

...and they advised me to consult you, sir, instead of going to the central office, as I at first was inclined.

These references to the bankers served at once to ensure Boyd's interest, for reasons hinted at in an earlier narrative. He laid down his pipe without having lighted it, and again waved his visitor to a chair.

"You do not know me by name, I take it," said Dickson, as he sat down. "Only since seeing your card," said Boyd. "I observe, however, that you are a married man, and very near-sighted."

"Dear me! How is that? Do I wear my heart on my sleeve?" "Hardly that," smiled Boyd. "But a spot has been sponged from your vest this morning, presumably by your wife, since you scarce could have visited your tailor thus early; and I notice the handle of a reading-glass protruding slightly from your inside pocket."

That one of these deductions did not affect Dickson very pleasantly was apparent in his increased nervousness, and the sudden trembling of his hands on his knees; yet he laughed a little, and cried:

"Oh, yes, quite right; you are quite right, Mr. Boyd. I am very near-sighted, very, when viewing objects close at hand. Yet I do not even require glasses for observing things at a distance."

"That is occasionally the case, I understand."

"I am told so. Yet I believe that very few are as sorely afflicted as I. I can read only with a very powerful glass, as you may see."

And he now displayed his reading-glass, a thick lens nearly six inches in diameter, having a silver rim and an ebony handle, Boyd merely glanced at it, then turned to Coleman, who had risen.

"Drop in a little later, Jimmie," said he. "I imagine that Mr. Dickson will not long engage me."

"No, Mr. Boyd, not very long," said Dickson, when they were alone. "I received in my mail this morning a letter which gives me great uneasiness, if not serious alarm. I took it to my bankers for advice, scarce knowing what else to do, and they advised me to consult you. I wish you would examine the letter; here it is, and tell me what you think of it, and how seriously I should regard it. I am tempted to place it in the hands of the police for investigation."

Boyd examined the letter with interest, and was immediately struck with its peculiarities.

It neither was written nor printed in the ordinary way. Instead, each word had been cut singly from some book or newspaper, evidently with a penknife, and then pasted on a blank sheet of paper.

Plainly the work had been very carefully done, yet it had been found so delicate that the completed lines presented considerable irregularity, with the separate words differently spaced and slanted at various angles. The communication thus conveyed was quite brief, and read as follows:

"Nathan Dickson, Maiden Lane: You look out for yourself. Persons I dare not name are about to execute a design against you, the character of which I cannot safely disclose. I am a friend to you, and this is a warning you will not wisely ignore. Heed it. Guard yourself and that most dear to you."

Boyd then read this curious message, and then looked up at the grave face of his waiting visitor.

"Have you the cover by which this method is prevent being traced by his handwriting?"

"That is apparent," cried Dickson nervously. "But what of the letter itself? It has given me a dreadful shock. My nerves are completely unstrung. It is so indefinite, yet in a way so threatening, I don't know whether my life is in danger, or my property, or what. I am all of a tremble from head to foot."

"Which really is very foolish of you," said Boyd indifferently. "I do not think your life is in any danger, Mr. Dickson. Are you a man of much property?"

"Bradstreet rates me at a hundred thousand, which is rather more than I possess," replied Dickson more composedly. "I own a modest summer place near Jamaica Bay, where I dwell for about six months of the year, renting a house in town during the winter."

"At present you are where?" "I am still living in town."

"You do a large business in diamonds?" "Quite so. As agent for foreign houses; moreover, I carry a valuable stock."

"In part consigned to you, I presume," observed Boyd, raising his brows.

"Yes, certainly."

"Do you consider your quarters in Maiden Lane, and the safe or vault in which you store your goods, perfectly secure against burglars?" inquired Boyd.

"Indeed, yes!" exclaimed Dickson. "I never felt otherwise."

Boyd smiled, and again glanced at the patchwork letter.

"Who among your friends, Mr. Dickson, is a practical joker?" he asked, a bit dryly.

"Really I recall none."

"Yet this letter is, in my opinion, the work of such a person."

"A joke—a practical joke! Sent only to annoy or alarm me!" exclaimed Dickson, with much eagerness. "Do you really think so, Mr. Boyd? Indeed, I shall feel greatly relieved if that is your opinion. Do you really think so, Mr. Boyd?"

Boyd glanced at a tall, elderly man, who nodded in corroboration of Coleman's explanation. Boyd quickly asked: "Did Dickson tell you he should be absent to-day, Mr. Gibson?"

"He did, sir, as he was closing up within, and Boyd next forced open the last night. He said he was going to his summer place to-day, to plan for occupying it a little later."

"Does he employ no clerks here, who could have kept the store open?" "None, sir. He runs his business alone. I greatly fear that robbery has been committed here. The explosion occurred about 10 minutes ago, and was very severe, fairly shaking the upper floors."

Boyd glanced quickly at the window. An inner curtain, drawn below the tops of the window shutters outside, prevented a view of the interior of the store.

"Have you looked out back, Jimmie?" he demanded quickly.

"Yes, first thing," cried Coleman. "The way is through that alley, and the back window with an iron shutter on hinges, secured inside the store. There is a round hole in it through which I looked, but the smoke in the store obscured everything. There has been an explosion in there all right, but I saw no signs of thieves in the rear area, which lies a bit lower than the street. I tried to force a small cellophane door back there, but it wouldn't give a hair, so I turned to tackle this one. Ah, now we're in!"

The iron grating finally had given way, and fell clanging upon the sidewalk. With an iron bar, Coleman then proceeded to force the lock of the door, an operation quickly accomplished, when he threw open the door and entered the shop.

Boyd quickly followed him, first glancing at one of the policemen, and saying sharply:

"What's the trouble, Jimmie?" he added, as he joined him.

The central office man quickly looked up on hearing Boyd's voice.

"Ah, you're here! Good enough!" he exclaimed. "Recalling that letter, I hastened to send for you. I'm told there has been an explosion in here, a devil of a noise, and that Dickson has gone to his summer home for the day. I happened along just after the explosion was heard, and found Gibson, who occupies the upper floors, trying to get in here."

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"If you will leave the letter with me until after noon, Mr. Dickson, I will examine it more closely a little later, in case any obscure features of consequence have escaped me. Should I discover any, I will hasten to inform and advise you."

"Certainly," cried Dickson. "I shall be glad to leave it."

"I have your business card," said Boyd. "In case I should wish to reach you at home, which is not very probable, you had better leave me your apartment address. Write it on this blank, if you like. Here is a pencil."

Dickson again drew out his lens, holding it in his left hand while he wrote with the other, and bowing his head nearly to the paper on which he inscribed the desired address.

"There it is, Mr. Boyd," said he, arising. "I am always at home evenings. My wife and children are my chief comfort and delight. Call some evening, if you will, when not upon business. A thousand thanks for your opinion and advice. My bankers tell me that you invariably are right in such matters. You cannot imagine how much you have relieved me."

Boyd smiled, and shook his proffered hand, bowing him to the office door, where he bade him good morning.

When Jimmie Coleman entered a little later, he found Boyd at the window still studying the letter; and the latter at once confided to him the occasion of Dickson's visit.

"And what do you really make of this, Felix?" inquired Coleman, curiously examining the letter.

Boyd laughed softly, with an odd gleam in one corner of his eye.

"Make of it, Jimmie?" said he. "Not very much more than I told Dickson. Still, it presents a few curious features. Notice that each word was cut from some book or paper."

"That's very evident."

"Now place the face of the page against the window-pane, so that the light strikes through it. You find that you then can decipher the printing on the reverse side of the page from which the word in the letter was carefully cut."

"So I can, for a fact."

"Under the word 'design,' in the letter, you find 'descant,' in small italics."

"Yes, it is quite plain."

"Under the word 'execute,' in the letter, you find the two words—'to exert.' Plainly, Jimmie, those two words, as well as the italics noted, formed parts of the definitions of the two words 'descant' and 'exertion,' on the reverse page from which the words 'design' and 'execute' were cut by the sender of this letter."

"Eureka!" cried Coleman. "It's dead open and shut, Felix, that the words of this letter were cut from an ordinary dictionary."

"Certainly it is, Jimmie," laughed Boyd; then he added, rather dryly: "Very possibly, Jimmie, I some day shall discover the dictionary from which they were cut."

Yet Mr. Felix Boyd gave the matter very little immediate attention. That afternoon he returned the letter to Dickson, at his store in Maiden Lane, stating that he found nothing in it to warrant serious apprehensions, and he left the dealer in diamonds quite assured that his earlier fears were entirely groundless.

Boyd next called upon Dickson's bankers, who stated that the latter was a man of sterling integrity, whose word was as good as his bond, and that his family comprised a wife and seven charming children.

It was not a little after noon, with the sun shining unusually hot from a clear sky, when Felix Boyd resumed Maiden Lane and joined Coleman in front of Dickson's place of business. The store was a small one, occupying only the ground floor of a narrow brick building, that was wedged in between two much more imposing stone structures, looking much as if it had slipped in between such massive neighbors by some freak or mischance.

The single broad window was protected with high wooden shutters, and the store door closed with a stout iron grating, then glozed and secured with a padlock. On a card tacked on the shutter of the door was rudely printed:

OPEN THURSDAY MORNING.

It being Wednesday, the card and the closed store plainly indicated that Dickson had planned to be absent for a day, and had left a notice when he should return.

On the street fronting the store was a crowd of spectators, kept back by several policemen, and Boyd found Coleman and an officer engaged in forcing the iron grating guarding the closed door.

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