

## THE AVENGING CHANCE

The parlour maid seemed to think there was nothing odd in his mission, and took him up to the drawing-room at once. A corner of the room was devoted to the silver-framed photographs of Mrs. Verreker-le-Flemming's friends, and there were many of them. Roger examined them with interest, and finally took away with him not two photographs but six, those of Sir William, Mrs. Beresford, Beresford, two strange males who appeared to belong to the Sir William period, and, lastly, a likeness of Mrs. Verreker-le-Flemming herself. Roger liked confusing his trail.

For the rest of the day he was very busy.

His activities would have no doubt seemed to Mrs. Verreker-le-Flemming not merely baffling but pointless. He paid a visit to a public library, for instance, and consulted a work of reference, after which he took a taxi and drove to the offices of the Anglo-Eastern Perfumery Company, where he inquired for a certain Mr. Joseph Lea Hardwick and seemed much put out on hearing that no such gentleman was known to the firm and was certainly not employed in any of their branches. Many questions had to be put about the firm and its branches before he consented to abandon the quest.

After that he drove to Messrs. Weall and Wilson, the well-known institution which protects the trade interests of individuals and advises its subscribers regarding investments. Here he entered his name as a subscriber, and explaining that he had a large sum of money to invest, filled in one of the special inquiry forms which are headed *Strictly Confidential*.

Then he went to the Rainbow Club, in Piccadilly.

Introducing himself to the porter without a blush as connected with Scotland Yard, he asked the man a number of questions, more or less trivial, concerning the tragedy.

«Sir William, I understand», he said finally, as if by the way, «did not dine here the evening before».

There it appeared that Roger was wrong. Sir William had dined in the club, as he did about three times a week.

«But I quite understood he wasn't here that evening», Roger said plaintively.

The porter was emphatic. He remembered quite well. So did a waiter, whom the porter summoned to corroborate him. Sir William had dined, rather late, and had not left the dining-room till about nine o'clock. He spent the evening there, too, the waiter knew, or at least some of it, for he himself had taken him a whisky and soda in the lounge not less than half an hour later.

Roger retired.

He retired to Merton's, in a taxi.

It seemed that he wanted some new note paper printed, of a very special kind, and to the young woman behind the counter he specified at great length and in wearisome detail exactly what he did want. The young woman handed him the books of specimen pieces and asked him to see if there was any style there which would suit him. Roger glanced through them, remarking garrulously to the young woman that he had been recommended to Merton's by a very dear friend, whose photograph he happened to have on him at that moment. Wasn't that a curious coincidence? The young woman agreed that it was.

«About a fortnight ago, I think, my friend was in here last», said Roger, producing the photograph. «Recognise this?».

The young woman took the photograph, without apparent interest.

«Oh, yes, I remember. About some note paper, too, wasn't it? So that's your friend. Well, it's a small world. Now this is a line we're selling a good deal of just now».

Roger went back to his rooms to dine. Afterwards, feeling restless, he wandered out of the Albany and turned up Piccadilly. He wandered round the Circus, thinking hard, and paused for a moment out of habit to inspect the photographs of the new revue hung outside the Pavilion. The next thing he realised was that he had got as far as Jermyn Street

and was standing outside the Imperial Theatre. Glancing at the advertisements of *The Creaking Skull*, he saw that it began at half past eight. Glancing at his watch, he saw that the time was twenty-nine minutes past the hour. He had an evening to get through somehow. He went inside.

The next morning, very early for Roger, he called on Moresby at Scotland Yard.

«Moresby», he said without preamble, «I want you to do something for me. Can you find me a taximan who took a fare from Piccadilly Circus or its neighbourhood at about ten past nine on the evening before the Beresford crime to the Strand somewhere near the bottom of Southampton Street, and another who took a fare back between those points? I'm not sure about the first. Or one taxi might have been used for the double journey, but I doubt that. Anyhow, try to find out for me, will you?».

«What are you up to now, Mr. Sheringham?», Moresby asked suspiciously.

«Breaking down an interesting alibi», replied Roger serenely. «By the way, I know who sent those chocolates to Sir William. I'm just building up a nice structure of evidence for you. Ring up my rooms when you've got those taximen».

He strolled out, leaving Moresby positively gaping after him.

The rest of the day he spent apparently trying to buy a second-hand typewriter. He was very particular that it should be a Hamilton No. 4. When the shop people tried to induce him to consider other makes he refused to look at them, saying that he had had the Hamilton No. 4 so strongly recommended to him by a friend who had bought one about three weeks ago. Perhaps it was at this very shop? No? They hadn't sold a Hamilton No. 4 for the last three months? How odd.

But at one shop they had sold a Hamilton No. 4 within the last month, and that was odder still.

At half past four Roger got back to his rooms to await the telephone message from Moresby. At half past five it came.

«There are fourteen taxidriviers here, littering up my office», said Moresby offensively. «What do you want me to do with 'em?».

«Keep them till I come, Chief Inspector», returned Roger with dignity.

The interview with the fourteen was brief enough, however. To each man in turn Roger showed a photograph, holding it so that Moresby could not see it, and asked if he could recognise his fare. The ninth man did so, without hesitation.

At a nod from Roger, Moresby dismissed them, then sat at his table and tried to look official. Roger seated himself on the table, looking most unofficial, and swung his legs. As he did so, a photograph fell unnoticed out of his pocket and fluttered, face downwards, under the table. Moresby eyed it but did not pick it up.

«And now, Mr. Sheringham, sir», he said, «perhaps you'll tell me what you've been doing?».

«Certainly, Moresby», said Roger blandly. «Your work for you. I really have solved the thing, you know. Here's your evidence». He took from his notecase an old letter and handed it to the Chief Inspector. «Was that typed on the same machine as the forged letter from Mason's, or was it not?».

Moresby studied it for a moment, then drew the forged letter from a drawer of his table and compared the two minutely.

«Mr. Sheringham», he said soberly, «where did you get hold of this?».

«In a second-hand typewriter shop in St. Martin's Lane. The machine was sold to an unknown customer about a month ago. They identified the customer from that same photograph. As it happened, this machine had been used for a time in the office after it was repaired, to see that it was O.K., and I easily got hold of that specimen of its work».

«And where is the machine now?».

«Oh, at the bottom of the Thames, I expect», Roger smiled. «I tell you, this criminal takes no unnecessary chances. But that doesn't matter. There's your evidence».

«Humph! It's all right so far as it goes», conceded Moresby. «But what about Mason's paper?».

«That», said Roger calmly, «was extracted from Merton's book of sample note papers, as I'd guessed from the very yellowed edges might be the case. I can prove contact of the criminal with the book, and there is a gap which will certainly turn out to have been filled by that piece of paper».

«That's fine», said Moresby more heartily.

«As for the taximan, the criminal had an alibi. You've heard it broken down. Between ten past nine and twenty-five past, in fact during the time when the parcel must have been posted, the murderer took a hurried journey to that neighbourhood, going probably by bus or Underground, but returning, as I expected, by taxi, because time would be getting short».

«And the murderer, Mr. Sheringham?».

«The person whose photograph is in my pocket», Roger said unkindly. «By the way, do you remember what I was saying the other day about *Chance the Avenger*, my excellent film title? Well, it's worked again. By a chance meeting in Bond Street with a silly woman I was put, by the merest accident, in possession of a piece of information which showed me then and there who had sent those chocolates addressed to Sir William. There were other possibilities, of course, and I tested them, but then and there on the pavement I saw the whole thing, from first to last».

«Who was the murderer, then, Mr. Sheringham?», repeated Moresby.

«It was so beautifully planned», Roger went on dreamily. «We never grasped for one moment that we were making the fundamental mistake that the murderer all along intended us to make».

«And what was that?», asked Moresby.

«Why, that the plan had miscarried. That the wrong person had been killed. That was just the beauty of it. The plan had *not* miscarried. It had been brilliantly successful. The wrong person was *not* killed. Very much the right person was».

Moresby gasped.

«Why, how on earth do you make that out, sir?».

«Mrs. Beresford was the objective all the time. That's why the plot was so ingenious. Everything was anticipated. It was perfectly natural that Sir William should hand the chocolates over to Beresford. It was foreseen that we should look for the criminal among Sir William's associates and not the dead woman's. It was probably even foreseen that the crime would be considered the work of a woman!».

Moresby, unable to wait any longer, snatched up the photograph.

«Good heavens! But Mr. Sheringham, you don't mean to tell me that ... Sir William himself!».

«He wanted to get rid of Mrs. Beresford», Roger continued. «He had liked her well enough at the beginning, no doubt, though it was her money he was after all the time.

«But the real trouble was that she was too close with her money. He wanted it, or some of it, pretty badly; and she wouldn't part. There's no doubt about the motive. I made a list of the firms he's interested in and got a report on them. They're all rocky (22), every one. He'd got through all his own money, and he had to get more.

«As for the nitrobenzine which puzzled us so much, that was simple enough. I looked it up and found that beside the uses you told me, it's used largely in perfumery. And he's got a perfumery business. The Anglo-Eastern Perfumery Company. That's how he'd know

about it being poisonous, of course. But I shouldn't think he got his supply from there. He'd be cleverer than that. He probably made the stuff himself. Any schoolboy knows how to treat benzol with nitric acid to get nitrobenzine».

«But», stammered Moresby, «but Sir William ... . He was at Eton (23)».

«Sir William?», said Roger sharply. «Who's talking about Sir William? I told you the photograph of the murderer was in my pocket». He whipped out the photograph in question and confronted the astounded Chief Inspector with it. «Beresford, man! Beresford's the murderer of his own wife.

«Beresford, who still had hankerings after a gay life», he went on more mildly, «didn't want his wife but did want her money. He contrived this plot, providing as he thought against every contingency that could possibly arise. He established a mild alibi, if suspicion ever should arise, by taking his wife to the Imperial, and slipped out of the theatre at the first interval. (I sat through the first act of the dreadful thing myself last night to see when the interval came.) Then he hurried down to the Strand, posted his parcel, and took a taxi back. He had ten minutes, but nobody would notice if he got back to the box a minute late.

«And the rest simply followed. He knew Sir William came to the club every morning at ten thirty, as regularly as clockwork; he knew that for a psychological certainty he could get the chocolates handed over to him if he hinted for them; he knew that the police would go chasing after all sorts of false trails starting from Sir William. And as for the wrapper and the forged letter, he carefully didn't destroy them because they were calculated not only to divert suspicion but actually to point away from him to some anonymous lunatic».

«Well, it's very smart of you, Mr. Sheringham», Moresby said, with a little sigh, but quite ungrudgingly. «Very smart indeed. What was it the lady told you that showed you the whole thing in a flash?».

«Why, it wasn't so much what she actually told me as what I heard between her words, so to speak. What she told me was that Mrs. Beresford knew the answer to that bet; what I deduced was that, being the sort of person she was, it was quite incredible that she should have made a bet to which she knew the answer. *Ergo* (24), she didn't. *Ergo*, there never was such a bet. *Ergo*, Beresford was lying. *Ergo*, Beresford wanted to get hold of those chocolates for some reason other than he stated. After all, we only had Beresford's word for the bet, hadn't we?

«Of course he wouldn't have left her that afternoon till he'd seen her take, or somehow made her take, at least six of the chocolates, more than a lethal dose. That's why the stuff was in those meticulous six-minim doses. And so that he could take a couple himself, of course. A clever stroke, that».

Moresby rose to his feet.

«Well, Mr. Sheringham, I'm much obliged to you, sir. And now I shall have to get busy myself». He scratched his head. «Chance the Avenger, eh? Well, I can tell you one pretty big thing Beresford left to Chance the Avenger, Mr. Sheringham. Suppose Sir William hadn't handed over the chocolates after all? Supposing he'd kept 'em, to give to one of his own ladies?».

Roger positively snorted. He felt a personal pride in Beresford by this time.

«Really, Moresby! It wouldn't have had any serious results if Sir William had. Do give my man credit for being what he is. You don't imagine he sent the poisoned ones to Sir William, do you? Of course not! He'd send harmless ones, and exchange them for the others on his way home. Dash it all, he wouldn't go right out of his way to present opportunities to Chance».

«If», added Roger, «Chance really is the right word».

## READING NOTES.

1. **club**: the typical club is an all-male society with an expensive annual subscription and premises where its members can meet and enjoy the club's facilities. The clubs strictly guard the criteria for selecting their membership, which is generally elected by the existing membership.

2. **Piccadilly**: a street in the West End of London. The thoroughfare is supposed to have got its odd name from one Robert Baker, a tailor, who made *pickadils* (collars or ruffs). His house was named Piccadilly Hall and before long the name meant the street itself.

3. **blank**: a euphemism for *damn*, from the once usual form of printing d---.

4. **ill wind**: *here* unhealthy trend.

5. **he had a finger in a good many business pies**: he was actively involved in many business undertakings.

6. **but Beresford, whose wild oats, though duly sown, had been a sparse crop, was ready enough to be a Puritan himself**: but Beresford who had never been given to a life of pleasure and gaiety while young was quite prepared to settle down seriously and abide by rigid moral standards.

7. **to make no bones about it**: *here* beyond doubt.

8. **kirsch** (*German*): a cherry liqueur.

9. **maraschino**: a sweet liqueur made from black Dalmatian cherries.

10. **By Jove** (*coll*): *here* an exclamation of surprise.

11. **neat**: undiluted, without water.

12. **minim**: *here* one drop. *Minim* is a fluid measure: one sixtieth of a drachm.

13. **a brute of a case**: a horrifying case. This type of metaphorical epithet will often be used for emphasis, as in *a brute of a fellow*, *a fool of a boy*, *a shadow of a smile*, etc.

14. **on the modern side**: concerned with modern subjects, that is chemistry and physics.

15. **bird** (*sl*): a fellow. *A classical bird* means a school student studying the classics (that is Latin and Greek – language and literature).

16. **house**: *here* a school boarding house.

17. **light-o'-love**: a woman who is wanton or inconstant in her love.

18. **humph!**: an expression of dissatisfaction or doubt.

19. **fat chance** (*coll*): no chance at all; usually ironical.

20. **poetic justice**: fitting allotment of rewards or punishments to good and evil characters in a play.

21. **play the game**: act honourably.

22. **rocky** (*coll*): unreliable, financially insecure.

23. **Eton**: Eton College, a famous public school for boys, near Windsor, founded in 1440.

24. **ergo** (*Lat*): therefore.