

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

HERBERT JENKINS

Table of Contents

<u>THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM</u>	1
<u>HERBERT JENKINS</u>	2
<u>I</u>	3
<u>II</u>	5
<u>III</u>	6
<u>IV</u>	12

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- I
- II
- III
- IV

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

I

"WELL," cried Tims, one Saturday night, as he pushed open the kitchen door of the little flat he occupied over the garage. "How's the cook, the stove, and the supper?"

"I'm busy," said Mrs. Tims, a little, fair woman, with blue eyes, an impertinent nose, and the inspiration of neatness in her dress, as she altered the position of a saucepan on the stove and put two plates into the oven to warm.

This was the invariable greeting between husband and wife. Tims went up behind her, gripped her elbows to her side, and kissed her noisily.

"I told you I was busy," she said.

"You did, Emmelina," he responded. "I heard you say so, and how's his Nibs?"

The last remark was addressed to an object that was crawling towards him with incoherent cries and gurgles of delight. Stooping down, Tims picked up his eighteen-months-old son and held him aloft, chuckling and mouthing his glee.

"You'll drop him one of these days," said Mrs. Tims, "and then there'll be a pretty hullabaloo."

"Well, he's fat enough to bounce," was the retort. "Ain't you, Jimmy?"

Neither Tims nor Mrs. Tims seemed to be conscious that without variations these same remarks had been made night after night, week after week, month after month.

"How's Mr. Sage?" was the question with which Mrs. Tims always followed the reference to the bouncing of Jimmy.

"Like Johnny Walker, still going strong," glibly came the reply, just as it came every other night. "He was asking about you to-day," added Tims.

"About me?" Mrs. Tims turned, all attention, her cooking for the time forgotten.

"Yes, wanted to know when I was going to divorce you."

"Don't be silly, Jim," she cried. "What did he say, really now?" she added as she turned once more to the stove.

"Oh! he just asked if you were well," replied Tims, more interested in demonstrating with the person of his son how an aeroplane left the ground than in his wife's question.

"Anything else?" enquired Mrs. Tims, prodding a potato with a fork to see if it was done.

Tims was not deceived by the casual tone in which the question was asked. He was wont to say that, if his wife wanted his back teeth, she would get them.

"Nothing, my dear, only to ask if his Nibs was flourishin'," and with a gurgle of delight the aeroplane soared towards the ceiling.

Mrs. Tims had not forgotten the time when Malcolm Sage visited her several times when she was ill with pneumonia. She never tired of telling her friends of his wonderful knowledge of household affairs. He had talked to her of cooking, of childish ailments, of shopping, in a way that had amazed her. His knowledge seemed universal. He had explained to her among other things how cracknel biscuits were made and why croup was so swift in its action.

Tims vowed that the Chief had done her more good than the doctor, and from that day Malcolm Sage had occupied chief place in Mrs. Tims's valhalla.

"Quaint sort o' chap, the Chief," Tims would remark sometimes in connection with some professional episode.

"Pity you're not as quaint," would flash back the retort from Mrs. Tims, whose conception of loyalty was more literal than that of her husband.

Supper finished and his Nibs put to bed, Tims proceeded to enjoy his pipe and evening paper, whilst Mrs. Tims got out her sewing. From time to time Tims's eyes would wander over towards the telephone in the comer.

Finally he folded up the paper, and proceeded to knock out the ashes from his pipe preparatory to going to bed. His eyes took a last look at the telephone just as Mrs. Tims glanced up.

"Don't sit there watching that telephone," she cried, "anyone would think you were wanting ——"

"Brrrrrrr — brrrrrrr — brrrrrrr," went the bell.

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

"Now perhaps you're happy," cried Mrs. Tims as he rose to answer the call, whilst she put on the kettle to make hot coffee to fill the thermos flasks without which she never allowed the car to go out at night. It was her tribute to "the Chief."

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

II

In his more expansive moments Malcolm Sage would liken himself to a general practitioner in a diseased-infected district. It is true that there was no speaking-tube, with its terrifying whistle, a few feet from his head; but the telephone by his bedside was always liable to arouse him from sleep at any hour of the night.

As Tims had folded up his newspaper with a view to bed, Malcolm Sage was removing his collar before the mirror on his dressing-table, when his telephone bell rang. Rogers, his man, looked interrogatingly at his master, who, shaking his head, passed over to the instrument and took up the receiver.

"Yes, this is Malcolm Sage — Speaking — Yes." Then for a few minutes he listened with an impassive face. "I'll be off within ten minutes — The Towers, Holdingham, near Guildford — I understand."

While he was speaking, Rogers, a little sallow-faced man with fish-like eyes and expressionless face, had moved over to the other telephone and was droning in a monotonous, uninflected voice, "Chief wants car in five minutes."

It was part of Malcolm Sage's method to train his subordinates to realise the importance of intelligent and logical inference.

Returning to the dressing-table, Malcolm Sage took up another collar, slipped a tie between the fold, and proceeded to put it on.

As he did so he gave instructions to Rogers, who, note-book in hand, and with an expression of indifference that seemed to say "Kismet," silently recorded his instructions.

"My address will be The Towers, Holdingham, near Guildford. Be on the look-out for messages."

Without a word Rogers closed the book and, picking up a suit-case, which was always ready for emergencies, he left the room. Two minutes later Malcolm Sage followed and, without a word, entered the closed car that had just drawn up before his flat in the Adelphi.

Rogers returned to the flat, switched the telephone on to his own room, and prepared himself for the night, whilst Malcolm Sage, having eaten a biscuit and drunk some of Mrs. Tims's hot coffee, lay back to sleep as the car rushed along the Portsmouth road.

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

III

In the library at The Towers three men were seated, their faces lined and drawn as if some great misfortune had suddenly descended upon them; yet their senses were alert. They were listening.

"He ought to be here any minute now," said Mr. Llewellyn John the Prime Minister, taking out his watch for the hundredth time.

Sir Lyster Grayne, First Lord of the Admiralty, shook his head.

"He should do it in an hour," said Lord Beamdale, the Secretary of War, "if he's got a man who knows the road."

"Sage is sure ——" began Sir Lyster; then he stopped abruptly, and turned in the direction of the further window.

A soft tapping as of a finger-nail upon a pane of glass was clearly distinguishable. It ceased for a few seconds, recommenced, then ceased again.

Mr. Llewellyn John looked first at Sir Lyster and then on towards where Lord Beamdale sat, heavy of frame and impassive of feature.

Sir Lyster rose and walked quickly over to the window. As he approached the tapping recommenced. Swinging back the curtain he disappeared into the embrasure.

The others heard the sound of the window being raised and then closed again. A moment later Malcolm Sage appeared, followed by Sir Lyster, who once more drew the curtain.

At the sight of Malcolm Sage, Mr. Llewellyn John's features relaxed from their drawn, tense expression. A look of relief flashed momentarily into Lord Beamdale's fish-like eyes.

"Thank God you've come, Sage!" cried Mr. Llewellyn John, with a sigh of relief as he grasped Malcolm Sage's hand as if it had been a lifebelt and he a drowning man. "I think you have met Lord Beamdale," he added.

Malcolm Sage bowed to the War Minister, then with great deliberation removed his overcoat, carefully folded it, and placed it upon a chair, laying his cap on top. He then selected a chair at the table that gave him a dear view of the faces of the three Ministers, and sat down.

"Why did you come to the window?" enquired Sir

Lyster, as he resumed his own seat. "Did you know this was the library?"

"I saw a crack of light between the curtains," replied Malcolm Sage. "It may be desirable that no one should know I have been here," he added.

"Something terrible has happened, Sage," broke in the Prime Minister, his voice shaking with excitement. He had with difficulty contained himself whilst Malcolm Sage was taking off his overcoat and explaining his reason for entering by the window. "It's — it's ——" His voice broke.

"Perhaps Sir Lyster will tell me, or Lord Beamdale," suggested Malcolm Sage, looking from one to the other. Lord Beamdale shook his head.

"Just a bare outline, Sir Lyster," said Malcolm Sage, spreading out his fingers before him.

Slowly, deliberately, and with perfect self-possession, Sir Lyster explained what had happened.

"The Prime Minister and Lord Beamdale came down with me on Thursday night to spend the week-end," he said. "Incidentally we were to discuss a very important matter connected with this country's — foreign policy." The hesitation was only momentary. "Lord Beamdale brought with him a document of an extremely private nature. This I had sent to him earlier in the week for consideration and comment.

"If that document were to get to a certain Embassy in London no one can foretell the calamitous results. It might even result in another war, if not now certainly later. It was, I should explain, of a private and confidential nature, and consequently quite frankly expressed."

"And you must remember ——" began Mr. Llewellyn John excitedly.

"One moment, sir," said Malcolm Sage quietly, without looking up from an absorbed contemplation of a bronze letter-weight fashioned in the form of a sphinx.

Mr. Llewellyn John sank back into his chair, and Sir Lyster resumed.

"Just over an hour and a half ago, that is to say soon after eleven o'clock, it was discovered that the document in question was missing, and in its place had been substituted a number of sheets of blank paper."

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

"Unless it's found, Sage," cried Mr. Llewellyn John, jumping up from his chair in his excitement, "the consequences are too awful to contemplate."

For a few seconds he strode up and down the room, then returning to his chair, sank back into its comfortable depths.

"Where was the document kept?" enquired Malcolm Sage, his long, sensitive fingers stroking the back of the sphinx.

"In the safe," replied Sir Lyster, indicating with a nod a small safe let into the wall.

"You are in the habit of using it for valuable documents?" queried Malcolm Sage.

"As a matter of fact very seldom. It is mostly empty," was the reply.

"Why?"

"I have a larger safe in my dressing-room, in which I keep my papers. During the day I occasionally use this to save going up and down stairs."

"Where do you keep the key?"

"When there is anything in the safe I always carry it about with me."

"And at other times?"

"Sometimes in a drawer in my writing-table," said Sir Lyster; "but generally I have it on me."

"When was the document put into the safe?"

"At a quarter to eight to-night, just as the second dressing-gong was sounding."

"And you yourself put it in, locked the door, and have retained the key ever since?" Malcolm Sage had exhausted the interest of the sphinx and was now drawing diagrams with his forefinger upon the morocco surface of the table.

Sir Lyster nodded.

"I put the key in the pocket of my evening vest when I changed," he said. "After the other guests had retired, the Prime Minister raised a point that necessitated reference to the document itself. It was then I discovered the substitution."

"But for that circumstance the safe would not have been opened until when?" queried Malcolm Sage.

"Late to-night, when I should have transferred the packet to the safe in my dressing-room."

"Would you have examined the contents?"

"No. It is my rule to cut adrift from official matters from dinner-time on Saturday until after breakfast on Monday. It was only in deference to the Prime Minister's particular wish that we referred to the document to-night."

"I take it that the rule you mention is known to your guests and servants?"

"Certainly."

"There is no doubt that it was the document itself that you put in the safe?"

"None; the Prime Minister and Lord Beamdale saw me do it."

"No doubt whatever," corroborated Mr. Llewellyn John, whilst Lord Beamdale wagged his head like a mandarin.

"Does anyone else know that it is missing?" asked Malcolm Sage after a short pause.

Sir Lyster shook his head.

"Only we three; and, of course, the thief," he added.

Malcolm Sage nodded. He had tired of the diagrams, and now sat stroking the back of his head.

"Has anyone left the house since the discovery; that is, as far as you know?" he queried at length.

"No one," said Sir Lyster.

"The servants, of course, have access to this room?"

"Yes; but only Walters, my butler, is likely to come here in the evening, except, of course, my secretary."

"Where does he dine?"

"Miss Blair," corrected Sir Lyster, "always takes her meals in her own sitting-room, where she works. It is situated at the back of the house on the ground floor."

Again Malcolm Sage was silent, this time for a longer period.

"So far as you know, then," he said at length, addressing Sir Lyster, "only three people in the house were acquainted with the existence of the document; you, the Prime Minister, and Lord Beamdale."

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

Sir Lyster inclined his head.

"You are certain of that?" Malcolm Sage looked up swiftly and keenly. "Your secretary and Lady Grayne, for instance, they knew nothing about it?"

"Nothing; of that I am absolutely certain," replied Sir Lyster coldly.

"And the nature of the document?" enquired Malcolm Sage.

Sir Lyster looked across at Mr. Llewellyn John, who turned interrogatingly to Lord Beamdale.

"I am afraid it is of too private a nature to ——" he hesitated.

"If you require me to trace something," said Malcolm Sage evenly, "you must at least tell me what that something is."

"It is a document which ——" began Lord Beamdale, then he, too, paused.

"But, surely, Sage," broke in Mr. Llewellyn John, "it is not necessary to know the actual contents?"

"If you had lost something and would not tell me whether it was a dog or a diamond, would you expect me to find it?"

"But ——" began Mr. Llewellyn John.

"I'm afraid we are wasting time, gentlemen," said Malcolm Sage, rising. "I would suggest Scotland Yard. The official police must work under any handicap imposed. I regret that I am unable to do so."

He walked across to the chair where lay his cap and coat.

"Now, Sage," said Mr. Llewellyn John tactfully, "you mustn't let us down, you really mustn't." Then turning to Sir Lyster, he said, "I can see his point. If he doesn't know the nature of the document, he cannot form a theory as to who is likely to have taken it. Perhaps under the circumstances, Grayne, we might take Sage into our confidence; at least to such extent as he thinks necessary."

Sir Lyster made no response, whilst Lord Beamdale, whose economy in words had earned for him the sobriquet of "Lord Dumbeam," sat with impassive face.

"Perhaps I can help you," said Malcolm Sage, still standing by the chair on which lay his cap and coat. "At the end of every great war the Plans Departments of the Admiralty and the War Office are busy preparing for the next war. I suggest that this document was the Admiralty draft of a plan of operations to be put into force in the event of war occurring between this country and an extremely friendly power. It was submitted to the War Office for criticism and comment as far as land-operations were concerned. Another power, unfriendly to the friendly power, would find in this document a very valuable red-herring to draw across the path of its own perplexities."

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Llewellyn John, starting upright in his chair. "How on earth did you know?"

"It seems fairly obvious," said Malcolm Sage, as he returned to his chair and resumed his stroking of the sphinx's back. "Who else knew of the existence of the document?" he enquired.

"No one outside the Admiralty and the War ——" Sir Lyster stopped suddenly.

From the corridor, apparently just outside the library door, came the sound of a suppressed scream, followed by a bump against the woodwork.

Rising and moving swiftly across the room, Sir Lyster threw open the door, revealing a gap of darkness into which a moment later slid two figures, a pretty, fair-haired girl and a wizened little Japanese with large round spectacles and an automatic smile.

"I'm so sorry, Sir Lyster," faltered the girl, as she stepped timidly into the room, "but I was frightened. Someone had switched off the lights and I ran into ——" She turned to the Japanese, who stood deprecating and nervous on the threshold.

"I lose my passage," he said, baring his teeth still further; "I go to find cigarette-case of my master. He leave it in beelyard-room. I go ——"

With a motion of his hand, Sir Lyster dismissed the man, who slipped away as if relieved at getting off so lightly.

"You are up late, Miss Blair," he said coolly, turning to the girl.

"I'm so sorry," she said; "but Lady Grayne gave me some letters, and there was so much copying for you that ——" She paused, then added nervously, "I didn't know it was so late."

"You had better go to bed, now," said Sir Lyster.

With a charming smile she passed out, Sir Lyster closing the door behind her. As he turned into the room his eye caught sight of the chair in which Malcolm Sage had been sitting.

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

"Where is Mr. Sage?" He looked from Mr. Llewellyn John to Lord Beamdale.

As he spoke Malcolm Sage appeared from the embrasure of the window through which he had entered, and where he had taken cover as Sir Lyster rose to open the door.

"You see, Sage is not supposed to be here," explained Mr. Llewellyn John.

"Your secretary has an expensive taste in perfume," remarked Malcolm Sage casually, as he resumed his seat. "It often characterises an intensely emotional nature," he added musingly.

"Emotional nature!" repeated Sir Lyster. "As a matter of fact she is extremely practical and self-possessed. You were saying ——" he concluded with the air of a man who dismisses a trifling subject in favour of one of some importance.

"Diplomatists should be trained physiognomists," murmured Malcolm Sage. "A man's mouth rarely lies, a woman's never."

Sir Lyster stared.

"Now," continued Malcolm Sage, "I should like to know who is staying here."

Sir Lyster proceeded to give some details of the guests and servants. The domestic staff comprised twenty-one, and none had been in Sir Lyster's employ for less than three years. They were all excellent servants, of irreproachable character, who had come to him with good references. Seventeen of the twenty-one lived in the house. There were also four lady's maids and five menservants attached to the guests. Among the men-servants was Sir Jeffrey Trawlor's Japanese valet.

There was something in Sir Lyster's voice as he mentioned this fact that caused Malcolm Sage to look up at him sharply.

"The man you have just seen," Sir Lyster explained. "He has been the cause of some little difficulty in the servants'-hall. They object to sitting down to meals with a Chinaman, as they call him."

"He seems intelligent?" remarked Malcolm Sage casually.

"On the contrary, he is an extremely stupid creature," was the reply. "He is continually losing himself. Only yesterday morning I myself found him wandering about the corridor leading to my own bedroom. Walters has also mentioned the matter to me."

Sir Lyster then passed on to the guests. They comprised Mrs. Selton, an aunt of Sir Lyster; Sir Jeffrey and Lady Trawlor, old friends of their hostess; Lady Whyndale and her two daughters. There were also Mr. Gerald Nash, M. P., and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Winnington, old friends of Sir Lyster and Lady Grayne.

"Later I may require a list of the guests," said Malcolm Sage, when Sir Lyster had completed his account. "You said, I think, that the key of the safe was sometimes left in an accessible place?"

"Yes, in a drawer."

"So that anyone having access to the room could easily have taken a wax impression."

Sir Lyster flushed slightly.

"There is no one ——" he began.

"There is always a potential someone," corrected Malcolm Sage, raising his eyes suddenly and fixing them full upon Sir Lyster.

"The question is, Sage," broke in Mr. Llewellyn John tactfully, "what are we to do?"

"I should first like to see the inside of the safe and the dummy packet," said Malcolm Sage, rising. "No, I will open it myself if you will give me the key," he added, as Sir Lyster rose and moved over to the safe.

Taking the key, Malcolm Sage knelt before the safe door and, by the light of an electric torch, surveyed the whole of the surface with keen-sighted eyes. Then placing the key in the lock he turned it, and swung back the door, revealing a long official envelope as the sole contents. This he examined carefully without touching it, his head thrust inside the safe.

"Is this the same envelope as that in which the document was enclosed?" he enquired, without looking round.

The three men had risen and were grouped behind Malcolm Sage, watching him with keen interest.

"It's the same kind of envelope, but ——" began Sir Lyster, when Lord Beamdale interrupted.

"It's the envelope itself," he said. "I noticed that the right-hand top corner was bent in rather a peculiar manner."

Malcolm Sage rose and, taking out the envelope, carefully examined the damaged corner, which was bent and slightly torn.

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

"Yes, it's the same," cried Mr. Llewellyn John. "I remember tearing it myself when putting in the document."

"How many leaves of paper were there?" enquired Malcolm Sage.

"Eight, I think," replied Sir Lyster.

"Nine," corrected Lord Beamdale. "There was a leaf in front blank but for the words, 'Plans Department.'"

"Have you another document from the same Department?" enquired Malcolm Sage of Sir Lyster.

"Several."

"I should like to see one."

Sir Lyster left the room, and Malcolm Sage removed the contents of the envelope. Carefully counting nine leaves of blank white foolscap, he bent down over the paper, with his face almost touching it.

When Sir Lyster re-entered with another document in his hand Malcolm Sage took it from him and proceeded to subject it to an equally close scrutiny, holding up to the light each sheet in succession.

"I suppose, Sir Lyster, you don't by any chance use scent?" enquired Malcolm Sage without looking up.

"Mr. Sage!" Sir Lyster was on his dignity.

"I see you don't," was Malcolm Sage's calm comment as he resumed his examination of the dummy document. Replacing it in the envelope, he returned it to the safe, closed the door, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

"Well! what do you make of it?" cried Mr. Llewellyn John eagerly.

"We shall have to take the Postmaster-general into our confidence."

"Woldington!" cried Mr. Llewellyn John in astonishment. "Why?"

Sir Lyster looked surprised, whilst Lord Beamdale appeared almost interested.

"Because we shall probably require his help."

"How?" enquired Sir Lyster.

"Well, it's rather dangerous to tamper with His Majesty's mails without the connivance of St. Martins-le-Grand," was the dry retort.

"But ——" began Mr. Llewellyn John, when suddenly he stopped short.

Malcolm Sage had walked over to where his overcoat lay, and was deliberately getting into it.

"You're not going, Mr. Sage?" Sir Lyster's granite-like control seemed momentarily to forsake him. "What do you advise us to do?"

"Get some sleep," was the quiet reply.

"But aren't you going to search for ——?" He paused as Malcolm Sage turned and looked full at him.

"A search would involve the very publicity you are anxious to avoid," was the reply.

"But ——" began Mr. Llewellyn John, when Malcolm Sage interrupted him.

"The only effective search would be to surround the house with police, and allow each occupant to pass through the cordon after having been stripped. The house would then have to be gone through; carpets and boards pulled up; mattresses ripped open; chairs ——"

"I agree with Mr. Sage," said Sir Lyster, looking across at the Prime Minister coldly.

"Had I been a magazine detective I should have known exactly where to find the missing document," said Malcolm Sage. "As I am not" — he turned to Sir Lyster — "it will be necessary for you to leave a note for your butler telling him that you have dropped somewhere about the house the key of this safe, and instructing him to have a thorough search made for it. You might casually mention the loss at breakfast, and refer to an important document inside the safe which you must have on Monday morning. Perhaps the Prime Minister will suggest telephoning to town for a man to come down to force the safe should the key not be found."

Malcolm Sage paused. The others were gazing at him with keen interest.

"Leave the note unfolded in a conspicuous place where anyone can see it," he continued.

"I'll put it on the hall-table," said Sir Lyster.

Malcolm Sage nodded.

"It is desirable that you should all appear to be in the best of spirits." There was a fluttering at the corners of Malcolm Sage's mouth, as he lifted his eyes for a second to the almost lugubrious countenance of Lord Beamdale. "Under no circumstances refer to the robbery, even amongst yourselves. Try to forget it."

"But how will that help?" enquired Mr. Llewellyn John, whose nature rendered him singularly ill-adapted to a walking-on part.

"I will ask you, sir," said Malcolm Sage, turning to him, "to give me a letter to Mr. Woldington, asking him to

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

do as I request. I will give him the details."

"But why is it necessary to tell him?" demanded Sir Lyster.

"That I will explain to you to-morrow. That will be Monday," explained Malcolm Sage, "earlier if possible. A few lines will do," he added, turning to Mr. Llewellyn John.

"I suppose we must," said the Prime Minister, looking from Sir Lyster to Lord Beamdale.

"I hope to call before lunch," said Malcolm Sage, "but as Mr. Le Sage from the Foreign Office. You will refuse to discuss official matters until Monday. I shall probably ask you to introduce me to everyone you can. It may happen that I shall disappear suddenly."

"But cannot you be a little less mysterious?" said Sir Lyster, with a touch of asperity in his voice.

"There is nothing mysterious," replied Malcolm Sage. "It seems quite obvious. Everything depends upon how clever the thief is." He looked up suddenly, his gaze passing from one to another of the bewildered Ministers.

"It's by no means obvious to me," cried Mr. Llewellyn John, complainingly.

"By the way, Sir Lyster, how many cars have you in the garage?" enquired Malcolm Sage. "In case we want them," he added.

"I have two, and there are" — he paused for a moment — "five others," he added; "seven in all."

"Any carriages, or dog-carts?"

"No. We have no horses."

"Bicycles?"

"A few of the servants have them," replied Sir Lyster, a little impatiently.

"The bicycles are also kept in the garage, I take it?"

"They are." This time there was no mistaking the note of irritation in Sir Lyster's voice.

"There may be several messengers from Whitehall tomorrow," said Malcolm Sage, after a pause. "Please keep them waiting until they show signs of impatience. It is important. Whatever happens here, it would be better not to acquaint the police — whatever happens," he added with emphasis. "And now, sir" — he turned to Mr. Llewellyn John — "I should like that note to the Postmaster-general."

Mr. Llewellyn John sat down reluctantly at a table and wrote a note.

"But suppose the thief hands the document to an accomplice?" said Sir Lyster presently, with something like emotion in his voice.

"That's exactly what I am supposing," was Malcolm Sage's reply and, taking the note that Mr. Llewellyn John held out to him, he placed it in his breast pocket, buttoned up his overcoat, and walked across to the window through which he had entered. With one hand upon the curtain he turned.

"If I call you may notice that I have acquired a slight foreign accent," he said, and with that he slipped behind the curtain. A moment later the sound was heard of the window being quietly opened and then shut again.

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

IV

When Mr. Walters descended the broad staircase of The Towers on the Sunday morning he found two things to disturb him — Sir Lyster's note on the hall-table, and the Japanese valet "lost" in the conservatory.

He read the one with attention, and rebuked the other with acrimony. Having failed to find the missing key himself, he proceeded to the housekeeper's room, and poured into the large and receptive ear of Mrs. Eames the story of his woes.

"And this a Sunday too," the housekeeper was just remarking, in a fat, comfortable voice, when Richards, the chauffeur, burst unceremoniously into the room.

"Someone's taken the pencils from all the magnetos," he shouted angrily, his face moist with heat and lubricant.

"Is that your only excuse for bursting into a lady's room without knocking?" enquired Mr. Walters, with an austere dignity he had copied directly from Sir Lyster.

"If you apply to me presently I will lend you a pencil. In the meantime ——"

"But it's burglars. They've broken into the garage and taken the pencils from every magneto, every blinkin' one," he added by way of emphasis.

At the mention of the word "burglars," Mr. Walters's professional composure of feature momentarily forsook him, and his jaw dropped. Recovering himself instantly, however, he hastened out of the room, closely followed by Richards, leaving Mrs. Eames speechless, the oval cameo locket heaving up and down upon her indignant black-silk bosom. A man had sworn in her presence and had departed unrebuked.

On reaching the garage Mr. Walters gazed vaguely about him. He was entirely unversed in mechanics, and Richards persisted in pouring forth technicalities that bewildered him. The chauffeur also cursed loudly and with inspiration, until reminded that it was Sunday, when he lowered his voice, at the same time increasing the density of his language.

Mr. Walters was frankly disappointed. There was no outward sign of burglars. At length he turned interrogatingly to Richards.

"Just a-goin' to tune 'em up I was," explained Richards for the twentieth time, "when I found the bloomin' engines had gone whonky, then ——"

"Found the engines had gone what?" enquired Mr. Walters.

"Whonky, dud, na-poo," explained Richards illuminatingly, whilst Mr. Walters gazed at him icily. "Then in comes Davies," he continued, nodding in the direction of a little round-faced man, with "chauffeur" written on every inch of him, "and 'e couldn't get 'is blinkin' 'arp to 'um neither. Then we starts a-lookin' round, when lo and be'old! what do we find? Some streamin', saturated son of sin an' whiskers 'as pinched the ruddy pencils out of the scarlet magnetos."

"The float's gone from my carburettor."

The voice came from a long, lean man who appeared suddenly out of the shadows at the far-end of the garage.

Without a word Richards and Davies dashed each to a car. A minute later two yells announced that the floats from their carburettors also had disappeared.

Later Richards told how that morning he had found the door of the garage unfastened, although he was certain that he had locked it the night before.

This was sufficient for Mr. Walters. Fleeing from the bewildering flood of technicalities and profanity of the three chauffeurs, he made his way direct to Sir Lyster's room. Here he told his tale, and was instructed instantly to telephone to the police.

At the telephone further trouble awaited him. He could get no reply from the exchange. He tried the private wire to the Admiralty; but with no better result.

He accordingly reported the matter to Sir Lyster, who was by then with Lord Beamdale in the library. It was the Minister of War who reminded his host of Malcolm Sage's strange request that whatever happened the police were not to be communicated with.

"But Sage could not have anticipated this — this monstrous outrage," protested Sir Lyster, white with anger.

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

He had already imperiously put aside Lord Beamdale's suggestion that the whole affair might be a joke.

"Still, better do as he said," was the rejoinder and, as later Mr. Llewellyn John concurred, Sir Lyster decided to await the arrival of Malcolm Sage before taking further steps.

One by one the guests drifted down to breakfast, went out to the garage to see for themselves, and then returned to discuss the affair over coffee and kidneys, tea and toast.

It subsequently transpired that without exception the cars had been entirely put out of commission. From each the pencil had been removed from the magneto, and the float from the carburettor. From the bicycles the pedals had been taken away, with the exception of those belonging to Miss Blair and one of the housemaids, the only two ladies' machines in the place.

"A veritable Claude Duval," someone remarked; but this brought little consolation to the owners of the wrecked cars. It was a fine day, too, which added to their sense of hardship.

As Sir Lyster left the breakfast-room he encountered Miss Blair crossing the hall. She looked very fresh and pretty, with a demure, almost childlike expression of feature. Her cheeks were flushed with health and exercise.

"Would you like me to cycle over to Odford to the police?" she enquired. "My machine is quite all right. I have just been for a spin."

"No — er — not at present, thank you, Miss Blair," said Sir Lyster, a little embarrassed at having to refuse to do the obvious thing. He passed across the hall into the library, and Miss Blair, having almost fallen over the Japanese valet, "lost" in a corridor leading to the billiard-room, went out to condole with Richards and tell him of a strange epidemic of mishaps that seemed to have descended upon the neighbourhood. She herself had passed a motor-cycle, two push-bicycles, and a Ford car, all disabled by the roadside.

All that morning the Prime Minister, Sir Lyster, and Lord Beamdale waited and wondered. Finding the strain of trying to look cheerful too much for them, they shut themselves up in the library on the plea of pressing official business; this, in spite of Sir Lyster's well-known weekend rule.

Hour after hour passed; yet not only did Malcolm Sage fail to put in an appearance, but nothing was heard or seen of the promised bogus official messengers.

At luncheon more than one guest remarked upon the distraught and absent-minded appearance of the three Ministers, and deduced from the circumstance a grave political crisis.

The afternoon dragged its leaden course. Throughout the house there was an atmosphere of unrest. Among themselves the guests complained because no action had been taken to track down the despoiler of their cars. Walters had rendered the lives of the domestic staff intolerable by insisting upon search for the missing key being made in the most unlikely and inaccessible places, although in his own mind he was convinced that it had been stolen by the errant Japanese.

In the library sat the three Ministers, for the most part gazing either at one another or at nothing in particular. They were waiting for something to happen: none knew quite what.

Dinner passed, a dreary meal; the ladies withdrew to the drawing-room; but still the heavy atmosphere of foreboding remained. It was nearly half-past nine when Walters entered and murmured something in Sir Lyster's ear.

An eager light sprang into Mr. Llewellyn John's eyes as the First Lord rose, made his apologies, and left the room. It was only by the exercise of great self-control that the Prime Minister refrained from jumping up and bolting after them.

Two minutes later Walters again entered the dining-room, with a request that Mr. Llewellyn John and Lord Beamdale would join Sir Lyster in the library.

As Walters threw open the library-door, they found Malcolm Sage seated at the table, his fingers spread out before him, whilst Sir Lyster stood by the fireplace.

"Ask Miss Blair if she will come here to take down an important letter, Walters," said Sir Lyster.

"Well?" cried Mr. Llewellyn John, as soon as Walters had closed the door behind him. "Have you got it?"

"The document is now in a strong-room at the General Post Office," said Malcolm Sage without looking up. "I thought it would be safer there."

"Thank God!" cried Mr. Llewellyn John, collapsing into a chair.

Malcolm Sage glanced across at him and half rose.

"I'm all right, Sage," said Mr. Llewellyn John; "but coming after this awful day of anxiety, the news was

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

almost too much for me."

"Who took it from the safe then?" enquired Sir Lyster. "I ——" he stopped short as the door opened, and Miss Blair entered, notebook in hand, looking very dainty in a simple grey frock, relieved by a bunch of clove carnations at the waist. Closing the door behind her, she hesitated for a moment, a smile upon her moist, slightly-parted lips.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Blair," began Sir Lyster, "but Mr. Sage ——" he paused.

"It was Miss Blair who removed the document from the safe," said Malcolm Sage quietly, his eyes bent upon the finger-tips of his right hand.

"Miss Blair!" cried Sir Lyster, his hand dropping from the mantelpiece to his side.

For the fraction of a second the girl stood just inside the door; then as the significance of Malcolm Sage's words dawned upon her, the smile froze upon her lips, and blood ebbed from her face, leaving it drawn and grey, and the notebook dropped from her fingers. She staggered forward a few steps, then, clutching wildly at the edge of the table, she swayed from side to side. With an obvious effort she steadied herself, her gaze fixed upon her accuser.

Slowly Malcolm Sage raised his eyes, cold, grey, inflexible, and fixed them upon the terrified girl.

The three Ministers appeared not yet to have realised the true nature of the drama being enacted before them.

"Miss Blair," said Malcolm Sage quietly, "what are your relations with Paul Cressit?"

Twice she essayed to speak, but no sound came.

"I — I — er — know him," she faltered at length.

"I wondered," said Malcolm Sage slowly.

"What does this mean, Mr. Sage?" enquired Sir Lyster.

"I will tell you," said Malcolm Sage, whilst Lord Beamdale placed a chair into which Miss Blair collapsed. "Last night whilst you were at dinner Miss Blair opened your safe with a duplicate key made from a wax impression. She abstracted a valuable document, putting in its place some sheets of blank paper." He paused.

"Go on," almost gasped Mr. Llewellyn John.

"She took the document to her room and hid it, a little uncertain as to how she should get it to her accomplice. This morning she saw Sir Lyster's note on the hall-table, and emboldened by the thought that the theft had not been discovered, she cycled out to Odford and posted the document to Paul Cressit at his chambers in Jermyn Street." Again Malcolm Sage paused and drew from his pocket a note.

"In the envelope was enclosed this note." He handed to Mr. Llewellyn John a half sheet of paper on which was typed:

"Paul, dearest, I have done it. I will ring you up tomorrow. I shall ask for Tuesday off. You will keep your promise, dear, and save me, won't you? If you don't I shall kill myself — G."

"Miss Blair," said Sir Lyster coldly, "what have you to say?"

"N—nothing," she faltered, striving to moisten her grey lips.

"If you will tell the truth," said Malcolm Sage, "you still have a chance. If not"; he paused significantly.

She gulped noisily, striving to regain her power of speech.

"You — you promise?" She looked across at Mr. Llewellyn John.

"Whatever Mr. Sage says we endorse," he replied gravely.

"Both of us?" she repeated.

"Both," said Malcolm Sage.

"I — I love him," she moaned; then after a pause she added: "It was to save the disgrace. He promised, he swore he would if I did it."

"Swore he would do what?" said Malcolm Sage.

"Marry me."

Malcolm Sage raised his eyes to Sir Lyster, who was standing implacable and merciless.

The girl's head had fallen forward upon the table, and her shoulders were heaving convulsively.

Rising, Malcolm Sage walked across and placed his hand upon her arm.

"It will be better for everybody if you will try and control yourself," he said gently, "and above all tell us the truth."

As if surprised at the gentleness of his tone, she slowly raised her drawn face and looked at him in wonder.

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

"Now listen to me," continued Malcolm Sage, drawing up a chair and seating himself beside her, "and tell me if I am wrong. Whilst you were acting as Sir Lyster's secretary you met Paul Cressit at the Admiralty, and you were attracted to him."

She nodded, with a quick indrawing of her breath.

"He made violent love to you and you succumbed. Later you took him into your confidence in regard to a certain matter and he promised to marry you. He put you off from time to time by various excuses. You were almost distracted at the thought of the disgrace. He persuaded you to take a wax impression of Sir Lyster's key, on the chance of it one day being useful."

Again she nodded, whilst the three men listened as if hypnotised.

"Finally he swore that he would marry you if you would steal this document, and he showed you a special license. Am I right?"

She nodded again, and then buried her head in her arms.

"I suppose," said Malcolm Sage quietly, "he did not happen to mention that he was already married?"

"Married!" She started up, her eyes blazing. "It isn't true, oh! it isn't true," she cried.

"I'm afraid it is," said Malcolm Sage, with feeling in his voice.

With a moan of despair her head fell forward upon the table, and hard dry sobs shook her frail body.

"Miss Blair," said Malcolm Sage presently, when she had somewhat regained her self-control, "my advice to you is to write out a full confession and bring it to me at my office to-morrow morning. It is your only chance: and now you must go to your room."

He rose, assisted her to her feet, and led her to the door, which he closed behind her.

"That I think concludes the enquiry," he said, as he walked over to the fireplace and, leaning against the mantelpiece, he began to fill his pipe. "Unless," he added, turning to Mr. Llewellyn John, "you would like to see Cressit."

The Prime Minister looked across at Sir Lyster and then at Lord Beamdale. Both shook their heads.

"What we should like, Sage," said Mr. Llewellyn John, "is a little information as to what has been happening."

With great deliberation Malcolm Sage proceeded to light his pipe. When it was drawing to his entire satisfaction, he turned to Mr. Llewellyn John and, with the suspicion of a fluttering at the corners of his mouth, remarked:

"I hope you have not been inconvenienced about the telephone."

"We could get no reply from the exchange," said Sir Lyster, "and the wire to the Admiralty is out of order."

"I had to disconnect you after I left this morning," said Malcolm Sage quietly. "My chauffeur swarmed up one of the standards. Incidentally he wrecked an almost new pair of breeches."

"They'll have to go in the Naval Estimates," cried Mr. Llewellyn John, who was feeling almost jovial now the tension of the past twenty-four hours had been removed.

"From the first," proceeded Malcolm Sage, "it was obvious that this theft was planned either at the Admiralty or at the War Office."

"That is absurd!" cried Sir Lyster with heat, whilst Lord Beamdale leaned forward, his usually apathetic expression of indifference giving place to one of keen interest.

"I accepted the assurance that only three people in this house knew of the existence of the document," Malcolm Sage proceeded, as if there had been no interruption. "There was no object in any of those three persons stealing that to which they had ready access."

Lord Beamdale nodded his agreement with the reasoning.

"Therefore," continued Malcolm Sage, "the theft must have been planned by someone who knew about the document before it came here, and furthermore knew that it was to be here at a certain time. To confirm this hypothesis we have the remarkable circumstances that the blank paper substituted for the original document was, in quality and the number of sheets, identical with that of the document itself."

"Good," ejaculated Lord Beamdale, himself a keen mathematician.

Mr. Llewellyn John and Sir Lyster exchanged glances.

"It was almost, but not quite, obvious that the exchange had been effected by a woman."

"How obvious?" enquired Mr. Llewellyn John.

"Few women pass unperfumed to the grave," quoted Malcolm Sage. "I think it was Craddock who said that,"

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

he added, and Mr. Llewellyn John made a mental note of the phrase.

"The handle of the safe door was corrugated, and the lacquer had worn off, leaving it rough to the touch. When I kneeled down before the safe it was not to examine the metal work, but to see if the thief had left a scent."

"A scent?" repeated Sir Lyster.

"On the handle of the door there was a distinct trace of perfume, very slight, but I have a keen sense of smell, although a great smoker. On the document itself there was also evidence of a rather expensive perfume, not unlike that used by Miss Blair. Furthermore, it was bent in a rather peculiar manner, which might have resulted from its being carried in the belt of a woman's frock. It might, of course, have been mere chance," he added; "but the envelope did not show a corresponding bend."

Again Lord Beamdale nodded appreciatively.

"Although several people have had an opportunity of taking a wax impression of the key, the most likely were Miss Blair and Walters — that, however, was a side issue."

"How?" enquired Sir Lyster.

"Because primarily we were concerned with making the criminal himself or herself divulge the secret."

"That's why you would not allow the loss to be made known," broke in Mr. Llewellyn John.

"The thief," continued Malcolm Sage, with a slight inclination of his head, "would in all probability seize the first safe opportunity of getting rid of the plunder."

"But did you not suspect the Japanese?" broke in Lord Beamdale.

"For the moment I ruled him out," said Malcolm Sage, "as I could not see how it was possible for him to know about the existence of the document in question, and furthermore, as he had been in the house less than two days, there was no time for him to get a duplicate key."

"What did you do then?" queried Sir Lyster.

"I motored back to town, broke in upon the Postmaster-general's first sleep, set on foot enquiries at the Admiralty and War Office, in the meantime arranging for The Towers to be carefully watched." Malcolm Sage paused for a moment; then as none of his hearers spoke he continued:

"I had a number of people in the neighbourhood — motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians. No one could have left the house and grounds without being seen."

"Miss Blair found the morning irresistible, and took an early spin on her bicycle to Odford, where she posted a packet in a pillar-box situated in a street that was apparently quite empty."

"And you secured it?" enquired Mr. Llewellyn John, leaning forward eagerly.

"I'm afraid I quite spoil the local postmaster's Sunday by requesting that a pillar-box should be specially cleared, and producing an authority from the Postmaster-general. After he had telegraphed to head-quarters and received a reply confirming the letter, he reluctantly acquiesced."

"And it was addressed to this man Cressit?" enquired Sir Lyster.

"Yes. He is a temporary staff-clerk in the Plans Department. Incidentally he is something of a Don Juan, and the cost of living has increased considerably, as you know, sir," he added, turning to the Prime Minister.

Mr. Llewellyn John smiled wanly. It was his political "cross," this cost-of-living problem.

"And what shall we do with him?" enquired Sir Lyster. "The scoundrel," he added.

"I have almost done with him as a matter of fact," said Malcolm Sage.

"Done with him?" exclaimed Lord Beamdale.

"I sent him a telegram in Miss Blair's name to be at Odford Station to-night at seven: then I kidnapped him."

"Good heavens, Sage! What do you mean?" cried Mr. Llewellyn John, with visions of the Habeas Corpus Act and possible questions in the House, which he hated.

"We managed to get him to enter my car, and then we went through him — that is a phrase from the crook-world. We found upon him the marriage certificate, and later I induced him to confess. I am now going to take him back to my office, secure his finger-prints and physical measurements, which will be of interest at Scotland Yard."

"But we are not going to prosecute," said Mr. Llewellyn John anxiously.

"Mr. Paul Cressit will have forty-eight hours in which to leave the country," said Malcolm Sage evenly. "He will not return, because Scotland Yard will see that he does not do so. There will probably be an application to you, sir," Malcolm Sage continued, turning to Mr. Llewellyn John, "to confirm what I tell them."

THE STOLEN ADMIRALTY MEMORANDUM

"Excellent!" cried Mr. Llewellyn John. "I congratulate you, Sage. You have done wonders."

"But I failed to understand your saying that you would be here this morning," said Sir Lyster, "and under an assumed name with ——"

"A foreign accent," suggested Malcolm Sage. "The thief might have been an old hand at the game, and too clever to fall into a rather obvious trap. In that case I might have been forced, as a foreigner, to salute the hands of all the ladies in the house. I learnt to click my heels years ago in Germany." Again there was a suspicious movement at the corners of Malcolm Sage's mouth.

"But ——" began Sir Lyster.

"To identify the scent?" broke in Mr. Llewellyn John.

Malcolm Sage inclined his head slightly.

"The Foreign Office messengers?" queried Lord Beamdale.

"I decided that pedestrians and cyclists would do as well. I merely wanted the house watched. There were quite a number of casualties to cars and bicycles in the neighbourhood," he added dryly.

"But why did you cut us off from the telephone?" enquired Mr. Llewellyn John.

"The accomplice might have got through, and I could afford to take no risks."

"Well, you have done splendidly, Sage," said Mr. Llewellyn John heartily, "and we are all greatly obliged. By the way, there's another little problem awaiting you. Someone broke into the garage last night and wrecked all the cars and bicycles ——"

"Except two," said Malcolm Sage.

"Then you've heard." Mr. Llewellyn John looked at him in surprise.

"The man who did it is in my car outside with Cressit."

"You've got him as well?" cried Mr. Llewellyn John excitedly. "Sage, you're a miracle of sagacity," he added, again mentally noting the phrase.

"The missing pencils, floats, and pedals you will find on the left-hand side of the drive about halfway down, under a laurel bush," said Malcolm Sage quietly.

"And who is this fellow who did this scandalous thing?" demanded Sir Lyster.

"My chauffeur."

"Your chauffeur!"

"I could not risk the thief having access to a fast car."

"But what if this fellow Cressit refuses to go?" enquired Lord Beamdale.

"He won't," said Malcolm Sage grimly. "D.O.R.A. is still in operation. I had to remind him of the fact."

Malcolm Sage picked up his hat and coat and walked towards the door.

"I must be going," he said. "I have still several things to attend to. You won't forget about the plunder from the garage?" he added.

"But what am I to do about Miss Blair?" asked Sir Lyster.

"That's a question I think you will find answered in the Gospel of St. Luke — the seventh chapter and I think the forty-seventh verse"; and with that he was gone, leaving three Ministers gazing at one another in dumb astonishment.

Had a cynic peeping into the library of The Towers a few minutes later, he would have discovered three Cabinet Ministers bending over a New Testament, which Sir Lyster had fetched from his wife's boudoir, and the words they read were: "Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much."

"Strange," murmured Lord Beamdale, "very strange," and the others knew that he was referring not to the text, or to the unhappy girl — but to Malcolm Sage.

"We are always surprised when we find Saul among the prophets," remarked Mr. Llewellyn John, and he made a mental note of the phrase. It might do for the "Wee Frees."