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THE BLACK

Episode I
THE CASE OF LADY PURSEYENCE

Two years ago I received a letter signed Olga Purseyence asking me if I would give the lady an interview on a certain date at a certain hour. I looked up the lady's credentials in my books of reference, and found that she was the widow of Sir George Purseyence, and I wrote back fixing the time and date.

Now, I daresay "Lady Olga Purseyence" suggests to you a tall, willowy, refined looking lady with sad dark eyes. That is the picture I got of her, and I was very much surprised to find a very stout, dumpy woman, coarse featured and heavy-eyed. When she opened her mouth, the final illusion was gone. She had the vilest Cockney accent, and insisted throughout our interview in referring to me as 'young man',

I learnt afterwards that she was the third wife of the eccentric baronet, and that she had been his cook housekeeper for ten years before, in a moment of mental aberration, he took her to wife. Her original name had been Mary Ann Sopper, and 'Olga' was quite a new creation, having been decided upon by her after her husband's death. I expect she got the name from a novel, but that is by the way.

She started pretty badly from my point of view.

"I wish you to understand, young man," she said, planting herself squarely in the armchair, which I had pushed forward for her, "that I don't believe in private, detectives. I never did and I never shall."

"That's good," said I. "Now let's hear your story and let's see if I believe in you."

She frowned at me.

"Don't forget, young man," she said warningly, "that you're dealing with a member of the British aristocracy. If I have any cheek from you I'll take my custom elsewhere."

Of course, the only thing to do was to tell her to take her 'custom' elsewhere, but she must have made pretty thorough inquiries into our business before she came, and she was by no means prepared to follow my advice.

"My dear lady," I said, "in the very chair, in which you are sitting I have had dukes, duchesses, countesses and earls beyond number."

This seemed to mollify her, and I thought she eyed the chair with greater respect.

"Well, I'll cut a long story short," she said (which in women of this class means that they are going to make a short story long). "I married Sir George rather late in life. A good many people can't understand why he married me," she said with unconscious humour. "I'm not going to boast, but you'll see that Sir George wasn't the only gooseberry on the bush." She positively bridled with pride as she opened her capacious handbag and produced a letter.

It was written in a foreign hand and the postmark was Liverpool. I gathered from the calligraphy that the writer was of one of the Latin races. It would be indiscreet to give the opening of the letter, which dealt with a mad and foolish adventure of a chance meeting at a concert, of other meetings, and finally the greatest adventure of all. The letter concluded:

"And now, my darling, my love, misfortune has come to me, alas! I am without engagement, I am poor, I need money to take me to my land and to give me the rest I need. Will you not send it to me, sweetheart? Five hundred English pounds. It is so little to you, so much to me. Or shall I bring my beautiful violin and play outside your house until you throw it into my hands?"

It was signed "Thy Lover."

"He gives the Post Restante as his address," said I. "Well, it is a simple matter to inform the police, but I suppose you do not want to take that step?"

"Indeed. I don't," said the woman violently, "do you think I want the whole of this county to know? It's bad enough as it is, young man. I'm snubbed here and there, and I'm not going to give them any other handle. Why, I'd have to clear out. I dare not show my nose in the village as it is."

"He addresses you as 'My Darling Mary Ann'," said I, pointing to one passage in the preamble; "is that the name you gave to him?"

She flushed. "That was my name originally," she admitted. "I took on Olga because it sounded more classy. That bit puzzled me, because I never told him my name was Mary Ann, and he must have wormed it out of somebody."

"Now, tell me all about the facts of the case, Lady Purseyence," said I. "We have the man's side of the story, what is yours?"

She had met a 'gentlemanly' foreigner at a promenade concert, it appeared. He had sat by her side, had lent her a programme, and had spoken to her entertainingly and interestingly upon the music.

They had afterwards met, and learning that he was a musician—she did not explain exactly what kind of a musician he was, but I afterwards discovered that he played second violin in the orchestra of a Blackpool hotel—she had agreed to spend her summer holiday at Blackpool where he had an engagement. And that, she swore, was as far as the matter had gone. She admitted that she thought he was a distinguished nobleman, or at least a great artiste, who was giving a series of concerts at Blackpool, and when she discovered that, he was merely a plebeian hotel fiddler she left Blackpool in a hurry, lest her aristocratic friends should discover her acquaintance with so common a person.

"Now Lady Purseyence, you've got to be very frank with me," said I; "you'll swear to me that nothing else happened, that you did not—err—hold hands or anything of that sort."

"Good heavens, no," she exploded.

I stopped her with a wave of my hand. "You see, I must know all the facts."

"You know all the facts," she said tartly, "now what am I to do?"

"What is his name?" I asked her.

"Festier," she said, "Jules Festier."

"Do you know his London address?"

She shook her head.

"Have you seen him since?"

"No," she said.

"Well, leave the matter with me, Lady Purseyence," I said, "and I will do the very best I can for you."

Being rather slack at the time, I took the case into my own hands, and did not, as I ordinarily would have done, hand it over to my assistants. My first business was to inquire after Festier, and here I had many channels of information. One of my informants in Soho discovered a man who knew Festier, and to my amazement, this man gave Festier a very excellent character.

"A most respectable man," he said, "and a pretty good musician. He went back to France three months ago." I stared at him.

"Are you sure?" He was a man whose opinion I valued.

"Quite sure," he said emphatically.

"Has he a good record?" I asked.

"Excellent," he said. Then, after a moment's pause: "Wait a moment. There's a woman in this street, Madame Visconti, who knew his wife when she was alive and with whom he corresponds. Maybe she has heard from him."

I sat down in the little restaurant where the conversation had taken place, as my informant knew the proprietor of the restaurant, and presently he came back in triumph with a letter.

"By good luck," he said, "Festier wrote to Madame only this morning. Here is the letter."

The first thing I saw when I took the letter in my hand was that it was in absolutely different writing to that, which Lady Purseyence had received.

To confirm the certainty that the writers were different men there occurred by good fortune the following sentence in the middle of the letter:—

"I suppose you have not seen that kind lady whom I met at the concert. I often think about her goodness to me. You remember, dear friend, that she came to Blackpool to hear me play, but had to leave owing to the illness of her mother."

I made a mental note of this passage, and handed the letter back. That evening I telephoned to Lady Purseyence.

"What excuse did you give to Festier for returning to London from Blackpool?" I asked.

"I forget now," she said. "Oh, yes, I remember, I told him that my mother was ill."

"Do you mind if I come down to see you?"

"Do," she replied. "You will easily find my house. It is the biggest for miles around."

I smiled to myself.

Even the vulgarity of Lady Purseyence could not obliterate the good taste, which the late Sir George had shown in furnishing this wonderful house of his, and though her ladyship had added one or two articles of furniture to the beautiful drawing room, into which I was shown, articles, which made one shudder to look upon, so utterly out of harmony were they with the general furnishing, it was still a noble and tasteful apartment.

She was dressed for dinner when I arrived, and cane to me in a plum-coloured velvet, cut low.

"There were one or two questions I wanted to ask," I explained.

After a seven-course dinner, which bored me unutterably, and when the servants had gone, I began my cross-examination.

"I tell you what strikes me as curious, Lady Purseyence," I said, "and you mustn't be offended at anything I say. We're talking in confidence as man to man, so to speak."

"Straightforward dealing is my weakness," she said, "say what you like, young man".

She was flushed and in a more communicative mood than she had been on the afternoon of my interview. "Why did you go to the promenade concert?" I asked. "Are you a lover of music?"

"I like a rag," she said, "and I've got a mechanical piano that plays all the latest jazz tunes."

"Yes, I know," said I, "but I'm talking about music —real classical music. Do you like it?"

She laughed.

"I think it's muck," she said.

"Then you went out of curiosity?" I asked.

She laughed again.

"No. I didn't," she said. "I'll tell you the truth. I should have gone to sleep if I hadn't talked to that fellow. No, I'll tell you why I went."

She folded up her serviette, resolutely.

"There's a lot of women in this county who look down on me, a lot of cats, I ought to say, and them not better than they ought to be. They are always trying to show and put me in my place, and the worst of them is Mrs. Deston Power. Yes, I must admit she's pretty, but handsome is as handsome does, say I. Well, one day, we had a bazaar, and this Power woman, whose husband is in India and who's got nothing to do but gad around, started talking about the wonderful music of Froli. I think that was the man's name."

I nodded. I knew Antonio Froli by repute. He was what is known in police circles as a 'bad lad'. A brilliant musician, with a vicious temperament, he had recently been in trouble, and had seen his engagements cancelled because of certain incidents in his private life, which had come to light.

Lady Purseyence went on: "I said to myself: 'I'm going to learn something about music.' And up to London I went.

I went to hear this fellow Froli, but I spotted Mrs. Deston Power sitting in the front row, and I cleared out, though I needn't have done, for she hadn't any eyes for any but this long-haired Italian"

"There's another question I'd like to ask you, Lady Purseyence," said I. "Does any of your relations call you Mary Ann, any of your sisters?"

She shook her head.

"Nobody," she said. "I've got no relations in the world, thank God!"

She stopped and hesitated.

"Nobody?" I asked again.

"Well", she said after a pause. "I'll tell you the truth. It's a humiliating thing for a lady like me to admit, but these—she paused as though to eradicate a violent adjective—"these people around here, the Deston Powers and people of that kind, call me Mary Ann. That's my nickname," she said. "Pretty rotten, isn't it?"

"Very unkind," said I.

"They call me 'Mary Ann the Cook', 'The Duchess of Cuisine', and things like that, but I'll show 'em one of these days," she said grimly. "I tell you, Mr. What's-Yer-Name, the women round here are cats."

From that moment, I had in my mind the explanation of a difficulty. I went straight away back to town and saw Bob Fenning, of Scotland Yard. Bob is an old friend of mine. We have worked together unofficially on many, remarkable occasions, and Bob would always go out of his way to help me, as I would go out of my way to help him.

"What was this Froli case? I saw it in the papers some time ago," said I.

"Froli? You mean the Dago musician?"

I nodded.

"Well, it isn't a pleasant case, but he was charged with breaking a champagne bottle on the head of a waiter at the Star Restaurant," said Bob. "Behind that, of course, there

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