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THE letter came to me as a voice from the dead. At first the handwriting on the envelope seemed strange, and then after staring at it for a few seconds I remembered. I hadn't seen that writing for twenty years, and one is apt to forget.

The postmark was New York, and with the letter still unopened in my hand I sat staring out of the window. So Jim Featherstone was in America—the man who at one time had been my greatest friend. We had lost touch with one another after the tragedy had happened and Jim had paid the price. I'd tried—Heaven knows—hard enough to find the dear old chap, but every time I'd come up against a blank wall.

And now here in my hand I held the answer to my search: at last Jim had broken the silence.

Unconsciously my thoughts drifted backwards to that dreadful time twenty years ago. And now that I felt instinctively that the clue to everything which had puzzled us all

at the time—for there were many who loved Jim—lay here between my fingers, deliberately I refrained from opening the envelope. It had waited long years: it could wait a few more minutes while I sorted out in my mind the events as they had happened.

It had been midnight when the telephone bell had rung in my sitting-room. I remember I had one leg of my pyjamas off and one on, and I swore at the interruption. I was sleepy and wanted to go to bed: I'd been working pretty hard on a case, and I had to be in court early the next morning. Who on earth could want me at midnight?

But the bell went on ringing insistently, and I went into the sitting-room.

"What is it?" I cried irritably into the receiver.

"Are you Mr. Pollock?" came a man's voice.

"I am. Who are you?"

"Vine Street speaking, sir. Can you come down here at once? Mr. Featherstone is here, and has asked for you as a legal adviser."

Into my mind there leapt at once the idea that Jim was tight, and wanted me to try and fix things. And my irritation did not decrease.

"What on earth does he want me for at this time?" I half muttered, forgetting the man at the other end could hear. "I suppose the old fool has got blotto."

And from the other end came the reply :

" I'm afraid it's not that, sir : it's something infinitely more serious." And the tone of the voice even more than the words pulled me together.

" I'll come at once," I said.

All the time I dressed I wondered what Jim could have been doing : all the way down in a hansom, which I was lucky enough to pick up, I was still wondering. Wild Jim was and always had been, but there was no atom of vice in him. He had money : at least quite enough, without being actually wealthy : he had hosts of friends. So what could he have been doing ?

An Inspector met me and his face was very grave. He made no attempt at beating about the bush, but came straight to the point.

" It's murder, Mr. Pollock, I'm sorry to say."

I stared at him stupidly.

" You mean that Jim—that Mr. Featherstone—is accused of murdering someone ? " I said.

He nodded.

" But it's incredible," I cried angrily. " Whom is he accused of murdering ? "

" A Mr. John Parsons," said the Inspector. " Perhaps you would go and see him, Mr. Pollock. He can tell you the story himself, but I am bound to admit that things look extremely black. You see, your friend makes

"On the contrary, Bill, I realise it only too well. As you say, it's murder."

"But who is this John Parsons? I've never heard of him."

"No more had I until this morning," he answered. "But if it's of importance, and presumably it is, John Parsons is, or rather was, a foul blackmailing swine. He was a man dead to even the twinge of a decent instinct, a loathsome brute, a slimy cur. And though I realise quite fully that legally speaking I've committed murder, from every other point of view I have merely exterminated a thing that had no right to live."

"Granted, old man," I said hopelessly. "But that's got nothing to do with it. The only point of view we're concerned with is the legal one, and legally it doesn't matter if he was all you say or an angel of light. Tell me, what was this request you went up to make and which he wouldn't grant?"

Jim smiled at me gravely, and laid his hand on my arm.

"I knew you'd ask me that, old man. It's pretty obvious, isn't it? Sticks out a yard. But I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me?" I repeated. "But why not? Presumably, you've sent for me because you want me to defend you."

.. "If you'll be so good, Bill."

"Good be blowed, Jim!" I cried. "Of

course I'll defend you. But I must know all the facts of the case."

Once again he smiled gravely and shook his head.

"You shall know all except that, Bill. Believe me, old friend, I have a very good reason."

I argued, expostulated and finally lost my temper, but it was useless. He was adamant on that one point—the most vital point in the whole case. He had gone up to interview this man Parsons, having made an appointment by telephone. The object of the interview was to demand the handing over of a certain thing. And that demand had been refused. Parsons had merely laughed at his request. So Jim had taken the revolver out of his pocket, and had warned him of his unalterable intention of killing him if the request was not complied with. And once again Parsons had laughed and, rising from his chair, had crossed to the bell.

"It was then that I shot him through the heart, Bill," said Jim quietly. "After that I locked the door, took the keys of his safe from the body, opened the safe and found what I sought. The servants were hammering on the door, but it was a stout one. I burnt the thing I had come for, and then I opened the door. And that is absolutely all there is to it."

Moreover, that had been absolutely all there

was to it when he was tried. Not by even so much as a hint had Jim given away what had been the object of his visit. I warned him of the consequences, but I might have saved my breath.

"I realise all you say, old friend," he said patiently. "But it's just impossible for me to tell you. I know what it means to me, but I can't help it, whatever the result may be."

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And so it came to the trial. The court was crammed, and the most self-possessed person there was Jim. I can see him now standing between the two warders, head thrown back a little, arms folded. And what a magnificent-looking specimen of manhood he was! He gave me a nod and a smile, but after that he looked neither to the right hand nor the left, though the court was crammed with his friends.

Quietly, inexorably, but with studied moderation counsel for the Crown outlined the case. He made no effort to gloss over the character of the murdered man: with scrupulous fairness he went so far as to emphasise it.

"As my learned friend will doubtless tell you, gentlemen," he said, "John Parsons was that most loathsome of all things—a blackmailer. From documents discovered in his safe, no

doubts can be entertained on that score. But, gentlemen, the law of England protects people against blackmail. Further, it punishes the blackmailer with the utmost severity. It is the safeguard of a civilised community, it is the thing to which appeal must be made. And no man, under any conditions whatever, has the right to take the law into his own hands."

It was a short case. Though technically the plea was "Not guilty," there was no dispute over facts. And there was no drama to it either until I put Jim himself into the witness box. Whether he liked it or not, I was determined to run sentiment for all it was worth. And I asked him once again the question point blank :

"What was the request you made to John Parsons ? "

He looked me straight in the face.

"I refuse to say."

"Did it concern a woman's honour ? "

For a moment he hesitated ; then he answered firmly :

"Yes—it did."

Of course, it was useless. Counsel for the Crown, as was his duty, pushed him hard on the point.

"Who was the woman ? "

"I refuse to say."

"Will you write down the name and hand it to his Lordship ? "

“ I will not.”

And then the Judge intervened. A little sternly he pointed out that Jim was jeopardising his chances by his attitude, and that his consistent refusal to give any information on this point not only tended to throw doubts on the veracity of his statement, but came perilously near contempt of court.

Jim bowed, and I can hear now his quiet, level voice.

“ My Lord, I realise what you say only too well. May I, however, beg of you to believe that nothing is farther from my mind than any feeling of contempt of court. For what it is worth, you have my word : but I can bring you no proof, even if I wished to. For the proof was destroyed by me that night. And whatever your Lordship's judgment may be on me, I thank my God that I was able to do so.”

A woman in court gave a little sob, and the Judge frowned.

I talked to him three years after at some banquet or other, and he told me his feelings at the moment. Notoriously one of the most impartial men on the bench, yet every sympathy he had was with Jim. And he felt that he was being stupidly quixotic.

“ Are we to understand,” he said, “ that there is a woman living so devoid of every decent sense that she allows you to stand on trial for murder—a murder perpetrated, as you

say, to save her honour—without coming forward and giving evidence.”

I saw the muscles on Jim's face tighten, and a strange look came into his eyes.

“The woman in question is dead, my Lord.”

And for a space there was absolute silence in court.

It was all over in one day. There could only be one end: the issue was never in doubt. There was no refuting the Crown's deadly arguments. If such a precedent were allowed, where would matters end? There was merely prisoner's unsubstantiated word that he had killed this man to save a dead woman's honour. Even if it were true, there was no justification whatever for such an act. And how could they possibly tell that it was true? The members of the jury must obliterate from their minds all questions of sentiment. They must not take into account the prisoner's personality, nor that of the dead man. All they must concentrate on was the fact that admittedly a man had been murdered, and that the only excuse for the act was an appeal to sentiment which might, he allowed, be true, but which, on the other hand, might be merely a lie put forward as a last despairing endeavour to mitigate a cold-blooded crime. Let them not forget that prisoner at the bar had gone to this man's house with a loaded revolver in his pocket. . . .

And through it all Jim listened with the same grave, quiet attention. Never for one instant did any hint of agitation or fear show on his face, and when the jury left to consider their verdict and he was removed he gave me one of his usual cheery smiles. They didn't take long—ten minutes to be exact—and the verdict was the only possible one—"Guilty."

They took a couple of sobbing women out, and they closed the doors. And hands clenched, and knees twitched, for it's a dreadful moment, when a man's life is declared forfeit. They asked him if he had anything to say, and because he was white clean through he did have something to say. And it was this:

"Only one thing, my Lord. That had I been in any other position in this court to-day, either in your Lordship's seat or in the jury box, or conducting the case for the Crown, I only hope that I should have acted with the same scrupulous fairness towards prisoner that has been accorded to me to-day."

And then it was over. Jim was sentenced to death, and it seemed to me as I watched him that he was staring at something above him—something that he saw, and we couldn't. But then maybe my eyes were a bit dim.

Certain it is that even to the last he never faltered. He seemed to be sustained by some outside power; he seemed to be curiously aloof.

And all through the days that followed he was just the same. When I told him that from every corner of the country huge petitions were arriving for his reprieve he shrugged his shoulders and smiled a little sadly.

"Dear old Bill," he answered, "you've been just wonderful over it all. But I don't think I very much mind what happens. I'm not a particularly religious bloke, but perhaps—who knows—one might run across people over the other side."

And again he seemed to be staring through the windows of his cell at something or somebody that I couldn't see.

It was successful—the petition—and the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. The utter vileness of the man Parsons had a good deal to do with it, I think. And when I told Jim the news, and the two warders stood there smiling all over their face, he wrung my hand and thanked me. But even at the time it struck me that his chief feeling was gratitude for the trouble I'd taken, rather than joy at the result.

That was the last time I ever saw him. The years rolled by, and by the law of nature his memory grew a little dim. I became increasingly busy, and Jim faded a bit from my mind. But always I had marked the date of his release: I wanted to meet him as he came out. He had earned the maximum remission of his

sentence, and the Governor of the prison had promised to let me know the actual date. And then, as luck would have it, I went down with a severe attack of influenza two days before he was due to come out.

I wired to the Governor asking him to tell Jim where I was, and he told him. But Jim never came. I went to old addresses: I followed every clue I could think of, but it was useless. Jim completely disappeared, leaving no trace, and, as I have said, I gave it up, a little hurt and offended.

And now, at long last, I held in my hands a letter from him. It was a very bulky one, and I gave a start as I saw the date. It had been written two years previously, though the postmark was recent.

"Old friend," it ran, "don't think too hardly of me. The Governor gave me your message, but fifteen years of prison changes a man. We should have been strangers, Bill, and I should have stepped back into a world I didn't know, and that didn't know me. I couldn't have borne to meet the old set again. Most of them probably are married, and to their wives, who never knew me at all, I should have been just an unknown man who'd served a life sentence for murder. It would have been an impossible situation: I couldn't have stood it. But it was good of you to think of me—awfully good, old pal. Only I'm thankful you had 'flu,

otherwise I should have had to hurt you. For I had made up my mind irrevocably to cut adrift, and I should have had a terrible job trying to make you see my point of view.

"But now, during the three years since I came out, the conviction has been growing on me that it is only fair to you to let you, who defended me so ably, know the truth. You won't get this letter until I am dead"—for a moment I stopped reading and stared out of the window—"but you'll get it then. The old lungs got touched up a bit in prison, and they tell me that I ought to go to some sanatorium. But I'm thinking it's hardly worth while. . . .

"All I ask you, Bill, is to burn this letter when you've read it, and promise me that never by word or deed will you divulge its contents to a living soul. Because it's the story of the only part of my life that counts, and the only part of the life of one other.

"I met her first at St. Moritz. She was nineteen and I was twenty-one. We were both pretty good skiers, and so she managed to get away from the two stout women who dogged her footsteps wherever she went. Because, you see, she wasn't an ordinary mortal like you and me, old man; she was a Royalty. And yet she was just an ordinary mortal like you and me, in that she loved love, and life, and most marvellous of all, she loved one, Jim Featherstone. Useless to ask how these things happen :

they lie on the lap of the gods for capricious distribution. And I—great Heavens! old friend, it would be beyond my power to tell you how I loved that girl. She was more to me than life itself. We were discreet; we had to be. She was there incognito, of course, but the two Gorgons watched her like lynxes. Had they had an inkling of our feelings for one another they would have whisked her away and buried her once more in the starchy ceremony of her father's Court. For he was a King, and it should not tax your ingenuity overmuch to find out the country he reigned over.

“ But there are ways of eluding even lynx-eyed Gorgons, and for four weeks we managed to do it. And for four weeks we lived in a world of our own—my girl and I. We didn't bother much over what was going to happen—the present was good enough for us. Once or twice I alluded to it, but always she put her little hand over my mouth and stopped me. So I forced myself to forget the madness of it all, and lived just for each day as it came.

“ But at last there came the time when it could be ignored no longer. We were up there in the snow, eating our lunch, when she told me in her sweet, broken English :

“ ‘ To-morrow, Jim, I'm going. Going back to prison.’

“ I'd known, of course, that it had to come,

but that didn't make it any easier. And something snapped inside me. I caught her in my arms, and begged and implored her to sacrifice everything and marry me.

" 'You'll be happy as my wife, dear love,' I whispered. 'I've got a bit of money, and there's the whole great world in front of us.'

" Just for a little she lay in my arms with the wonder of it all in her dear eyes; and then she gave a little twisted smile.

" 'If only I could, my Jim!' she said gravely. 'If only I could! But there's something I haven't told you. Maybe I've been wicked these last few weeks, letting you kiss me and make love to me. But I couldn't help it, for I love you so, my dear. And I think I hate him.'

" 'Who?' I demanded.

" 'The man I've got to marry. It's been arranged for many years.'

" And she told me who he was. A diplomatic marriage—the usual thing: and for a while I cursed bitterly and foolishly, till the words died away in my throat and I grew silent, just staring into her dear eyes. It was to take place when she was twenty-one, so there were two years before the sacrifice.

" This isn't a love story, Bill, and, anyway, there are things of which a man does not write. And that last afternoon is one of them. Sufficient to say that we said good-bye to one another up in the white purity of the snow.

And white though it was it was no whiter than my beloved girl.

“ The months went on, and I came back to London. I tried to forget in the way that men have always tried to forget, and I couldn't. Time made things no better: if anything it made them worse. The official announcement appeared in the papers full of the usual lies. How wonderful it was that the close cementing together of the two nations should be accomplished by such a romantic love-match—you know the sort of stuff. And I cursed the fools who wrote it, and went on all the harder trying to forget.

“ It was three months before the ceremony was due to take place that a letter came to me at my club, and I stood there staring at it like a man bereft of his senses. I'd only seen her handwriting once, but I knew it in a flash. And the postmark was London.

“ She'd sent it over by someone, of course—I'd given her my club as an address if ever she wanted me. That was my first thought, until I turned the envelope over. And on the back was the name of a London hotel.

“ Bill, I was shaking like a man with the palsy when I opened that letter. I had to put it on a table before I could get it steady enough to read. She was in London for three days, and though she felt it was madness, she must see me again. Would I meet her that

afternoon? She gave me a rendezvous, where she would be in her car, and then we would go for a drive.

“And now I’m coming to the end, old man. Madness it may have been—the time we spent those next three days. But it was a madness which has lived through the long, grey years, and will live with me till the end. She was strictly incognito: only one girl friend was with her—a girl who loved her even as I did. She knew, of course; she it was who came later and told me what had happened. It was the driver who was the traitor—God! if I could get my hands on that man he would die even as John Parsons died.

“But I’m jumping ahead. Why we chose Richmond Park for our last day I don’t know—though it wouldn’t have mattered much where we’d gone: the result would have been the same. But it was there, in one of those little copses, that I said ‘Good-bye’ to her for the last time. She was leaving next day, and we sat there hand in hand. And after a while my arms went round her, and she clung to me helplessly.

“‘Always and always; for ever and ever, my man,’ she said again and again.

“What’s the good of labouring it? The shadows were lengthening when I kissed her for the last time, and watched her stumble a little blindly back to the waiting car. It was

the end, and from that moment I have only seen her twice. Once at Victoria Station the next morning, when for a moment her eyes met mine and she smiled pitifully : once amidst the pomp and ceremony of her marriage. I watched her from the crowd, as she bowed and smiled to the cheering people. But her face was white, Bill : and it seemed to me that she was looking for someone—always looking. But maybe that was my imagination.

“ Once again I came back to London and tried to forget. Now it was over, definitely finished : I told myself over and over again that I was a fool.

“ ‘ Cut it clean out, you ass : it’s an episode—dead and finished.’

“ But you can’t cut out a part of you—a vital part, and I couldn’t forget. I haven’t forgotten yet : I never shall.

“ It was a year later that she died. She died giving birth to a son, and a nation went into mourning. So did an obscure individual in London, but he didn’t count—not until a little later. And then only he knew it and one other, and now you.

“ It was the girl friend who came to me and told me what had happened. She came one morning and she had travelled over Europe without stopping. I take off my hat to that girl, Bill : she was superb—a thoroughbred clean through.

“ ‘They’re after me, Mr. Featherstone,’ she said. ‘But they’re a day behind.’ ”

“ ‘What’s happened?’ I asked, staring at her, bewildered.

“ She made no answer, but just took an envelope from her bag and handed it to me. I took out the contents and for a few moments I could hardly believe my eyes. There were six snapshots inside, and in every one of them there appeared my girl and me. They had been taken in Richmond Park, and subconsciously I recalled an occasional click-click that I had heard that wonderful afternoon. At the time I had hardly noticed it—put it down to a cricket or something. Now I knew. Some devil had been there hidden with a camera, and this was the result.

“ ‘How did you get these?’ I asked her.

“ ‘They were sent to a man at Court,’ she answered quietly. ‘Never mind how I got them: if you want to know, I stole them. But you know what intrigue is out there, and the man to whom they were sent is the leader of the anti-Royalist clique. For years he has been working secretly to overthrow the existing Monarchy: in the country he has a large following. He is utterly unscrupulous and he proposes, I know, to publish those photographs and circulate them. You see what people will say, Mr. Featherstone: that the late Queen had a lover. Probably they will go further and

say that the boy is not the son of the King. You must stop it. I don't care about the King or his house: I do care about her reputation. You loved her: you've got a day. Do something! *You see, the films are still in existence.* And that's the man who has them. I found his name and address when I took the prints.'

"I looked at the paper she held out to me, and then I laid my hand on her arm.

"'Leave it all to me,' I said, and she went away comforted.

"Old friend, the rest you know. I rang that devil up twice on the telephone to fix an appointment. Each time he was out. So after dinner I went up to see him. He smiled when he saw me, and I had to control myself not to strike him in the face.

"'And what can I do for you?' he asked, though he knew full well all the time.

"'You can give me the films of those infamous pictures you took in Richmond Park,' I answered.

"He laughed again.

"'But I value them highly,' he said. 'They've been worth a great deal of money to me, my dear boy.'

"'You foul swine!' I cried, and he waved a deprecating hand.

"'I regard it as a most creditable performance,' he continued. 'And really, you know, Richmond Park is a very public place for

love-making. Anyone might have been there. In fact, as I followed your car and realised your destination I grew quite alarmed. But still, everything worked out very satisfactorily.'

"And at that moment the telephone bell rang beside him. He spoke into it and his face changed suddenly. I can still see him hanging up the receiver with a cold, sneering smile.

" 'So, my young friend, you have succeeded in stealing those photographs, have you? How very interesting.'

"I realised that the pursuers had arrived in London, and that time was even shorter than I thought.

" 'Photographs for which I have been paid a very large sum,' he continued. 'And here have I got all the trouble of printing another set.'

" 'You'll never do that, you blackmailer,' I said, and he leant back in his chair still smiling.

" 'May I ask how you propose to prevent me?' he remarked. 'The negatives are in that safe, the key of which is attached to my body by a steel chain. It is possible that you are a little stronger than I am, but not much. Anyway, there is a bell, and there are two menservants in this house who really are strong: specially engaged, in fact, for removing troublesome people. So may I ask you again how you propose to prevent me?'

“ ‘ By killing you,’ I said, and I pulled out the revolver.

“ And still he smiled.

“ ‘ They hang people for that in England, my dear boy. So I wouldn’t if I were you. It’s a stupid bluff, you know—that revolver game.’

“ Bill, sometimes now I see the look in his eyes of cringing, hideous terror when he first realised it wasn’t bluff. And I glory in it. He gave a sort of stifled scream, and reached for the bell, just as I plugged him through the heart.

“ Then I locked the door and I burnt the films, and I knew that my darling was safe. Old friend, wouldn’t you have done as I did ? ”