

THE MAD
HATTER MYSTERY

JOHN DICKSON CARR

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I

A Cab Horse in a Barrister's Wig

IT BEGAN, like most of Dr Fell's adventures, in a bar. It dealt with the reason why a man was found dead on the steps of Traitors' Gate, at the Tower of London, and with the odd headgear of this man in the golf suit. That was the worst part of it. The whole case threatened for a time to become a nightmare of hats.

Abstractly considered, there is nothing very terrifying about a hat. We may pass a shop-window full of them without the slightest qualm. We may even see a policeman's helmet decorating the top of a lamp-post, with no more than an impression that some practical joker is exercising a primitive sense of humour. Young Rampole, when he saw the newspaper, was inclined to grin at the matter as just that. Chief Inspector Hadley was not so sure.

They were waiting for Dr Fell at Scott's, a tavern in the heart of Piccadilly Circus. Sitting in an alcove with a glass of beer, Rampole studied the chief inspector. He was wondering. He had only arrived from America that morning, and the press of events seemed rather sudden.

He said: 'I've often wondered, sir, about Dr Fell. He seems to be all sorts of things.'

The other nodded, smiling faintly. You could not, Rampole felt, help liking the chief inspector of the C.I.D. He was the sort of man who might be described as compact; very neatly dressed, with a military moustache and smooth hair the colour of dull steel. If there was a quality about him you noticed at once, it was a quality of repose, of quiet watchfulness.

'Have you known him long?' Hadley asked.

'As a matter of fact, only since last July.' The American found himself rather startled to remember that.

'Good Lord! it seems years! He ... well, in a manner of speaking, he introduced me to my wife.'

Hadley nodded. 'I know. That would be the Starberth case. He wired me from Lincolnshire, and I sent the men he wanted.'

A little more than eight months ago .. Rampole looked back on those terrifying scenes in the Hag's Nook, and the twilight by the railway station where Dr Fell had put his hand on the shoulder of Martin Starberth's murderer. Now there were only happiness and Dorothy.

Again the chief inspector smiled faintly. 'And you, I believe,' he continued in his deliberate voice, 'carried off the young lady. I hear glowing reports of you from Fell ... He did rather a brilliant piece of work in that affair,' Hadley added abruptly. 'I wonder ...'

'Whether he can do it again?'

The other's expression grew quizzical. 'Not so fast please. You seem to be scenting crime again.'

'Well, sir, he wrote me a note to meet you here. ...'

'And,' said Hadley, 'you may be right. I have a feeling.' He touched a folded newspaper in his pocket, hesitated and frowned. 'Still, I thought that this thing' might be rather more in his line than mine. Bitton appealed to me personally, as a friend, and it's hardly a job for the Yard. I don't want to turn him down. I suppose you've heard of Sir- William Bitton?'

'The collector??'

'Ah,' said Hadley, 'I fancied you would. Fell said it would be in your line, too. The book-collector, yes, Though I knew him better before he retired from politics.' He glanced at his watch. 'He should be here by two o'clock, and so should Fell.'

A thunderous voice boomed, 'AHA!' They were conscious of somebody flourishing a cane at them across the room, and of a great bulk filling the stairway to the street. The only other occupants of the room were two business men conversing in low tones in one corner, and they jerked round to stare at the beaming appearance of Gideon Fell.

All the old genial days, all the beer-drinking and fiery moods and table-pounding conversations, beamed back at Rampole in the person of Dr Fell. The American felt like calling for another drink and striking up a song for sheer joyousness. There was the doctor, bigger and stouter than ever. He wheezed. His red face shone, and his small eyes twinkled over eyeglasses on a broad black ribbon. There was a grin under his bandit's moustache, and chuckling upheavals animated his several chins. On his head was the inevitable black shovel hat; his paunch projected from a voluminous black cloak.

'Heh,' he said. 'Heh-heh-heh.' He came rolling over to the alcove and wrung Rampole's hand. 'My boy, I'm delighted. Delighted! Heh. I say, you're' looking fine. And Dorothy?'

'.. Excellent; I'm glad to hear it. My wife sends her warmest regards'

There are people before whom you instantly unbend. Dr Fell was one of them. No constraint could exist before him; he blew it away with a superb puff; and, if you had any affectations, you forgot them immediately. Hadley looked indulgent, and beckoned a waiter.

'This might interest you,' the chief inspector suggested, handing Dr Fell a wine-card. He assumed a placid, innocent air. 'The cocktails are recommended. There is one called an "Angel's Kiss"

'Hah?' said Dr Fell, starting in his seat.

'or a "Love's Delight"-'

'Gunk!' said Dr Fell. He stared at the card. 'Young man, do you serve these?'

'Yes, sir,' said the waiter, jumping involuntarily.

'Young man,' continued the doctor, rumbling and polishing his glasses, 'have you never reflected on what American influence has done to stalwart England? Where are your finer instincts? This is enough to make decent tipplers shudder.'

'I think you'd better order something,' suggested Hadley.

'A large glass of beer,' said the doctor. 'Lager.'

Snorting he produced his cigar-case and offered it round as the waiter took away the glasses. But with the first healing puffs of smoke he settled himself back benignly against the alcove.

'My young friend here will tell you, Hadley,' Dr Fell rumbled, making an immense gesture with his cigar, 'that I have been working for seven years on the materials of my book, The Drinking Customs of England from the Earliest Days, and I blush to have to include such manifestations as these, even in the appendix. They sound almost bad enough to be soft drinks. I ...'

He paused, small eyes blinking over his glasses. A quiet, impeccably dressed man, who seemed like a manager of some sort, was hesitating near their alcove. He appeared to be ill-at-ease, and feeling slightly ridiculous. But he was contemplating Dr Fell's very picturesque shovel hat which lay across the cloak on a chair. As the waiter brought three rounds of beer, this man entered the alcove.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said, 'but may I make a suggestion? If I were you, I should be very careful of this hat.'

The doctor stared at him for a moment, his glass halfway to his lips. Then a bright and pleased expression animated his red face.

'Permit me, sir,' he requested earnestly, 'to shake your hand. You are, I perceive, a person of sound taste and judgement. I wish you could talk to my wife on this matter. It is, I agree, an excellent hat. But why should I exercise more than my usual care in guarding it?'

The man's face was growing pink. He said stiffly: 'I had no wish to intrude, sir. I thought you knew ... That is to say, there have been several such outrages in this vicinity, and I did not wish to have our patrons incommoded. That hat - well, hang it!' the manager exploded, volplaning down into honest speech, 'that thing would be too much. He couldn't miss. The Hatter would be bound to steal it.'

'Who?'

'The Hatter, sir. The Mad Hatter.'

Hadley's mouth was twitching back, and he seemed about to burst out laughing or leave the table in haste. But Dr Fell did not notice. He took out a large handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

'My dear sir,' he said, 'this is most refreshing. Let me see if I follow you. Am I to understand that there is in this neighbourhood a hatter of such notoriously unbalanced mind that, as I walk innocently past his shop, he would be apt to dash into the street and steal my hat? That is carrying the aesthetic sense too far. I must courteously but firmly refuse,' continued Dr Fell, raising his voice warmly, 'to run up Piccadilly pursued by impassioned hatters.'

The chief inspector said sharply to the manager: 'Thank you very much. This gentleman has just arrived in London; he knows nothing about it. I can explain.'

As the red-faced manager hurried towards the restaurant, Dr Fell sighed.

'Now you've driven him away,' he protested, querulously, 'and I was just beginning to enjoy it. I perceive among London hatters a bustling, up-to-the-minute, go-get-'em spirit.' He took a deep drink of beer, and shook his great head of hair like a mane. Then he beamed on his companions.

'Blast you . . . ' said the chief inspector. He struggled with dignity, and lost. 'Oh well. Confound it, I hate scenes, and you seem to revel in them. All the same, he was talking perfect sense. It's a kid's prank, of course. But it keeps on and on. If he'd stopped at stealing one or two hats, and this infernal newspaper ragging hadn't begun, no harm would have been done. But it's making us look foolish.'

The doctor adjusted his glasses.

'Do you mean to say,' he demanded, 'that a real hatter is going about London stealing... '

'"Mad Hatter" is what the newspapers call him. It was started by this young cub Driscoll, the free-lance. Driscoll is Bitton's nephew; it would be difficult to muzzle him, and if we did try to muzzle him we should look foolish. He's doing the damage ... Laugh, by all means!' Hadley invited.

Dr Fell lowered his chin into his collar.

'And Scotland Yard, he asked, with suspicious politeness, 'is unable to apprehend this villainous... '

Hadley retained his repose with an effort. Hadley said, in a quiet voice: 'I don't give a damn, personally, if he steals the Archbishop of Canterbury's mitre. But the effect of a police force's being laughed at is not at all humorous. Besides, suppose we catch him? To the newspapers the trial would be much funnier than the offence.' Can you imagine two stolen wigged counsel battling as to whether the defendant did, or did not, on the evening of March 5, 1932, abstract the helmet of Police Constable Thomas Sparkle from the head of the said constable in or about the premises of Euston Road, and did thereafter elevate the said helmet to the top of a lamp-standard before the premises of New Scotland Yard, SW - or whatever they say?'

'Did he do that?' Dr Fell queried, with interest.

'Read it,' said Hadley, and drew the newspaper from his pocket. 'That's young Driscoll's column. It's the worst, but the others are almost as facetious.'

Dr Fell grunted. 'I say, Hadley, this isn't the case you wanted to talk to me about, is it? Because, if it is, I'm damned if I help you. Why man, it's glorious!'

Hadley was not amused. 'That,' he answered, coldly, 'is not the case. But out of what I have on hand, I

hope to put a brake on Driscoll. Unless . . . ' He hesitated, turning something over in his mind. `Read it. It will probably delight you

HAT-FIEND STRIKES AGAIN!

Is There a Political Significance in
the Movements of the Sinister
Master Mind?

BY PHILIP C. DRISCOLL,

our special correspondent in charge of the latest Mad Hatter atrocities.
London, March 12.

Not since the days of Jack the Ripper has this city been so terrorized by a mysterious fiend who strikes and vanishes without a clue, as in the exploits of the diabolical criminal genius known as the Mad Hatter. On Sunday morning fresh exploits of the Mad Hatter challenged the best brains of Scotland Yard. passing the, cab-rank on the east side of Leicester Square about 5 A.M., P.C. James McGuire was struck by a somewhat unusual circumstance. A hansom-cab was drawn up at the kerb, from which certain not untuneful noises indicated that the driver was asleep inside. The horse (whose name has subsequently been ascertained to be Jennifer) was chewing a large stick of peppermint and looking benevolently upon P.C. McGuire. What, especially, struck the quick-witted policeman, however, was the fact that on her head Jennifer wore a large white wig with flowing sides: in fact, a barrister's wig. Though some caution was manifested in taking steps when Mr McGuire reported to Vine Street Police Station the presence of a horse in a barrister's wig eating peppermint in Leicester Square, ultimate investigation proved it true. It became obvious that the Hat-Fiend was again at large.

Readers of the Daily Recorder are, already aware how, on the preceding day, a beautiful pearl-grey top-hat was discovered on the head of one of the lions on the Nelson Monument in Trafalgar Square, looking towards Whitehall. By its inscription it was found to belong to Sir Isaac Simonides Levy, of Curzon Street, the well-known member of the Stock Exchange. Under, cover of a light mist, that cloak of evil-doers, it had been twitched from Sir Isaac's head as he was leaving his home the preceding evening to address a meeting of the Better Orphans' League., It will be obvious that Sir Isaac, in a pearl-grey top-hat for evening wear, was (at the least) conspicuous.

The origin of the wig on Jennifer's head was, therefore, clear to the authorities. At the present moment its owner has not been ascertained, nor has he come forward. Detectives believe that the Mad Hatter must have been near the cab-rank only, a few moments before the arrival of P.C. McGuire, inasmuch as the stick of peppermint was scarcely a third gone when the policeman first saw her. It is further inferred that the criminal was well acquainted with Leicester Square, and probably with the horse Jennifer, since he took advantage of her liking for peppermints to place the wig upon her head. Beyond this, the police have little to work on....

`There's more of it,' Hadley said, when he saw Dr Fell fold over the paper at this point, `but it doesn't matter. I hate this damned ragging, that's all.'

`Undoubtedly,' said Dr Fell, sadly, `you police are a persecuted lot. And no clue, I suppose. I'm sorry I can't take the case. Perhaps, though, if you sent your best men to all the sweet-shops near Leicester Square, and inquire who bought...'

`I didn't bring you down from Chatterham,' Hadley retorted, with asperity, `to talk about an undergraduate prank. But I may stop this young pup Driscoll from writing such tosh; and that will stop the rest of them. I wired you that it had something to do with Bitton; Bitton is this boy's uncle, and holds the purse strings.... One of the most valuable manuscripts in Bitton's collection, he tells me, has been stolen.'

`Ah,' said Dr Fell. He put aside the paper, and sat back with his arms folded.

`The devil about these thefts of manuscripts or rare books,' Hadley continued, `is that you can't trace

them like an ordinary theft. In the case of precious stones, or plate, or even pictures, it's fairly simple. We know our pawnshops and our receivers of stolen goods too well. But you can't do it with books or manuscripts. When a thief takes something like that, he has a definite person in mind to whom he intends to dispose of it; or else he's acting under the buyer's orders, to begin with. In any case, you can be sure the buyer won't tell.'

The chief inspector paused.

'And the Yard's intervention in the matter is further complicated by the fact that the manuscript stolen from Bitton was one to which he had well, a rather dubious right himself.'

'I see,' murmured the doctor. 'And what was it?'

Hadley picked up his glass slowly, and set it down hastily. Feet clattered on the brass stair-rods. A tall man in a flapping greatcoat strode down into the room; the bartender drew a deep breath, resignedly, and tried not to notice the wild look in the stranger's eye. The bartender murmured, 'Good afternoon, Sir William,' and returned to polishing glasses.

'It's not a good afternoon,' Sir William Bitton announced, violently. He passed the end of his white scarf across his face, moist from the thickening mist outside, and glared. 'Ah, hallo, Hadley! Now, look here, something's got to be done. I tell you I won't...' He strode into the alcove, and his eye fell on the paper Dr Fell had discarded. 'So you're reading about that swine who steals hats?'

'Quite, quite,' said Hadley, looking about nervously. 'Sit down, man! What's he done to you?'

'What's he done?' inquired Sir William, with deadly politeness. He raised the forelock of his white hair.

'You can see for yourself what he's done. Right in front of my house - car standing there - chauffeur down buying cigarettes. I went out to it. Misty in the square. Saw what I thought was a sneak-thief putting his hand into the side pocket of the car door through the window in the tonneau. I said, "Hi!" and jumped on the running board. Then the swine shot out his hand and...'

Sir William gulped.

'I had three appointments this afternoon before I came here; two of 'em in the City. Even going to make monthly calls. Call on Lord Tarlotts. Call on my nephew. Call - Never mind. But I couldn't and wouldn't go anywhere, because I hadn't got one. And I was damned if I'd pay three guineas for a third one that swine might ... What's he done?' bellowed Sir William, breaking off again. 'He's stolen my hat, that's what he's done! And it's the second hat he's stolen from me in three days!'

2

Manuscripts and Murder

HADLEY rapped on the table. 'A double whisky here,' he said to the waiter. 'Now sit down and calm yourself. People think this is a madhouse already... And let me introduce you to some friends of mine.'

'D'ye do?' said the other, grudgingly, and bobbed his head at the introductions. He resumed in his high, argumentative voice as he sat down. 'The only reason I came here was because I'd got to see you if I'd had to come without my boots. Ha. No other hat in the house. Just bought two new hats last week - top-hat and Homburg. And Saturday night this maniac pinched the top-hat, and this afternoon he got the Homburg. By God! I won't have it! I tell you - He glared round as the waiter appeared. 'Eli? - Oh, Whisky.' Just a splash.'

Spluttering, he sat back to take a drink, and Rampole studied him. Everybody knew, by hearsay of this man's fiery humours. Jingo newspapers frequently dwelt on his career: how he had begun in a draper's shop at the age of eighteen, become a whip in Parliament at forty-two, managed the armament policy of one Government, and had gone down still battling for a bigger navy in the peace reaction after the war. He had been the prince of jingoes; his speeches were full of reference to Drake, the long-bow, and hurrah for old England; and he still wrote letters vilifying the present Prime Minister. Now Rampole saw a man hardly past his prime at seventy: wiry, vigorous, with a long neck thrust out of his wing collar, and uncannily shrewd blue eyes.

Suddenly Sir William put down his glass and stared at Dr Fell with narrowed eyes. 'Excuse me, he

said, in his jerky but wonderfully clear fashion, 'I didn't catch your name at first. Dr Gideon Fell? - Ah, I thought so. I have been wanting to meet you, I have your work on the history of the supernatural in English fiction. But this damned business about hats ...'

Hadley said, brusquely 'I think we've heard quite enough about hats, for the moment. You understand that according to the story you told me we can't take official cognizance of it at the Yard. That's why I've summoned Dr Fell. There's no time to go into it now, but he has helped us before. I am not one of those fools who distrust amateurs. And it is particularly in his line. All the same . . .'

The chief inspector was troubled. Suddenly he drew a long breath. Evenly he continued:

'Gentlemen, neither am I one of those fools who call themselves thoroughly practical men. A moment ago I said we had heard quite enough about hats; and before I saw Sir William I thought so. But this second theft of his hat has it occurred to you that in some fashion (I do not pretend to understand it) this may relate to the theft of the manuscript?'

'It had occurred to me, of course,' Dr Fell rumbled, beckoning the waiter and pointing to his empty glass, 'that the theft of the hats was more than an undergraduate prank. It's quite possible that some scatter-brained chap might want to collect stolen hats a policeman's helmet, a barristers wig, any sort of picturesque headgear he could proudly display to his friends. I noticed the same habit when I was teaching in America, among the students. There it ran to signs and signboards of all kinds to decorate the walls of their rooms.

'But this is a different thing, you see. This chap isn't a lunatic collector. He steals the hat and props it up somewhere else, like a symbol, for everybody to see. There's one other explanation, nonetheless. . .'
Sir William's thin lips wore a wintry smile as he glanced from Rampole to the absorbed face of the doctor; but shrewd calculation moved his eyes.

'You're a quaint parcel of detectives,' he said. 'Are you seriously suggesting that a thief begins pinching hats all over London so that he can pinch a manuscript from me? Do you think I'm in the habit of carrying valuable manuscripts around in my hat? Besides, I might point out that it was stolen several days before either one of my hats.'

Dr Fell ruffled his big dark mane with a thoughtful hand. 'The repetition of that word "hat",' he observed, 'has rather a confusing effect. I'm afraid I shall say "hat" when I mean almost anything else...: Suppose you tell us about the manuscript first - what was it, and how did you get it, and when was it stolen?'

'I'll tell you what it was,' Sir William answered, in a low voice, 'because Hadley vouches for you. Only one collector in the world - no, say two - know that I found it. One of them had to know; I had to show it to him to make sure it was genuine. The other I'll speak of presently. But I found it.

'It is the manuscript of a completely unknown story by Edgar Allan Poe. Myself and one other person excepted, nobody except Poe has ever seen or heard of it... Find that hard to believe, do you?'

There was a frosty pleasure in his look, and he chuckled without opening his mouth.

'I've never collected Poe manuscripts. But I have a first edition of the Al Araaf collection, published by subscription while he was at West Point, and a few copies of the Southern Literary Messenger he edited in Baltimore. Well ! - I was poking about for odds and ends in the States last September, and I happened to be visiting Dr Masters, the Philadelphia collector. He suggested that I have a look at the house where Poe lived there, at the corner of Seventh and Spring Garden Streets. I did. I went alone. And a jolly good thing I did.'

'It was a mean neighbourhood, dull brick fronts and washing hung in gritty backyards. The house was at the corner of an alley, and I could hear a man in a garage swearing at a back-firing motor. Very little about the house had been changed.

'From the alley I went through a gate in a high board fence, and into a paved yard with a crooked tree growing through the bricks. In a little brick kitchen a glum-looking workman was making some notations on an envelope; there was a noise of hammering from the front room. I excused myself; I said that the house used to be occupied by a writer I had heard of, and I was looking round. He growled to go ahead, and went on ciphering. So I went to the other room. You know the type; small and low-ceilinged; cupboards set flush with the wall, and papered over, on either side of a low black

mantelpiece.'

Sir William Bitton obviously saw that he had caught his audience, and it was clear from his mannerisms and pauses that he enjoyed telling a story.

'They were altering the cupboards. The cupboards, mind you.' He bent forward suddenly. 'And again - a jolly good thing they took out the inner framework instead of just putting up plaster-board and papering them out. There was a cloud of dust and mortar in the place. Two workmen were just bumping down the framework, and I saw ...'

'Gentlemen, I went cold and shaky all over. It had been shoved down between the edges of the framework: thin sheets of paper, spotted with damp, and folded twice lengthwise. It was like a revelation, for when I had pushed open - the gate, and first saw those workmen altering the house, I thought: Suppose I were to find ... Well, I confess I almost lunged past those men. One of them said, "What the hell!" and almost dropped the frame. One glance at the handwriting, what I could make out of it, was enough; you know that distinctive curly line beneath the title in Poe's MSS., and the fashioning of the E. A. Poe?

'But I had to be careful. I didn't know the owner of the house; and he might know the value of this. If I offered the workmen money to let me have it, I must be careful not to offer too much, or they would grow suspicious and insist on more....'

Sir William smiled tightly. 'I explained it was something of sentimental interest to a man who had lived here before. And I said, "Look here, I'll give you ten dollars for this." Even at that, they were suspicious; I think they had some idea of buried -treasure, or directions for finding it, or something. The ghost of Poe, would have enjoyed that.' Again that chuckle behind the closed teeth. Sir William swept out his arm.

'But they looked over it, and saw that it was only - "a kind of a story, or some silly damn thing, with long words at the beginning." Finally they compromised at twenty dollars, and I took the manuscript away

'As you may know, the leading authorities on Poe are Professor Hervey. Allen of New York and Dr Robertson of Baltimore. I knew Robertson, and took my find to him. First I made him promise that, no matter what I showed him, he would never mention it to anybody.'

Rampole was watching the chief inspector. During the recital Hadley had become - not precisely bored, but restive and impatient.

'But why, keep it a secret?' he demanded. 'If there, was any trouble about your right, you were at least first claimant; you could have; bought it. And you'd made what you say, is a great discovery.'

Sir William stared at him, and then shook his head. 'You don't understand,' he replied at length. 'And I can't: explain. I wanted no trouble. I wanted this great thing, a secret between Poe and myself, for myself. For nobody else to see unless I chose.'

A sort of pale fierceness was in his face; the orator was at a loss for words to explain something powerful and intangible.

'At any rate, Robertson is a man of honour. He promised, and he will keep; his, promise, even though he urged me to do as you say, Hadley. But, naturally, 'I refused... . Gentlemen, the manuscript was what I thought; it was even better.!

'And what was it?' Dr Fell asked, rather sharply.

Sir William opened his lips, and then hesitated.

'One moment, gentlemen. It is not that I do not - ah - trust you. Of course not. Ha! But so much I have told openly, to strangers. Excuse me. I prefer to keep my secret a bit longer. Well enough to tell you what it was when you have heard my story of the theft, and decide whether you can help me.'

There was a curious expression on Dr Fell's face; not contemptuous, not humorous, not bored, but a mixture of the three.

'Suppose, you tell us,' he suggested, 'the facts of the theft, and whom you suspect!'

'It was taken from my house in Berkeley Square at sometime between Saturday afternoon and Sunday - morning. Adjoining my bedroom upstairs I have a dressing-room which I use a good deal as a study. The greater part of my collection is, of course, downstairs in the library and my study there. I had been

examining the manuscript in my upstairs study on Saturday afternoon.. '

'Was it locked up?' Hadley inquired.

'No. Nobody - at least, so I thought - knew of it, and I saw no reason for unusual precautions. It was merely in a drawer of my desk.'

'What about the members of your household? Did they know of it?'

Sir William jerked his head down in a sort of bow. 'I'm glad you asked that, Hadley. Don't think 'I shall take um brage at the suggestion; but I couldn't make it myself. At least - not immediately. Naturally I don't suspect them; ha!'

'Naturally,' said the inspector, placidly. 'Well?'

'At the present, my household consists of my daughter Sheila, my brother Lester, and his wife. My nephew by marriage, Philip, has a flat of his own, but he generally eats Sunday dinner with us. That is all - with the exception of one guest, Mr Julius Arbor, the American collector.'

Sir William examined his finger nails. There was a pause.

'As to who knew about it,' he resumed, waving a careless hand ; 'my family knew that I had brought back a valuable manuscript with me, of course. But none of them is in the least interested in such matters, and the mere words, "another manuscript," was sufficient explanation.!

'And Mr Arbor?'

Sir William said, evenly: 'I had intended to show it to him. He has a fine collection of Poe first editions. But I had not mentioned it.!

'Go on,' said Hadley, stolidly.

'As I have said, I was examining the manuscript on Saturday afternoon; fairly early. Later I went to the Tower of London...'

'To the Tower of London?'

'A very old friend of mine, General Mason, is deputy governor there. He and his secretary have done some very fine research into the Tower records. They wanted me to see a recently discovered record dealing with Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex. I returned home, dined alone, and afterwards went to the theatre. I did not go into my study then, and after the theatre it was rather late; so I turned in immediately. I discovered the theft on Sunday morning. There was no attempt at burglarious entry at any time ; all the windows were locked, and nothing else in the house had been touched.'

'Was the drawer locked?' Hadley asked. 'No.'

'I see. What did you do then?'

'I summoned my valet,' Sir William's bony fingers rapped flatly on the table; he twisted his long neck, and several times started to speak before he resumed. 'And I must confess, Hadley, that I was at first suspicious of him. He was a new man; he had been in my employ only a few months. He had the closest access to my rooms and could prowl as he liked without suspicion. But - well, he seemed too earnest, too dog-like, too thoroughly stupid at anything beyond his immediate duties. He was obviously upset and tongue-tied when I questioned him later, but that was a product of his natural dullness.!

'And his story?'

'He had no story,' Sir William said, irritably. 'He had noticed nothing suspicious, seen nothing whatever. I had difficulty getting it through his head how important the thing was; even what I was looking for. It was the same thing with the rest of the servants. They had noticed nothing.'

'What about the members of the - household?'

'My daughter Sheila had been out all Saturday afternoon. When she returned, she was in the house only a short time, and then she went out to dinner with the chap she's engaged to. . . . General Mason's secretary, by the way. My brother Lester and his wife were visiting friends in the west of England; they only returned on Sunday evening. Philip -

Philip Driscoll, my nephew - comes to see us only on Sundays. Consequently, nobody noticed anything suspicious at the time the manuscript could have been stolen.'

'And this - Mr Arbor?' The other reflected, rubbing his dry hands together.

'A very fine chap,' he answered. 'Reserved, scholarly, a trifle sardonic at times. Quite a young man, I should say scarcely more than forty - Ah, what were you asking? Mr Arbor, yes. Unfortunately, he was

not in a position to observe. An American friend of his had invited him to the country for the week-end. He left on Saturday, and did not return until this morning. . . . That's true, by the way,' he added, dropping into normal speech and almost leering across the table; 'I phoned up about it.'

Hadley nodded. He seemed to be debating something.

'I've brought you in a consulting expert,' he said slowly; nodding towards the doctor. 'Dr Fell has come some little distance as a favour to me. Hence I shall wash my hand: of the business, unless you should find the thief and want to prosecute. But I should like to ask a favour it return.'

'A favour?' Sir William repeated. 'Good God! yes, of course! Anything, in reason, I mean.'

'You spoke of your nephew, Mr Driscoll . . . Philip? Yes. What about him?'

'- who writes for the newspapers . . .'

'Oh, ah. Yes. At least, he tries to. I've exerted considerable influence to get him a real position on a newspaper. Bah! Between ourselves, the editors tell me he can turn out a good story, but he hasn't any news sense. Harbottle says he would walk through rice an inch deep in front of St Margaret's and never guess there'd been a wedding. So he's freelancing'

Hadley turned an expressionless face and picked up the newspaper on the table. He was just about to speak when a waiter, hurried to his side, glanced at him nervously, and whispered.

'Eh?' said the chief inspector. 'Speak louder, man! ... Yes, that's my name.. Right. Thanks.' He drained his glass and looked sharply at his companions. 'That's damned funny. I told them not to get in touch with me unless. Excuse me for a moment.'

'What's the matter?' inquired Dr Fell. 'Phone. Back in a moment'

They were silent as Hadley followed the waiter. In Hadley's look there had been a startled uneasiness which gave Rampole a shock....

He returned in less than two minutes, and Rampole felt something tighten in his throat. The chief inspector did not hurry he was as quiet and deliberate as ever; but his footfalls sounded louder on the tiled floor, and under the bright lights his face was pale.

Stopping a moment at the bar, he spoke a few words and then returned to the table.

'I've ordered you all a drink,' he said slowly. 'A whisky. It's just three minutes until closing time, and then we shall have to go.'

'Go?' repeated Sir William. 'Go where?'

Hadley did not speak until the waiter had brought the drinks and left the table. Then he said, 'Good luck!' hastily drank a little whisky, and set the glass down with care. Again Rampole was conscious of that tightening sense of terror....

'Sir William,' Hadley, went on, looking at the other levelly, 'I hope you will prepare yourself for a shock:

'Yes?' said the knight.

'We were speaking a moment ago of your nephew.'

'Yes? Well, good God! What about him?'

'I'm afraid I must tell you that he is dead. He has just been found at the Tower of London. There is reason to believe that he was murdered.'

The foot of Sir William's glass rattled on the polished table-top. He did not move; his eyes were fixed steadily and rather glassily on Hadley, and he seemed to have stopped breathing. At last he said, with an effort.

'I - I have my, car here....'

'There is also reason to believe,' Hadley went on, 'that what we thought a practical joke has turned into murder.

Sir William, your nephew is wearing a golf suit. And on the head of his dead body, somebody has put your stolen top hat.'