THE SIX NEW NOVELS

William Le Queux

Table of Contents

THE SIX NEW NOVELS

William Le Queux

THE car had again undergone a transformation.

With a new racing−body, built in Northampton, and painted in white picked out with gilt, no one would have recognised it as the car which had carried away the clever jewel−thief from Bond Street.

Since the adventure at Leghorn I had seen nothing of La Belle Valentine. With Bindo, however, I had driven the car across from Rome to Calais by way of Ventimiglia and Marseilles, and, after crossing the Channel I had gone alone to Northampton, and there awaited the making of the smart new racing−body.

Count Bindo di Ferraris, who seemed ever on the move with an eye open for "a good thing," wrote me from Ilfracombe, Southampton, Manchester, Perth, Aberdeen, and other places, remitting me the necessary money, and urging me to push on the work, as he wanted the car again immediately.

At last, when it was finished, I drove it to a garage I knew at the back of Regent Street, and that same evening met him at the Automobile Club. At his request, I dressed smartly and gave no outward appearance of the chauffeur; therefore he invited me to dine, and afterwards, while we sat alone in a corner of the smoking−room, he began to unfold a series of plans for the future. They were, however, hazy, and only conveyed to me an idea that we were going on a long tour in England.

I ventured to remark that to be in England, after the little affair in Bond Street, might be somewhat dangerous. He replied, however, with his usual nonchalant air:

"My dear Ewart, there's not the slightest fear. Act as I bid, and trust in me. To− morrow, at eleven, we go north together — into Yorkshire. You will be my servant again after to− night. You understand — eh?"

"Perfectly. Shall we start from here?"

"Yes. But before we set out I can only warn you that you'll want all your wits about you this time. If we have luck, we shall bring off a big thing — a very big thing."

"And if we have no luck?"

"Well — well, we shan't bring it off — that's all," he laughed.

"Where are we going?"

"Yorkshire. To spend a week at the seaside. It will do us both good. I've decided that the Scarborough air will be extremely beneficial to us. One of our friends is already there — at the Grand."

"Sir Charles?"

"Exactly. He's very fond of Scarborough — likes the church parade on Sundays, the music on the Spa, and all that kind of thing. So we'll join him. I wonder if we shall get through in a day?"

"We ought to — with luck," was my response, and then, after urging me to leave everything in his hands, he told me that I'd better get early to bed, and thoroughly overhaul the car early next morning before starting.

So next day at ten he took his seat by my side outside the club in Piccadilly, and we drove away into the traffic towards Regent's Park on our way to that much overrated highway, the Great North Road. The day was warm and dusty, and as it was a Saturday there were police traps out everywhere. Therefore progress was slow for I was forced at every few miles to slow down to escape a ten−pound fine.

Leafy Hatfield, crooked Hitchin, quaint old Stamford, we passed until we swung into the yard of "The Angel" that antique and comfortable hotel well known to all motorists at Grantham, where we had a hasty meal.

Then out again in the sunset, we headed through Doncaster to York, and in the darkness, with our big head−lamps shining we tore through Malton and slipped down the hill into Scarborough. The run had been a long and dusty one, the last fifty miles in darkness and at a high speed, therefore when we pulled up before the Grand I leaned heavily upon the steering−wheel, weary and fagged.

It was about eleven o'clock at night and Sir Charles, who had evidently been expecting our arrival in the big hall of the hotel, rushed out and greeted Bindo effusively. Then, directed by a page−boy who sat in the Count's

seat, I took the car round to Hutton's garage, close by.

With Sir Charles I noticed another man, young, with very fair hair, a mere boy, he seemed — in evening clothes of the latest cut. When I returned to the hotel I saw them all seated in the big hall over whiskies and sodas, laughing merrily together. It was late, and all the other guests had retired.

Next day Bindo took the young man, whose name I discovered to be Paul Clayton, for a run on the car to Bridlington. Bindo drove, and I sat upon the step. The racing−body gave the "forty" a rakish appearance, and each time we went up and down the Esplanade, or across the Valley Bridge, we created considerable interest. After lunch we went on to Hornsea, and returned to Scarborough at tea−time.

That same evening, after dinner, I saw Bindo's new friend walking on the Esplanade with a fair−haired, well−dressed young girl. They were deep in conversation, and it struck me that she was warning him regarding something.

Days passed — warm, idle August days. Scarborough was full of visitors. The Grand was overrun by a smartly−dressed crowd, and the Spa was a picturesque sight during the morning promenade. The beautiful "Belvedere" grounds were a blaze of roses, and, being private property, were regarded with envy by thousands who trod the asphalte of the Esplanade. Almost daily Bindo took Paul for a run on the car. To York, to Castle Howard, to Driffield, and to Whitby we went — the road to the last−named place, by the way, being execrable. Evidently Bindo's present object was to ingratiate himself with young Clayton but with what ulterior motive I could not conceive.

Sir Charles remained constantly in the background. Well−dressed and highly respectable, he presented a rather superior air, and walked on the Spa at certain hours, establishing a kind of custom from which he did not depart. He had now changed his name to Sinclair, while Bindo di Ferraris went under the less foreign cognomen of Albert Cornforth. I alone kept my own name, George Ewart.

As day succeeded day, I kept wondering what was really in the wind. Why were they so friendly with Paul Clayton? Of one fact I felt assured, and it was that jewels were not the object of the manœuvre on this occasion. That Bindo and his friends had laid some deep plot was, of course, quite certain, but the Count never took me into his confidence until the last moment, when the coup was made. Therefore, try how I would, I could not discover the intentions of the gang.

From Leghorn to Scarborough is a far cry. At least we were safe from detection for all our little business affairs, save that of the Bond Street jewellers. Continually I reflected that our description had been circulated by the police, and that some enterprising constable or detective might pick upon us on the off−chance of being correct.

Count Bindo or Albert Cornforth, as he now chose to be known was having a most excellent time. He soon grew to know many people in the hotel, and being so essentially a ladies' man was greatly in request at the dances. Continually he apologised to the ladies for being unable to take them motoring, but, as he explained the space on a racing car is limited.

Thus a fortnight passed. Round at the garage were a number of cars from London, Manchester and elsewhere and I soon grew friendly with several expert chauffeurs, two of whom were old friends.

One day Bindo and I had been to Harrogate, dined at the Majestic, and returned. After taking the car to the garage I went out for a turn along the Esplanade, in order to stretch my legs. It was midnight, brightly starlit, and silent save for the low soughing of the waves upon the shore. I had lit my pipe and walked nearly to the Holbeck Gardens at the extreme end of the South Cliff when, in the darkness, I discerned of two figures sitting upon a seat in the shadow. One was a man, and the other a woman in a light evening dress, with a wrap thrown over her head and shoulders. As I passed I managed to get a glimpse of their faces. One was Paul Clayton and the other the pretty, fair−haired young woman I had seen him with before. They were sitting in the attitude of lovers. He held her hand and, I believe, had just raised it to his lips.

I hurried on, annoyed with myself for being so inquisitive. But the beautiful face of the girl became impressed upon my memory.

Count Bindo, the nonchalant, audacious cosmopolitan, who spent money so freely, was a veritable marvel of cleverness and cunning in all matters of chicanery and fraud. He was evidently a man who, though still young, had a pretty dark record. But what it really was he carefully concealed from me. I can only admit that I had now become an adventurer like the others, for in each case I had received a certain portion of the profits of the coups

which we had assisted each other in effecting. True, we lived a life full of excitement and change, but it was a life I liked, for at heart I was nothing if not a wanderer and adventurer. I liked adventure for adventure's sake, and cared nothing for the constant peril of detection. Strange how easily one can be enticed from a life of honesty into one of fraud, especially if the inducements held out are an adequate recompense for any qualm of conscience.

The actions of our friend, Sir Charles Blythe, were also rather puzzling. He seemed to be taking no part in whatever scheme was in progress. If I met him in public on the Esplanade, or elsewhere, I saluted him as a chauffeur should, but when we met unobserved I was his equal and on several occasions I made inquiries which he refused to satisfy.

We had been nearly three weeks in Scarborough when, after dinner, one evening in the big hall of the hotel I saw the audacious Bindo seated drinking coffee with a little queer, wizen−faced but rather over−dressed old lady, towards whom he seemed to be particularly polite. She was evidently one of those wrinkled, yellow−toothed old tabbies who still believe themselves to be attractive, for, as I watched covertly, I saw how she assumed various poses for the benefit of those seated in her vicinity. Though so strikingly dressed, in a gown trimmed with beautiful old lace, she wore no jewellery, save her wedding−ring. Her airs and mannerisms were, however, amusing, and quickly made it apparent that she moved in a good set.

From the hall−porter I presently learned that she was a Mrs. Clayton, of St. Mellions Hall, near Peterborough, the widow of a wealthy Oldham cotton−spinner, who generally spent a month at that hotel each year.

"She's a quaint old girl," he informed me in confidence. "Thinks no end of herself, and always trying to hang on to some woman with a title, even if she's only a knight's wife. Some ill−natured woman has nicknamed her the Chameleon — because she changes her dresses so often and is so fond of bright colours. But she's a good old sort," he added. "Always pretty free with her tips. Her son is here, too."

Whoever or whatever she was, it was evident that Bindo was busily engaged ingratiating himself with her, having previously established a firm friendship with her son, who, by the way, had left Scarborough on the previous day.

I happened to have a friend who was chauffeur to a doctor in Peterborough, therefore I wrote to him that evening, making inquiries regarding St. Mellions and its owner. Three days later a reply came to the effect that the Hall was about ten miles from Peterborough, and one of the finest country seats in Northamptonshire. It had been the property of a well−known Earl who, having become impoverished by gambling, had sold it together with the great estate, to old Joshua Clayton, the Lancashire millionaire. "She keeps a couple of cars," my friend concluded. "One is a Humber voiturette, and the other a twenty−four Mercedes. You know her chauffeur — Saunders — from the Napier works."

Of course I knew Saunders. He was once a very intimate friend of mine, but for the past couple of years I had lost sight of him.

Why, I wondered, was Bindo so intensely interested in the over−dressed old crone? He walked with her constantly on the Spa or along the Esplanade; he lounged at her side when she sat to watch the parading summer girls and their flirtations, and he idled at coffee with her every evening. After a few days Sir Charles Blythe, alias Sinclair, was introduced. By pre−arrangement the bogus baronet chanced to be standing by the railings looking over the Spa grounds one morning when Bindo and his companion strolled by. The men saluted each other, and Bindo asked Mrs. Clayton's leave to introduce his friend. The instant the magic title was spoken the old lady became full of smiles and graces, and the trio walking together passed along in the direction of Holbeck.

Two days later Henderson appeared on the scene quite suddenly. I was walking along Westborough late one evening when somebody accosted me, and, turning, I found it was our friend — whom I believed to be still on the Continent. He was dressed as foppishly as usual, and certainly betrayed no evidence that he was a "crook."

"Well, Ewart?" he asked. "And how goes things? Who's this old crone we've got in tow? A soft thing, Bindo says."

I told him all I knew concerning her, and he appeared to be reassured. He had taken a room at the Grand, he told me and I afterwards found that on the following morning Bindo pretended to discover him at the hotel and introduced him to the unsuspecting old lady as young Lord Kelham. Mrs. Clayton was delighted at thus extending her acquaintanceship with England's bluest blood.

That same afternoon the old lady, who seemed to be of a rather sporting turn of mind, expressed a desire to ride upon a racing−car; therefore I brought round the forty, and Bindo drove her over to Malton, where we had

tea, and a quick run back in the evening. There are no police−traps on the road between Scarborough and York, therefore we were able to put on a move, and the old lady expressed the keenest delight at going so fast. As I sat upon the step at her feet she seemed constantly alarmed lest I should fall off.

"My own cars never go so quickly," she declared. "My man drives at snail's pace."

"Probably because you have traps in Northamptonshire," Bindo replied. "There are always lurking constables along the Great North Road and the highways leading into it. But you must let me come and take your driver's place for a little while. If the cars are worth anything at all I'll get the last mile out of them."

"I only wish you would come and pay me a visit, Mr. Cornforth. I should be so very delighted. Do you shoot?"

"A little," Bindo answered. "My friend, Sir Charles Sinclair, is said to be one of the best shots in England. But I'm not much of a shot myself."

"Then can't you persuade him to come with you?"

"Well, I'll ask him," my employer replied. "He has very many engagements however. He's so well known, you see."

"He'll come if you persuade him I'm sure," the old lady said, with what she believed to be a winning smile. "You can drive my Mercedes, and he can shoot. I always have a house−party through September, so you both must join it. I'll make you as comfortable as I can in my humble house. Paul will be at home."

"Humble, Mrs. Clayton? Why, I have years ago heard St. Mellions spoken of as one of the show−houses of the Midlands."

"Then you've heard an exaggeration, my dear Mr. Cornforth," was her response, as she laughed lightly. "Remember, I shall expect you, and you can bring your own car if you like. Our roads are fairly good, you'll find."

Bindo accepted with profuse thanks, and shot me a glance by which I knew that he had advanced one step further towards the consummation of his secret intentions — whatever they were. Sir Charles would, no doubt, go with us. What, I wondered, was intended?

Three weeks later we arrived one evening at St. Mellions, and found it a magnificent old Tudor mansion, in the centre of a lordly domain, and approached from the high road by a great beech avenue nearly a mile in length. The older wing of the house — part of an ancient Gothic abbey — was ivy−covered, while in front of the place was a great lake, originally the fish−pond of the Carmelite monks.

It wanted an hour before dinner when we arrived, and at sound of our horn nearly a dozen men and women of the house−party came forth to greet us.

"They seem a pretty smart crowd," remarked Bindo under his breath to Sir Charles, seated beside him.

"Yes, but we'll want all our wits about us," replied the other. "I hear that the wife of Gilling, the jeweller in Bond Street, is here with her daughter. Suppose her husband takes it into his head to run down here for the week−end — eh?"

"We won't suppose anything of the sort, my dear fellow. I always hate supposing. It's a bad habit when you've got your living to earn, as we have."

And with those words he ran along to the main entrance, and pulled up sharply, being greeted by our hostess herself, who, in a cream serge dress, stood upon the steps and shouted us a warm welcome.

My two friends were quickly introduced by Paul to the assembled party, while several of the men came around the car to admire it, one of them questioning me as to its horse−power, its make, and other details, inquiries which showed his ignorance. Round in the garage I found my friend Saunders, and later on he took me over the splendid old place, filled as it was with the relics of the noble but now decadent English family.

My eyes and ears were open everywhere. The house−party, numbering eighteen, consisted mostly of the parvenu set, people who having made money by trade were attempting to pass as county families. The men possessed for the most part the air of "the City" and the womenkind were painfully "smart" without the good breeding necessary to carry it off.

After dinner, under the guidance of Saunders, I managed to get a glimpse of the great hall, where the party had assembled for coffee. It was a fine, lofty oak−panelled old place, once the refectory of the monks, with great Gothic windows of stained glass, antique cabinets, and stands of armour. Against the dark oak, from floor to ceiling, the dresses of the women showed well, and, amid the laughter and chatter, I saw the gay careless Bindo

— a well set−up, manly figure in his evening clothes — standing beside his hostess, chatting and laughing with her, while Sir Charles was bending over the chair of a pretty fair−haired girl in turquoise, whom I recognised as the same girl I had seen with Paul at Scarborough. Her name was Ethel Gilling, Saunders said, and told me that young Clayton was, in secret, deeply in love with her. Would her father arrive and put a premature end to our conspiracy? I feared that he might.

Saunders asked me a good deal about my berth and position, and I fancy he envied me. He did not know that I had become a "crook" like my master, but believed me to be a mere chauffeur whose duties took him hither and thither across Europe. No chauffeur can bear private service with a cheap car in a circumscribed area. Every man who drives a motor−car — whether master or servant — longs for wide touring and a high−power.

Contrary to Bindo's declaration, he proved to be a very good shot, while Sir Charles provoked the admiration of all the men when, next morning, they went forth in search of birds. That same afternoon Bindo drove the Mercedes containing Mrs. Clayton and three ladies of the party, while I drove one of the men — a Captain Halliday — in our own car, and we all went over to the ruins of Crowland Abbey. Saunders had told me that he had never driven the Mercedes to her full power, as his mistress was so nervous. But, with Bindo driving, the old lady now seemed to want to go faster and faster. Our car was, of course, the more powerful, and ere we had gone ten miles I put on full speed, and passed my master with ease, arriving at Crowland fully twenty minutes before him.

It was, however, very apparent that Bindo, the good−looking adventurer, had wormed himself entirely into the Chameleon's good graces. Both he and Halliday escorted the ladies over the ruins, and after tea at the old−fashioned "George" we made a quick and enjoyable run home in the sunset by way of Eye, Peterborough, Castor, and Wansford.

The autumn days went by, and, amid such pleasant surroundings, our visit was proving a most merry one. Yet, try how I would, I could not see what Bindo and his friend intended.

The girl in turquoise who flirted so outrageously with young Clayton was, I discovered, also very friendly with Sir Charles. Then I saw that his partiality towards her was with a distinct object — namely, in order to be aware of her father's movements.

Truly, Bindo and Blythe were past−masters in the art of genteel scoundrelism. Adventurers of the very first water, they seldom, if ever, let me into their secrets until their plans were actually matured. Their reason for this reticence was that they believed I might show the white feather. They could not yet rely upon my audacity or courage.

Within a week Bindo was the most popular man in the house−party, the humorist of the dinner−table, and an expert in practical jokes, of which many were being played, one half the party being pitted against the other half, as is so often the case.

In the servants' hall we were also having a pretty merry time. Medhurst, the maid of Mrs. Clayton, was a particularly prepossessing young woman, and I had many chats and a few walks with her. From her, at Bindo's instigation, I learned a good deal regarding her mistress's habits and tastes, all of which I, in due course, reported to my master. A shrewd girl was Medhurst, however, and I was compelled to exercise a good deal of judicious tact in putting my questions to her.

One evening, however, while sitting alone in the park smoking, just before going to bed, I saw Bindo himself strolling at her side. She was speaking softly, but what about I could not make out. They were in a part of the park into which the guests never went, and it seemed as though she had kept a secret tryst. Not wishing to disturb them, I slipped away unobserved.

Next morning Paul Clayton went up t London in order to see his mother's solicitors, and that same afternoon, about four o'clock, Mrs. Clayton received a very urgent telegram to come at once, as her lawyers desired some instructions immediately. The message she received evidently caused her very great anxiety, for she took Medhurst, and drove in the Mercedes to Peterborough station, where she caught the up−express at seven o'clock.

She had apologised to her house−party for her absence, explained the urgency of her presence in London, and promised to be back in time for dinner on the morrow.

She left the Hall at half−past six. At seven Bindo called me out of the servants' hall and whispered:

"Hold yourself in readiness. Go to my room at nine punctually, and you'll find on the table half−a−dozen novels done up in a strap. Just take them carefully, put them in the car, and then get away, first to Northampton to

change the body, and the to Harwich. Wait for me there at the Great Eastern Hotel, in the name of Parker. Take great care of the books. I shall give you other instructions before people presently, but take no notice of them. I'll join you as soon as it's safe.

And with that he turned upon his heel and left me.

The dressing−gong was just sounding as I walked across to the garage in order to look through the car and charge the lamps, prior to my night journey. I was wondering what was about to happen. That some coup was to be made that night was very evident. I spent half−an−hour on the car, and had all in order, when a servant came to say that my master wanted me.

I found Bindo in the hall, laughing gaily with some ladies, prior to going in to dinner.

"Oh, Ewart," he said, when I entered, cap in hand. "I want you to run the car over to Birmingham to−night, and bring Colonel Fielding here to−morrow. You know where he lives — at Welford Park. He's expecting you. The roads are all right, so you'll make good time. You'd better get a couple of outer covers too, when you're there. You'll bring the Colonel back in time for dinner to−morrow — you understand!"

"Yes, sir," I replied, and, bowing, went out, while with the ladies he turned in the direction of the dining−room.

I idled about until the stable clock was just on the point of striking nine, when I made my way by the servants' staircase to my master's room. The corridor was in semi−darkness. I rapped, but there being no one there, I entered, switched on the light, and there upon the table found the small pile of new, cloth−bound six−shilling novels, held together with a strap of webbing, such as lawyers use to tie up their papers.

I took them up, switched off the light and carried them downstairs to the car which I had previously brought out into the stable−yard. My lamps were already lit, and I was in the act of putting on my frieze coat when Saunders, driving the Mercedes, passed me, going towards the main entrance of the Hall. He had a passenger — a guest from the station judging from his dress.

As the stranger descended from the car the light over the steps revealed his face. I started. It was the jeweller I had spoken to in Bond Street — the man I had taken for the manager, but who was none other than Mr. Gilling himself!

I saw that all was lost. In a few moments he would come face to face with Bindo!

In an instant, however, I had made up my mind, and, re−entering the house, I made my way quickly through into the large hall. But Gilling was already there kissing his wife and daughter. I glanced round, but was reassured to see both Bindo and Sir Charles were absentees. Did they know of Gilling's impending arrival?

I ran up to the rooms of both my friends but could not find them. In Bindo's room a dress−coat had been thrown upon the bed. He had changed since I had been up there for the books. Alarmed by the news of the jeweller's arrival, they had in all probability, changed hurriedly and slipped away. Therefore I ran down to the car, and, telling Saunders that I was off to Birmingham and should return on the morrow, I ran quietly down the long dark avenue.

From St. Mellions to Harwich, as the crow flies, is about one hundred and thirty miles. First, however, I went to Northampton, and put the previous body on the car. Then the road I took was by Huntingdon, Cambridge, Halstead, and Colchester — in all, about 170 miles. The night was dark, but the roads were in fairly good condition, therefore I went at as high a speed as I dare, full of wonder as to what had really happened.

Bindo's dress−coat on the bed showed that he had left, therefore I had every hope that he had not been recognised by the jeweller. After I had changed the body at the coachbuilder's at Northampton, the run to the Essex coast proved an exciting one, for I had one narrow escape at a level crossing. But to give details of the journey would serve no purpose. Suffice it to say that I duly arrived at the Great Eastern Hotel at Harwich next morning, and registered there in the name of Parker.

Then I waited in patience until, two days later, I received a note from Bindo, and met him at some distance from the hotel. His personal appearance was greatly altered, and he was shabbily dressed as a chauffeur.

"By Jove!" he said, when we were alone. "We've had a narrow squeak. We had no idea when Henderson sent the telegram from London calling the old crone up to town that Gilling had been invited. We only heard of his impending arrival at the very moment we were bringing off the coup. Then, instead of remaining there, becoming indignant, and assisting the police, we were compelled to fly, and thus give the whole game away. If we had stayed Gilling would have recognised us. By Jove! I never had such a tough quarter of an hour in all my life.

Blythe has gone up to Scotland and we shall ship the car across to Hamburg by to−night's boat from Parkeston. You've got those books all right. Don't lose them."

"I've left them in the car," I replied.

"Left them in the car!" he cried glaring at me. "Are you mad?"

"Mad! Why?"

"Go and get them at once and lock them up in your bag. I'll show you something when we get an opportunity."

The opportunity came three days later when we were alone together in a room in Hofer's Hotel, in the Bahnhofs−Platz in Hamburg. He took the books from me, undid the buckle, and, to my surprise, showed me that the centres of the popular books had been cleverly cut out so that they were literally boxes formed by the paper leaves. And each book was filled with splendid jewels!

The haul was a huge one, for several of the diamond ornaments which had been taken from the Chameleon's safe were of enormous value. The old lady was passionately fond of jewellery, and spent huge sums with Mr. Gilling. We afterwards discovered that several of the finest pieces we had taken had actually been sent to her on approval by Gilling, so, curiously enough, we had touched his property on a second occasion.

"It was a difficult affair," Bindo declared. "I had to pretend to make love to Medhurst, or I should never have been able to get a cast of the safe−key. However, we've been able to take the best of the old lady's collection, and they'll fetch a good price in Amsterdam, or I'm a Dutchman myself. Of course, there's a big hue−and−cry after us, so we must lie very low over here for a bit. Fancy your leaving those novels kicking about in the car! Somebody might have wanted to read them!"