employees of an old and important house like the Moritzes' were well known.

I took my ticket then, registering no luggage, as I had none but what I easily carried in my hand, as well as the bag. It was already dusk, if not dark, and there was not much bustle in the station, nor apparently many passengers. I took my place in an empty second−class compartment, and sat there quietly till the train should start. A few minutes before it did another man got in. I was somewhat annoyed at this, as in my circumstances nothing was more undesirable than travelling alone with one other. Had there been a crowded compartment, or one with three or four passengers, I would have chosen it; but at the moment I got in, the carriages were all either empty or with but one or two occupants. Now, I said to myself, I should have done better to wait till nearer the time of departure, and then chosen my place.

I turned to reconnoitre my companion, but I could not see his face clearly, as he was half leaning out of the window. Was he doing so on purpose? I said to myself, for naturally I was in a suspicious mood. And as the thought struck me I half started up, determined to choose another compartment. Suddenly a peculiar sound made itself heard. My companion was coughing. He drew his head in, covering his face with his hand, as he coughed again. You never heard such a curious cough. It was more like a hen clucking than anything I can think of. Once, twice he coughed; then, as if he had been waiting for the slight spasm to pass, he sprang up, looked eagerly out of the window again, and, opening the door, jumped out, with some exclamation, as if he had just caught sight of a friend.

And in another moment or two − he could barely have had time to get in elsewhere − much to my satisfaction, the train moved off.

'Now,' thought I, 'I can make myself comfortable for some hours. We do not stop till M−−−−: it will be nine o'clock by then. If no one gets in there I am safe to go through till tomorrow alone; then there will only be −−−− Junction, and a clear run to Calais.'

I unstrapped my rug and lit a cigar − of course I had chosen a smoking−carriage − and, delighted at having got rid of my clucking companion, the time passed pleasantly till we pulled up at M−−−−. The delay there was not great, and to my enormous satisfaction no one molested my solitude. Evidently the express to Calais was not in very great demand that night. I now felt so secure that, notwithstanding my intention of keeping awake all night, my innermost consciousness had not I suppose quite resigned itself to the necessity, for, not more than a hour or so

after leaving M−−−−, possibly sooner, I fell fast asleep.

It seemed to me that I had slept heavily, for when I awoke I had great difficulty in remembering where I was. Only by slow degrees did I realise that I was not in my comfortable bed at home, but in a chilly, ill−lighted railway−carriage. Chilly − yes, that it was − very chilly; but as my faculties returned I remembered my precious bag, and forgot all else in a momentary terror that it had been taken from me. No; there it was my elbow had been pressed against it as I slept. But how was this? The train was not in motion. We were standing in a station; a dingy deserted looking place, with no cheerful noise or bustle; only one or two porters slowly moving about, with a sort of sleepy 'night duty', surly air. It could not be the Junction? I looked at my watch. Barely midnight! Of course, not the Junction. We were not due there till four o'clock in the morning or so.

What, then, were we doing here, and what was 'here'? Had there been an accident − some unforeseen necessity for stopping? At that moment a curious sound, from some yards' distance only it seemed to come, caught my ear. It was that croaking, cackling cough! − the cough of my momentary fellow−passenger, towards whom I had felt an instinctive aversion. I looked out of the window − there was a refreshment room just opposite, dimly lighted, like everything else, and in the doorway, as if just entering, was a figure which I felt pretty sure was that of the man with the cough.

'Bah!' I said to myself, 'I must not be fanciful. I dare say the fellow's all right. He is evidently in the same hole as myself. What in Heaven's name are we waiting here for?'

I sprang out of the carriage, nearly tumbling over a porter slowly passing along.

'How long are we to stay here?' I cried. 'When do we start again for −−−−?' and I named the Junction.

'For −−−−,' he repeated in the queerest German I ever heard − was it German? or did I discover his meaning by some preternatural cleverness of my own? 'There is no train for −−−− for four or five hours, not till −−−−' and he named the time; and leaning forward lazily, he took out my larger bag and my rug, depositing them on the platform. He did not seem the least surprised at finding me there − I might have been there for a week, it seemed to me.

'No train for five hours? Are you mad?' I said.

He shook his head and mumbled something, and it seemed to me that he pointed to the refreshment−room opposite. Gathering my things together I hurried thither, hoping to find some more reliable authority. But there was no one there except a fat man with a white apron, who was clearing the counter − and − yes, in one corner was the figure I had mentally dubbed 'The man with the cough'.

I addressed the cook or waiter − whichever he was. But he only shook his head − denied all knowledge of the trains, but informed me that − in other words − I must turn out; he was going to shut up.

'And where am I to spend the night, then?' I said angrily, though clearly it was not the aproned individual who was responsible for the position in which I found myself.

There was a 'Restauration', he informed me, near at hand, which I should find still open, straight before me on leaving the station, and then a few doors to the right, I would see the lights.

Clearly there was nothing else to be done. I went out, and as I did so the silent figure in the corner rose also and followed me. The station was evidently going to bed. As I passed the porter I repeated the hour he had named, adding: 'That is the first train for −−−− Junction?'

He nodded, again naming the exact time. But I cannot do so, as I have never been able to recollect it.

I trudged along the road − there were lamps, though very feeble ones; but by their light I saw that the man who had been in the refreshment−room was still a few steps behind me. It made me feel slightly nervous, and I looked round furtively once or twice; the last time I did so he was not to be seen, and I hoped he had gone some other way.

The 'Restauration' was scarcely more inviting than the station−room. It, too, was very dimly lighted, and the one or two attendants seemed half asleep and were strangely silent. There was a fire of a kind, and I seated myself at a small table near it and asked for some coffee, which would, I thought, serve the double purpose of warming me and keeping me awake.

It was brought me, in silence. I drank it, and felt the better for it. But there was something so gloomy and unsociable, so queer and almost weird about the whole aspect and feeling of the place, that a sort of irritable resignation took possession of me. If these surly folk won't speak, neither will I, I said to myself childishly. And, incredible as it may sound, I did not speak. I think I paid for the coffee, but I am not quite sure. I know I never asked what I had meant to ask − the name of the town − a place of some importance, to judge by the size of the station and the extent of twinkling lights I had observed as I made my way to the 'Restauration'. From that day to this I have never been able to identify it, and I am quite sure I never shall.

What was there peculiar about that coffee? Or was it something peculiar about my own condition that caused it to have the unusual effect I now experienced? That question, too, I cannot answer. All I remember is feeling a sensation of irresistible drowsiness creeping over me − mental, or moral I may say, as well as physical. For when one part of me feebly resisted the first onslaught of sleep, something seemed to reply: 'Oh, nonsense! you have several hours before you. Your papers are all right. No one can touch them without awaking you.'

And dreamily conscious that my belongings were on the floor at my feet − the bag itself actually resting against my ankle − my scruples silenced themselves in an extraordinary way. I remember nothing more, save a vague consciousness through all my slumber of confused and chaotic dreams, which I have never been able to recall.

I awoke at last, and that with a start, almost a jerk. Something had awakened me − a sound − and as it was repeated to my now aroused ears I knew that I had heard it before, off and on, during my sleep. It was the extraordinary cough!

I looked up. Yes, there he was! At some two or three yards' distance only, at the other side of the fireplace, which, and this I have forgotten to mention as another peculiar item in that night's peculiar experiences, considering I have every reason to believe I was still in Germany, was not a stove, but an open grate.

And he had not been there when I first fell asleep; to that I was prepared to swear.

'He must have come sneaking in after me,' I thought, and in all probability I should neither have noticed nor recognised him but for that traitorous cackle of his.

Now, my misgivings aroused, my first thought, of course, was for my precious charge. I stooped. There were my rugs, my larger bag, but − no, not the smaller one; and though the other two were there, I knew at once that they were not quite in the same position − not so close to me. Horror seized me. Half wildly I gazed around, when my silent neighbour bent towards me. I could declare there was nothing in his hand when he did so, and I could declare as positively that I had already looked under the small round table beside which I sat, and that the bag was not there. And yet when the man, with a slight cackle, caused, no doubt, by his stooping, raised himself, the thing was in his hand!

Was he a conjuror, a pupil of Maskelyne and Cook? And how was it that, even as he held out my missing property, he managed, and that most cleverly and unobtrusively, to prevent my catching sight of his face! I did not see it then − I never did see it!

Something he murmured, to the effect that he supposed the bag was what I was looking for. In what language he spoke I know not; it was more that by the action accompanying the mumbled sounds, I gathered his meaning, than that I heard anything articulate.

I thanked him, of course, mechanically, so to say, though I began to feel as if he were an evil spirit haunting me. I could only hope that the splendid lock to the bag had defied all curiosity, but I felt in a fever to be alone again, and able to satisfy myself that nothing had been tampered with.

The thought recalled my wandering faculties. How long had I been asleep? I drew out my watch. Heavens! It was close upon the hour named for the first train in the morning. I sprang up, collected my things, and dashed out of the 'Restauration'. If I had not paid for my coffee before, I certainly did not pay for it then. Besides my haste, there was another reason for this − there was no one to pay to! Not a creature was to be seen in the room or at the door as I passed out − always excepting the man with the cough.

As I left the place and hurried along the road, a bell began, not to ring, but to toll. It sounded most uncanny. What it meant, of course, I have never known. It may have been a summons to the workpeople of some manufactory, it may have been like all the other experiences of that strange night. But no; this theory I will not at present enter upon.

Dawn was not yet breaking, but there was in one direction a faint suggestion of something of the kind not far off. Otherwise all was dark. I stumbled along as best as I could, helped in reality, I suppose, by the ugly yellow glimmer of the woebegone street, or road lamps. And it was not far to the station, though somehow it seemed farther than when I came; and somehow, too, it seemed to have grown steep, though I could not remember having noticed any slope the other way on my arrival. A nightmare−like sensation began to oppress me. I felt as if my luggage was growing momentarily heavier and heavier, as if I should never reach the station; and to this was joined the agonising terror of missing the train.

I made a desperate effort. Cold as it was, the beads of perspiration stood out upon my forehead as I forced myself along. And by degrees the nightmare feeling cleared off. I found myself entering the station at a run just as − yes, a train was actually beginning to move! I dashed, baggage and all, into a compartment; it was empty, and it was a second−class one, precisely similar to the one I had occupied before; it might have been the very same one. The train gradually increased its speed, but for the first few moments, while still in the station and passing through its immediate entourage, another strange thing struck me − the extraordinary silence and lifelessness of all about. Not one human being did I see, no porter watching our departure with the faithful though stolid interest always to be seen on the porter's visage. I might have been alone in the train − it might have had a freight of the dead, and been itself propelled by some supernatural agency, so noiselessly, so gloomily did it proceed.

You will scarcely credit that I actually and for the third time fell asleep. I could not help it. Some occult influence was at work upon me throughout those dark hours, I am positively certain. And with the daylight it was dispelled. For when I again awoke I felt for the first time since leaving home completely and normally myself, fresh and vigorous, all my faculties at their best.

But, nevertheless, my first sensation was a start of amazement, almost of terror. The compartment was nearly full! There were at least five or six travellers besides myself, very respectable, ordinary−looking folk, with nothing in the least alarming about them. Yet it was with a gasp of extraordinary relief that I found my precious bag in the corner beside me, where I had carefully placed it. It was concealed from view. No one, I felt assured, could have touched it without awaking me.

It was broad and bright daylight. How long had I slept?

'Can you tell me,' I enquired of my opposite neighbour, a cheery−faced compatriot − 'Can you tell me how soon we get to −−− Junction by this train? I am most anxious to catch the evening mail at Calais, and am quite out in my reckonings, owing to an extraordinary delay at −−−− I have wasted the night by getting into a stopping train instead of the express.'

He looked at me in astonishment. He must have thought me either mad or just awaking from a fit of intoxication − only I flatter myself I did not look as if the latter were the case.

'How soon we get to −−−− Junction?' he repeated. 'Why, my good sir, you left it about three hours ago! It is now eight o'clock. We all got in at the Junction. You were alone, if I mistake not?' − he glanced at one or two of the others, who endorsed his statement. 'And very fast asleep you were, and must have been, not to be disturbed by the bustle at the station. And as for catching the evening boat at Calais' − he burst into a loud guffaw − 'why, it would be very hard lines to do no better than that! We all hope to cross by the midday one.'

'Then − what train is this?' I exclaimed, utterly perplexed.

'The express, of course. All of us, excepting yourself, joined it at the Junction,' he replied.

'The express?' I repeated. 'The express that leaves' − and I named my own town −at six in the evening?'

'Exactly. You have got into the right train after all,' and here came another shout of amusement. 'How did you think we had all got in if you had not yet passed the Junction? You had not the pleasure of our company from M−−−−, I take it? M−−−−, which you passed at nine o'clock last night, if my memory is correct.'

'Then', I persisted, this is the double−fast express, which does not stop between M−−−− and your Junction?'

'Exactly,' he repeated; and then, confirmed most probably in his belief that I was mad, or the other thing, he turned to his newspaper, and left me to my extraordinary cogitations.

Had I been dreaming? Impossible! Every sensation, the very taste of the coffee, seemed still present with me − the curious accent of the officials at the mysterious town, I could perfectly recall. I still shivered at the remembrance of the chilly waking in the 'Restauration'; I heard again the cackling cough.

But I felt I must collect myself, and be ready for the important negotiation entrusted to me. And to do this I must for the time banish these fruitless efforts at solving the problem.

We had a good run to Calais, found the boat in waiting, and a fair passage brought us prosperously across the Channel. I found myself in London punctual to the intended hour of my arrival.

At once I drove to the lodgings in a small street off the Strand which I was accustomed to frequent in such circumstances. I felt nervous till I had an opportunity of thoroughly overhauling my documents. The bag had been opened by the Custom House officials, but the words 'private papers' had sufficed to prevent any further examination; and to my unspeakable delight they were intact. A glance satisfied me as to this the moment I got them out, for they were most carefully numbered.

The next morning saw me early on my way to − No. 909, we will say − Blackfriars Street, where was the office of Messrs Bluestone &Fagg. I had never been there before, but it was easy to find, and had I felt any doubt, their name stared me in the face at the side of the open doorway. 'Second−floor' I thought I read; but when I reached the first landing I imagined I must have been mistaken. For there, at a door ajar, stood an eminently

respectable−looking gentleman, who bowed as he saw me, with a discreet smile.

'Herr Schmidt?' he said. 'Ah, yes; I was on the lookout for you.'

I felt a little surprised, and my glance involuntarily strayed to the doorway. There was no name upon it, and it appeared to have been freshly painted. My new friend saw my glance.

'It is all right,' he said; 'we have the painters here. We are using these lower rooms temporarily. I was watching to prevent your having the trouble of mounting to the second−floor.'

And as I followed him in, I caught sight of a painter's ladder − a small one − on the stair above, and the smell was also unmistakable. The large outer office looked bare and empty, but under the circumstances that was natural. No one was, at the first glance, to be seen; but behind a dulled glass partition screening off one corner I fancied I caught sight of a seated figure. And an inner office, to which my conductor led the way, had a more comfortable and inhabited look. Here stood a younger man. He bowed politely.

'Mr Fagg, my junior,' said the first individual airily. 'And now, Herr Schmidt, to business at once, if you please. Time is everything. You have all the documents ready?'

I answered by opening my bag and spreading out its contents. Both men were very grave, almost taciturn; but as I proceeded to explain things it was easy to see that they thoroughly understood all I said.

'And now,' I went on, when I had reached a certain point, 'if you will give me Nos. 7 and 13 which you have already received by registered post, I can put you in full possession of the whole. Without them, of course, all I have said is, so to say, preliminary only.'

The two looked at each other.

'Of course,' said the elder man, 'I follow what you say. The key of the whole is wanting. But I was momentarily expecting you to bring it out. We have not − Fagg, I am right, am I not − we have received nothing by post?'

'Nothing whatever,' replied his junior. And the answer seemed simplicity itself. Why did a strange thrill of misgiving go through me? Was it something in the look that had passed between them? Perhaps so. In any case, strange to say, the inconsistency between their having received no papers and yet looking for my arrival at the hour mentioned in the letter accompanying the documents, and accosting me by name, did not strike me till some hours later.

I threw off what I believed to be my ridiculous mistrust, and it was not difficult to do so in my extreme annoyance.

'I cannot understand it,' I said. 'It is really too bad. Everything depends upon 7 and 13. I must telegraph at once for enquiries to be instituted at the post office.'

'But your people must have duplicates,' said Fagg eagerly. 'These can be forwarded at once.'

'I hope so,' I said, though feeling strangely confused and worried.

'They must send them direct here,' he went on.

I did not at once answer. I was gathering my papers together.

'And in the meantime', he proceeded, touching my bag, you had better leave these here. We will lock them up in the safe at once. It is better than carrying them about London.'

It certainly seemed so. I half laid down the bag on the table, but at that moment from the outer room a most peculiar sound caught my ears − a faint cackling cough! I think I concealed my start. I turned away as if considering Fagg's suggestion, which, to confess the truth, I had been on the very point of agreeing to. For it would have been a great relief to me to know that the papers were in safe custody. But now a flash of lurid light seemed to have transformed everything.

'I thank you,' I replied, 'I should be glad to be free from the responsibility of the charge, but I dare not let these out of my own hands till the agreement is formally signed.'

The younger man's face darkened. He assumed a bullying tone.

'I don't know how it strikes you, Mr Bluestone,' he said, 'But it seems to me that this young gentleman is going rather too far. Do you think your employers will be pleased to hear of your insulting us, sir?'

But the elder man smiled condescendingly, though with a touch of superciliousness. It was very well done. He waved his hand.

'Stay, my dear Mr Fagg; we can well afford to make allowance. You will telegraph at once, no doubt, Herr Schmidt, and − let me see − yes, we shall receive the duplicates of Nos. 7 and 13 by first post on Thursday morning.'

I bowed.

'Exactly,' I replied, as I lifted the now locked bag. 'And you may expect me at the same hour on Thursday morning.'

Then I took my departure, accompanied to the door by the urbane individual who had received me.

The telegram which I at once dispatched was not couched precisely as he would have dictated, I allow. And he would have been considerably surprised at my sending off another, later in the day, to Bluestone &Fagg's telegraphic address, in these words:

'Unavoidably detained till Thursday morning. − SCHMIDT.'

This was after the arrival of a wire from home in answer to mine. By Thursday morning I had had time to receive a letter from Herr Wilhelm, and to secure the services of a certain noted detective, accompanied by whom I presented myself at the appointed hour at 909. But my companion's services were not required. The birds had flown, warned by the same traitor in our camp through whom the first hints of the new patent had leaked out. With him it was easy to deal, poor wretch! but the clever rogues who had employed him and personated the members of the honourable firm of Bluestone &Fagg were never traced.

The negotiation was successfully carried out. The experience I had gone through left me a wiser man. It is to be hoped, too, that the owners of 909 Blackfriars Street were more cautious in the future as to whom they let their premises to when temporarily vacant. The repainting of the doorway, etc., at the tenant's own expense had already roused some slight suspicion.

It is needless to add that Nos. 7 and 13 had been duly received on the second−floor.

I have never known the true history of that extraordinary night. Was it all a dream, or a prophetic vision of warning? Or was it in any sense true? Had I, in some inexplicable way, left my own town earlier than I intended, and really travelled in a slow train?

Or had the man with a cough, for his own nefarious purposes, mesmerised or hypnotised me, and to some extent succeeded? I cannot say. Sometimes, even, I ask myself if I am quite sure that there ever was such a person as 'the man with the cough'!