## CHAPTER VII

### IN WHICH MR. HUCKS TAKES A HAND

"A many-sided man."—COLERIDGE ON SHAKESPEARE.

LET Mr. Christopher Hucks introduce himself in his own customary way, that is, by presenting his card of business :—

CHRISTOPHER HUCKS

ANCHOR WHARF, CANAL END BASIN, BURSFIELD
CANAL CARRIER, LIGHTERMAN, FREIGHTER AND WHARFINGER
BOAT BUILDER, COAL AND GENERAL MERCHANT
AUCTIONEER, PRACTICAL VALUER, HOUSE AND ESTATE AGENT
BUSINESS BROKER, ACCOUNTANT, COMMISSION MERCHANT

FIRE, LIFE, ACCIDENT AND PLATE GLASS INSURANCES EFFECTED
FIRE AND INCOME TAX CLAIMS PREPARED AND ADJUSTED
LIVE STOCK INSURED AGAINST DEATH FROM ACCIDENT OR DISEASE
SERVANTS' REGISTRY OFFICE

AGENT FOR JOHN TAYLOR AND CO'S PHOSPHATE AND SOLUBLE BONE MANURES
COPPERAS, CHARCOAL, ETC., FOR SEWAGE AND OTHER PURPOSES
ACIDS AND ANILINES FOR THE TEXTILE TRADES

VALUATIONS FOR PROBATE. EMIGRATION AGENT
PRIVATE ARRANGEMENTS NEGOTIATED WITH CREDITORS

N.B.—ALL KINDS OF RIVER AND CANAL CRAFT BUILT OR REPAIRED, PURCHASED, SOLD, OR TO LET. NOTE THE ADDRESS

Mr. Hucks, a widower, would have to be content in death with a shorter epitaph. In life his neighbours and acquaintances knew him as the toughest old sinner in Bursfield; and indeed his office hours (from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. nominally—but he was an early riser) allowed him scant leisure to practise the Christian graces. Yet

though many had occasion to curse Mr. Hucks, few could bring themselves to hate him. The rogue was so massive, so juicy.

He stood six feet four inches in his office slippers, and measured fifty-two inches in girth of chest. He habitually smoked the strongest shag tobacco, and imbibed cold rum and water at short intervals from morning to night; but these excesses had neither impaired his complexion, which was ruddy, jovial, and almost unwrinkled, nor dimmed the delusive twinkle of his eyes. These, under a pair of grey bushy brows, met the world humorously, while they kept watch on it for unconsidered trifles; but never perhaps so humorously as when their owner, having clutched his prey, turned a deaf ear to appeal. For the rest, Mr. Hucks had turned sixty, but without losing his hair, which in colour and habit resembled a badger's; and although he had lived inland all his life, carried about with him in his dress, his gait, his speech an indefinable suggestion of a nautical past. If you tried to fix it, you found yourself narrowed down to explaining it by the blue jersey he wore in lieu of shirt and waistcoat. (He buttoned his braces over it, and tucked its slack inside the waistband of his trousers.) Or, with luck, you might learn that he habitually slept in a hammock, and corroborate this by observing the towzled state of his back hair. But the suggestion was, in fact, far more subtle, pervasive—almost you might call it an aroma.

The Counting House—so he called the single apartment in which he slung his hammock, wrote up his ledgers, interviewed his customers, and in the intervals cooked his meals on an oil-stove—was, in fact, a store of ample dimensions. To speak precisely, it measured thirty-six feet by fourteen. But Mr. Hucks had reduced its habitable space to some eight feet by six, and by the following process.

Over and above the activities mentioned on his business card, he was a landlord, and owned a considerable amount of cottage property, including a whole block

of tenement houses hard by The Plain. Nothing could be simpler than his method of managing this estate. He never spent a penny on upkeep or repairs. On a vacancy he accepted any tenant who chose to apply. He collected his rents weekly and in person, and if the rent were not forthcoming he promptly distrained upon the furniture.

By this process Mr. Hucks kept his Counting House replete, and even crowded, with chattels, some of which are reckoned among the necessaries of life, while others —such as an accordion, a rain-gauge, and a case of stuffed humming-birds—rank rather with its superfluities. Of others again you wondered how on earth they had been taken in Mr. Hucks's drag-net. A carriage umbrella, for example, set you speculating on the vicissitudes of human greatness. When the collection impinged upon Mr. Hucks so that he could not shave without knocking his elbow, he would hold an auction, and effect a partial clearance; and this would happen about once in four years. But this clearance was never more than partial, and the residuum ever consisted in the main of musical instruments. Every man has his own superstitions; and for some reason Mr. Hucks—who had not a note of music in his soul—deemed it unlucky to part with musical instruments, which was the more embarrassing because his most transitory tenants happened to be folk who practised music on the public for a livelihood—German bandsmen, for instance, not so well versed in English law as to be aware that implements of a man's trade stand exempt from seizure in execution. Indeed, the bulk of the exhibits in Mr. Hucks's museum could legally have been recovered from him under writ of replevy. But there they were, and in the midst of them to-night their collector sat and worked at his ledger by the light of a hurricane lamp.

A knock at the door disturbed his calculations.

"Come in!" he called, and Dr. Glasson entered.

"Eh? Good evenin'," said Mr. Hucks, but without heartiness.

He disliked parsons. He looked upon all men as rogues more or less, but held that ministers of religion claimed an unfair advantage on the handicap. In particular this Dr. Glasson rubbed him, as he put it, the wrong way.

"Good evening," said Dr. Glasson. "You will excuse my calling at this late hour."

"Cert'nly. Come to pay for the coals? Fifteen tons best Newcastle at eighteen shillin' makes thirteen ten, and six pounds owin' on the last account—total nineteen ten. Shall I make out the receipt?"

"You don't seriously expect me. Mr. Hucks, to pay for your coals on the same day you deliver them——"

"No," Mr. Hucks agreed, "I didn't *expect* it; but I looked for ye to pay up the last account before I sent any more on credit. I've told Simmonds he was a fool to take your order, and he'll get the sack if it happens again. Fifteen tons, too! But Simmonds has a weak sort of respect for parsons. Sings in the choir somewhere. Well, if you ain't come to pay, you've come for something; to explain, may be, why you go sneakin' around my foreman 'stead of dealin' with me straight an' gettin' 'no' for an answer."

"Your manner is offensive, Mr. Hucks, but for the moment I must overlook it. The fact is, I want information, if you can give it, on an urgent matter. One of my charges is missing."

"Charges?" repeated Mr. Hucks. "Eh? Lost one of your orphans? Well, I haven't found him—or her, if it's a girl. Why don't you go to the police?"

"It is a boy. Naturally I hesitate to apply to the police if the poor child can be recovered without their assistance. Publicity in these matters, as no doubt you can understand——"

Mr. Hucks nodded.

"I understand fast enough."

"The newspapers exaggerate . . . and then the public—even the charitable public—take up some groundless suspicion——"

"Puts two and two together," agreed Mr. Hucks, still nodding, "and then the fat's in the fire. No, I wouldn' have the police poke a nose into the 'Oly Innocents—not if I was you. But how do *I* come into this business?"

"In this way. One of your employés was delivering coal to-day at the Orphanage——"

"Fifteen ton."

"—and I have some reason to believe that the child escaped by way of the coal-cellar. I am not suggesting that he was helped."

"Aren't you? Well, I'm glad to hear you say it, for it did look like you was drivin' at something o' the sort. I don't collect orphans, for my part," said Mr. Hucks with a glance around.

"What I meant to say was that your man—whoever he was—might be able to give some information."

"He might," conceded Mr. Hucks guardedly; "and he mightn't; and then again he might be more able than willin'."

"Must I remind you, Mr. Hucks, that a person who abets or connives at the sort of thing we are discussing is likely to find himself in trouble? or that even a refusal of information may be awkwardly construed?"

"Now see here, Glasson"—Mr. Hucks filled his pipe, and having lit it, leaned both elbows on the table and stared across at his visitor—"don't you ride the high horse with me. A moment ago you weren't suggestin' anything, and you'd best stick to that. As for my man—whoever he was—you can't charge him with stealin' one o' your blessed orphans until you lay hold on the orphan he stole and produce him in court. That's *Habeas Corpus*, or else 'tis *Magna Charter*—I forget which. What's more, you'd never face a court, an' you know it." He cast a curious glance at the Doctor's face, and added, "Sit down."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Sit down. No, not there." But the warning came too late. "Not hurt yourself, I hope?" he asked, as

the Doctor rubbed that part of himself which had come into collision with the sharp edge of a concertina. "Clear away that coil of hose and take a seat on the packing-case yonder. That's right; and now let's talk." He puffed for a moment and appeared to muse. "Seems to me, Glasson, you're in the devil of a hurry to catch this child."

"My anxiety is natural, I should hope."

"No, it ain't," said Mr. Hucks with brutal candour. "And that's what's the matter with it. What's more, you come to me. Now," with continued candour, "I ain't what you might call a model Christian; but likewise you don't reckon me the sort that would help you pick up orphans just for the fun of handin' 'em over to you to starve. So I conclude," Mr. Hucks wound up, "there's money in this somewhere."

Doctor Glasson did not answer for a few seconds. He seemed to be considering. His eyes blinked, and the folds of his lean throat worked as if he swallowed down something.

"I will be frank with you, Mr. Hucks," he said at length. "There may or may not be, as you put it, money in this. I have kept this child for close upon eight years, and during the last two the Orphanage has not received one penny of payment. He was brought to us at the age of two by a seafaring man, who declared positively that the child was not his, that he was legitimate, and that he had relatives in good position. The man would not tell me their names, but gave me his own and his address—a coast-guard station on the east coast. You will pardon my keeping these back until I know that you will help me."

"Go on."

"Sufficiently good terms were offered, and for six years my charges were regularly met without question. Then payment ceased. My demands for an explanation came back through the Dead Letter Office, and when I followed them up by a journey to the address given, it was to learn that my man—a chief boatman

in the coast-guard service—had died three months before, leaving no effects beyond a pound or two and the contents of his sea-chest—no will—and, so far as could be traced, no kith or kin. So far, Mr. Hucks, the business does not look promising."

"All right, Glasson. You keep a child for two years on charity, and then get into a sweat on losing him. I trust your scent, and am not disheartened—yet."

"The boy has considerable natural refinement."

"You didn't keep him for *that*?"

"It has often suggested to me that his parentage was out of the ordinary—that he probably has relatives at least—er—well-to-do. But the main point is that he did not escape to-day of his own accord. He was kidnapped, and in circumstances that convince me there has been a deliberate plot. To my mind it is incredible that these children, without collusion——" But here Doctor Glasson pulled himself up and sat blinking.

"Eh? Was there more than one?" queried Mr. Hucks, sharp as a knife.

"There was a small girl, not one of my charges. She called on me shortly after midday with a story that an aunt of hers, who may or may not exist, but whom she pretended to anticipate, took an interest in this child. While she waited for this aunt's arrival, the—er—matron, Mrs. Huggins, incautiously allowed her access to the kitchen garden, where—without my knowledge and against my rules—the boy happened to be working. The pair of them have disappeared; and, further, I have convinced myself that their exit was made by way of the coal-shaft."

"A small girl, you say? What age?"

"About ten, as nearly as I can guess. A slip of a child, very poorly dressed, and walking with a decided limp."

"I follow you this far," said Mr. Hucks, ruminating. "—Allowin' there's a plot, if 'tis worth folks' while to get hold o' the child, 'tis worth your while to get him back from 'em. But are you sure there's a plot? There it don't seem to me you've made out your case."

Mr. Hucks said it thoughtfully, but his mind was not working with his speech. The coals, as he knew—though he did not propose to tell the Doctor at any rate just yet—had been delivered by Sam Bossom. Of complicity in any such plot as this Sam was by nature incapable. On the other hand, Sam was just the fellow to help a couple of children out of mere kindness of heart. Mr. Hucks decided to have a talk with Sam before committing himself. He suspected, of course—nay, was certain—that Glasson had kept back something important.

Thus his meditations were running when the Doctor's reply switched the current in a new direction.

"You have not heard the whole of it. As it happens, the man in charge of the coal-boat was not, as I should judge, one of your regular employés—certainly not an ordinary bargeman—but a person whose speech betrayed him as comparatively well educated."

"Eh?" Mr. Hucks sat upright and stared.

"I am not suggesting——"

"No, damme—you'd better not!" breathed Mr. Hucks.

"Very possibly he had bribed your man with the price of a pot of beer. At all events, there he was, and in charge of the boat."

"You saw him? Spoke to him?"

"To be accurate, he spoke to me—down the coal-shaft, as I was examining it. I judged him to be simulating drunkenness. But his voice was a cultivated one—I should recognise it anywhere; and Mrs. Huggins, who saw and spoke with him, describes him as a long-faced man, of gentlemanly bearing, with a furred collar."

"Good Lord! Mortimer!" ejaculated Mr. Hucks, but inwardly.

"I need hardly point out to you that a bargee in a furred collar——"

"No, you needn't." Mr. Hucks rose from his chair. "See here, Glasson, you've come with a notion that I'm mixed up in this. Well, as it happens, you're wrong.

I don't ask you to take my word—I don't care a d——n whether you believe me or not—only you're wrong. What's more, I'll give no promise to help—not to-night, anyway. But I'm goin' to look into this, and to-morrow I'll tell you if we play the hand together. To-morrow at nine-thirty, if that suits? If not, you can go and get the police to help."

"Time may be precious," hesitated Glasson.

"Mine is, anyway," Mr. Hucks retorted. "Let me see you out. No, it's no trouble. I'm goin' to look into this affair right away."

He handed the Doctor his lantern, opened the door for him, and walked with him three parts of the way across the yard. As they passed the caravan door his quick ear noted a strange sound within. It resembled the muffled yap of a dog. But Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer did not keep a dog.

He halted. "There's the gate. Good night," he said, and stood watching while Glasson passed out. Then swinging on his heel, he strode back to the caravan.

"Mortimer!" he challenged, mounting to the third step and knocking.

"Ha! Who calls?" answered the deep voice of Mr. Mortimer after two seconds' interval.

"Hucks. And I want a word with you."

The door opened a little way . . . and with, that someone within the van uttered a cry, as a dark object sprang out over the flap, hurtled past Mr. Hucks, and hurled itself across the court towards the gate.

"'Dolph! 'Dolph!" called an agonised voice—a child's voice.

"The dog's daft!" chimed in Mr. Mortimer.

"'E'll kill 'im!"

As Mr. Hucks recovered his balance and stared in at the caravan doorway, now wide open, from the darkness beyond the gate came a cry and a fierce guttural bark—the two blent together. Silence followed. Then on the silence there broke the sound of a heavy splash.