

THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER



VIII.—THE FATE OF THE "ARTEMIS."

BY THE BARONESS ORCZY.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER	Who explains the mystery to—	MRS. BOWDEN	Landlady at their lodgings at Portsmouth.
THE LADY JOURNALIST	... Who re-tells it to the ROYAL readers.	MR. CARLETON	Who made an assault on Captain Markham.
CAPTAIN MARKHAM, R.N.R.	A retired merchant captain.	SIR ARTHUR INGLEWOOD	His counsel.
MRS. MARKHAM His wife.	JANE MASON	Principal witness.
MR. PAULTON Her brother.	CAPTAIN JUTLAND	Of the <i>Artemis</i> .
JOHANN SCHMIDT A mysterious foreigner.	MESSRS. MILLS AND CO.	Gun manufacturers.

"WELL, I'm——!" was my inelegant mental comment upon the news in that morning's paper.

"So are most people," rejoined the man in the corner with that eerie way he had of reading my thoughts. "The *Artemis* has come home, having safely delivered her dangerous cargo, and Captain Jutland's explanations only serve to deepen the mystery."

"Then you admit there is one in this case?" I said.

"Only to the public. Not to me. But I do admit that the puzzle is a hard one. Do you remember the earlier details of the case? It was towards the end of 1903. Negotiations between Russia and Japan were just reaching a point of uncomfortable tension,

and the man in the street guessed that war in the Far East was imminent.

"Messrs. Mills and Co. had just completed an order for a number of their celebrated quick-firing guns for the Russian Government, and these—according to the terms of the contract—were to be delivered at Port Arthur on or about February 1st, 1904. Effectively then, on December 1st last, the *Artemis*, under the command of Captain Jutland, sailed from Goole, with her valuable cargo on board, and with orders to proceed along as fast as possible, in view of the probable outbreak of hostilities.

"Less than two hours after she had started, Messrs. Mills received intimation from the highest official quarters, that in all probability before the *Artemis* could reach Port Arthur,

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and in view of coming eventualities, the submarine mines would have been laid at the entrance to the harbour. A secret plan of the port was therefore sent to the firm for Captain Jutland's use, showing the only way through which he could possibly hope to navigate the *Artemis* safely into the harbour, and without which she would inevitably come in contact with one of those terrible engines of wholesale destruction, which have since worked such awful havoc in this war.

"But *there* was the trouble. This official intimation, together with the plan, reached Messrs. Mills just two hours too late; it is a way peculiar to many official intimations. Fortunately, however, the *Artemis* was to touch at Portsmouth on private business of the firm's, and, therefore, it only meant finding a trustworthy messenger to meet Captain Jutland there, and to hand him over that all-important plan.

"Of course, there was no time to be lost, but, above all, some one of extreme trustworthiness must be found for so important a mission. You must remember that the great European Power in question is beset by many foes in the shape of her own disaffected children, who desire her downfall even more keenly than does her Asiatic opponent. Also, in times like these, when every method is fair which gives one adversary an advantage over the other, we must remember that our plucky little allies of the Far East are past masters in that art which is politely known as secret intelligence.

"All this you see made it an absolute necessity to keep the mission to Captain Jutland a profound secret. I need not impress upon you the fact, I think, that it is not expedient for the plans of an important harbour to fall under prying eyes.

"Finally, the choice fell on Captain Markham,

R.N.R., lately of the mercantile marine, and at the time in the employ of our own Secret Intelligence Department, to which he has rendered frequent and valuable services. This choice was determined also mainly through the fact that Captain Markham's wife had relatives living in Portsmouth, and that, therefore, his journey thither could easily be supposed to have an unofficial and quite ordinary character—especially if he took his wife with him, which he did.

"Captain and Mrs. Markham left Waterloo for Portsmouth at ten minutes past twelve on Wednesday, December 2nd, the secret plan lying safely concealed at the bottom of Mrs. Markham's jewel-case.

"As the *Artemis* would not touch at Portsmouth until the following morning, Captain Markham thought it best not to spend the night at an hotel, but to go into rooms; his choice fell on a place, highly recommended by his wife's relations, and which was situated in a quiet street on the Southsea side of the town. There he and his wife stayed the night, pending the arrival of the *Artemis*.

"But at twelve o'clock on the following morning the police were hastily called in by Mrs. Bowden,



"Captain Markham had been found lying half-insensible, gagged and bound, on the floor of the bedroom."

the landlady of 49 Gastle Street, where the Markhams had been staying. Captain Markham had been found lying half-insensible, gagged and bound, on the floor of the sitting-room, his hands and feet tightly pinioned, and a woollen comforter wound closely round his mouth and neck; whilst Mrs. Markham's jewel-case, containing valuable jewellery and the secret plans of Port Arthur, had disappeared.'

CHAPTER II.

"Mind you," continued the man in the corner after he had assured himself of my undivided attention, "all these details were unknown to the public at first. I have merely co-ordinated them, and told them to you in the actual sequence in which they occurred, so that you may be able to understand the subsequent events.

"At the time, that is to say, on December 3rd, 1903, the evening papers only contained an account of what was then called 'the mysterious outrage at Gastle Street, Portsmouth.' A private gentleman was presumably assaulted and robbed in broad daylight, and inside a highly respectable house in a busy part of the city.

"Mrs. Bowden, the landlady, was, as you may imagine, most excited and indignant. Her house and herself had been grossly insulted by this abominable outrage, and she did her level best to throw what light she could on this mysterious occurrence.

"The story she told the police was indeed extraordinary, and as she repeated it to all her friends, and subsequently to one or two journalists, it roused public excitement to its highest pitch.

"What she related at great length to the detective in charge of the case, was briefly this:

"Captain and Mrs. Markham, it appears, arrived at 49 Gastle Street, on Wednesday afternoon, December 2nd, and Mrs. Bowden accommodated them with a sitting-room and bedroom, both on the ground floor. In the evening Mrs. Markham went out to dine with her brother, a Mr. Paulton, who is a well-known Portsmouth resident, but Captain Markham stayed in and had dinner alone in his sitting-room.

"According to Mrs. Bowden's version of the story, at about nine o'clock a stranger called to see Captain Markham. This stranger was obviously a foreigner, for he spoke broken English. Unfortunately, the hall at 49 Gastle Street, was very dark, and, more-

over, the foreigner was attired in a magnificent fur coat, the collar of which hid the lower part of his face. All Mrs. Bowden could see of him was that he was very tall, and wore gold-rimmed spectacles.

"'He was so very peremptory in his manner,' continued Mrs. Bowden, 'that I had to show him in at once. The Captain seemed surprised to see him, in fact, he looked decidedly annoyed I might say, but just as I was closing the door I heard the stranger laugh, and say quite pleasantly: "You gave me the slip, my friend, but you see I have found you out all right."'

"Mrs. Bowden, after the manner of her class, seems to have made vigorous efforts to hear what went on in the sitting-room after that," continued the man in the corner, "but she was not successful. Later on, however, the Captain rang and ordered whiskies and sodas. Both gentlemen were then sitting by the fire, looking quite friendly.

"'I took a look round the room,' explained the worthy landlady, 'and took particular notice that the jewel-case was on the table, with the lid open. Captain Markham, as soon as he saw me, closed it very quickly.'

"The stranger seems to have gone away again at about half-past ten, and subsequently Mrs. Markham came home, accompanied by her brother, Mr. Paulton. The next morning she went out at a quarter-past eleven o'clock, and about half-an-hour later the mysterious stranger called again.

"This time he pushed his way straight into the sitting-room; but the very next moment he uttered a cry of intense horror and astonishment, and rushed back into the hall, gesticulating wildly and shrieking: 'A robbery!—a murder!—I go for the police!' And before Mrs. Bowden could stop him, or even could realise what had occurred, he had dashed out of the house.

"'I called to Meggie,' continued Mrs. Bowden, 'I was so frightened, I didn't dare go into the parlour alone. But she was more frightened than I was, and we stood trembling in the hall waiting for the police. At last I began to have my suspicions, and I got Meggie to run out into the street and see if she could bring in a policeman.'

"When the police at last arrived upon the scene, they pushed open the sitting-room door, and there found Captain Markham in a most helpless condition, his hands tied behind his back, and himself half-choked by the scarf over his mouth. As soon as he recovered his breath, he explained that he had no idea who his assailant was; he was

standing with his back to the door, when he was suddenly dealt a blow on the head from behind, and he remembered nothing more.

"In the meantime Mrs. Markham had come home, and of course was horrified beyond measure at the outrage which had been committed. She declared that her jewel-case was in the sitting-room when she went out in the morning—a fact confirmed by Captain Markham himself.

"But here, at once, the police were seriously puzzled. Mrs. Bowden, of course, told her story of the foreigner—a story which was corroborated by her daughter, Meggie. Captain Markham, pressed by the police, and by his wife, admitted that a friend had visited him the evening before.

"'He is an old friend I met years ago abroad, who happened to be in Portsmouth yesterday, and quite accidentally caught sight of me as I drove up to this door, and naturally came in to see me,' was the captain's somewhat lame explanation.

"Nothing more was to be got out of him that day; he was still feeling very bewildered, he said, and certainly he looked very ill. Mrs. Markham then put the whole matter in the hands of the police.

"Captain Markham had given a description of 'the old friend he had met years ago abroad.' This description vaguely coincided with that given by Mrs. Bowden of the mysterious foreigner. But the Captain's replies to the cross-questionings of the detectives in charge of the case were always singularly reticent and lame. 'I had lost sight of him for nearly twenty years,' he explained, 'and do not know what his present abode and occupation might be. When I knew him years ago, he was a man of independent means, without a fixed abode, and a great traveller. I believe that he is a German by nationality, but I don't think that I ever knew this as a fact. His name was Johann Schmidt.'

"I may as well tell you here at once, that the mysterious foreigner managed to make good his escape. He was traced as far as the South-Western Railway Station, where he was



"He pushed his way straight into the sitting-room
 . . . gesticulating wildly and shrieking: 'A robbery!—a murder!—I go for the police!'"

seen to rush through the barrier just in time to catch the express up to town. At Waterloo he was lost sight of in the crowd.

"The police were keenly on the alert; no trace of the missing jewels had as yet been found. Then it was that, gradually, the story of the secret plan of Port Arthur reached the ears of the general public. Who first told it and to whom, it is difficult to conjecture, but you know what a way things of that sort have of leaking out.

"The secret of Captain Markham's mission had of necessity been known to several people, and a secret shared by many soon ceases to be one at all; anyway, within a week of the so-called 'Portsmouth outrage,' it began to be loudly whispered that the robbery of Mrs. Markham's jewels was only a mask that covered the deliberate theft of the plans of Port Arthur.

"And then the inevitable happened. Already Captain Markham's strange attitude had been severely commented upon, and now the public, backed by the crowd of amateur detectives who read penny novelettes and form conclusions of their own, had made up its mind that Captain Markham was a party to the theft—that he was either the tool or the accomplice of the mysterious foreigner, and that, in fact, he had been either bribed or terrorised into giving up the plan of Port Arthur to an enemy of the Russian government. The crime was all the more heinous as by this act of treachery a British ship, manned by a British crew, had been sent to certain destruction.

"What rendered the whole case doubly mysterious was that Messrs. Mills and Co. seemed to take the matter with complete indifference. They refused to be interviewed, or to give any information about the *Artemis* at all, and seemed callously willing to await events.

"The public was furious; the newspapers stormed; everyone felt that the *Artemis* should be stopped at any cost at her next port of call, and not allowed to continue her perilous journey.

"And yet the days went by; the public read with horror at Lloyd's that the *Artemis* had called at Malta, at Port Said, at Aden, and was now well on her way to the Far East. Feeling ran so high throughout England that, if the mysterious stranger had been discovered by the police, no protection from them would have saved him from being lynched.

"As for Captain Markham, public opinion reserved its final judgment. A cloud hung

over him, of that there was no doubt; many said openly that he had sold the secret plans of Port Arthur, either to the Japanese or to the Nihilists, either through fear or intimidation, if not through greed.

"Then the inevitable climax came: A certain Mr. Carleton constituted himself the spokesman of the general public; he met Captain Markham one day at one of the clubs in London. There were hot words between them. Mr. Carleton did not mince matters; he openly accused Captain Markham of that which public opinion had already whispered, and finally, completely losing his temper, he struck the Captain in the face, calling him every opprobrious name he could think of.

"But for the timely interference of friends there would have been murder committed then and there; as it was, Captain Markham was induced by his own friends to bring a criminal charge of slander and of assault against Mr. Carleton, as the only means of making the whole story public, and possibly vindicating his character."

CHAPTER III.

"A criminal action for slander and assault is always an interesting one," continued the man in the corner after a while, "as it always argues an unusual amount of personal animosity on the part of the plaintiff.

"In this case, of course, public interest was roused to its highest pitch. Practically, though Captain Markham was the prosecutor, he would stand before his fellow citizens after this action, either as an innocent man, or as one of the most dastardly scoundrels this nation has ever known.

"The case for the Captain was briefly stated by his counsel. For the defence Sir Arthur Inglewood on behalf of Mr. Carleton pleaded justification. With wonderful eloquence Sir Arthur related the whole story of the secret plan of Port Arthur confided to the honour of Captain Markham, and which involved the safety of the British ship and the lives of a whole British crew.

"The first witnesses called for the defence were Mrs. Bowden and her daughter, Meggie. Both related the story I have already told you. When they came to the point of having seen the jewel-case *open* on the table, during that interview between Captain Markham and the mysterious stranger, there was a regular murmur of indignation throughout the whole crowd, so much so, that the judge threatened to clear the court, for Sir Arthur argued

this to be a proof that Captain Markham had been a willing accomplice in the theft of the secret plans, and had merely played the comedy of being assaulted, bound, and gagged.

“But there was more to come.

“It appears that on the morning of December 2nd—that is to say, before going to Portsmouth—Captain Markham, directly after breakfast, and while his wife was up in her own room, received a message, which seemed greatly to disturb him. It was Jane Mason, the parlourmaid at the Markham’s town house, who told the story.

“A letter bearing no stamp had been dropped into the letter-box; she had taken it to her master who, on reading it, became greatly agitated; he tore up the letter, stuffed

had, no one doubted it now, some hold upon Captain Markham, and had by a process of blackmail induced him to send the *Artemis* to her doom.

“After that, according to a statement made by the head clerk of Messrs. Mills and Co., Captain Markham came round to the office, begging that some one else should be sent to meet Captain Jutland at Portsmouth. ‘This,’ explained the head clerk, who had been subpoenaed for the defence, ‘was quite impossible at this eleventh hour, and, in the absence of the heads of the firm, I had on Mr. Mills’ behalf to hold Captain Markham to his promise.’

“This closed the case for the defence, and, in view of the lateness of the hour, counsels’ speeches were reserved for the following day.



“‘I found a scrap of paper, which had fallen out of his pocket.’”

it into his pocket, and presently took up his hat and rushed out of the house.

“‘When the master was gone,’ continued Jane, ‘I found a scrap of paper, which had fallen out of his pocket.’

“This scrap of paper Jane Mason had carefully put away. She was a shrewd girl and scented some mystery. It was now produced in court, and the few fragmentary words were read out by Sir Arthur Inglewood, amidst boundless excitement:

“ . . . if you lend a hand . . .
 . . . Port Arthur safely . . .
 . . . hold my tongue . . . ’

“And at the end there were four letters in large capitals, ‘STOW.’

“In view of all the evidence taken, there was momentous significance to be attached to those few words, of which only the last four letters seemed mysterious, but these probably were part of the confederate’s signature, who

There was not a doubt in anybody’s mind that Captain Markham was guilty, and but for the presence of a large body of police, I assure you he would have been torn to pieces by the crowd.”

The man in the corner paused in his narrative and blinked at me over his bonerimmed spectacles, like some lean and frowzy tom-cat eager for a fight.

“Well?” I said eagerly.

“Well, surely you remember what happened the following day?” he replied with a dry chuckle. “Personally, I don’t think that there ever was quite so much sensation in any English court of law.

“It was crowded, of course, when counsel for the plaintiff rose to speak. He made, however, only a short statement, briefly and to the point; but this statement caused everyone to look at his neighbour, wondering if he were awake or dreaming.

"Counsel began by saying that Messrs. Mills and Co., in view of the obvious conspiracy that had existed against the *Artemis*, had decided, in conjunction with Captain Markham himself, to say nothing about the safety of the ship until she was in port; but now counsel had much pleasure in informing the court and public that the *Artemis* had safely arrived at Port Arthur, had landed her guns, and was on her way home again by now. A cablegram *via* St. Petersburg had been received by Messrs. Mills and Co. from Captain Jutland that very morning.

"That cablegram was read by counsel in court, and was received with loud and prolonged cheering which could not be suppressed.

"With heroic fortitude—explained counsel—Capt. Markham had borne the gross suspicions against his integrity, only hoping that news of the safety of the *Artemis* would reach England in time to allow him to vindicate his character. But until Captain Jutland was safe in port, he had sworn to hold his tongue, and to bear insult and violence, sooner than once more jeopardise the safety of the British ship by openly avowing that she carried the plans of the important port with her.

"Well, you know the rest. The parties, at the suggestion of the judge, arranged the case amicably, and, Captain Markham being fully satisfied, Mr. Carleton was nominally ordered to come up for trial when called upon.

"Captain Markham was the hero of the hour; but presently, after the first excitement had subsided, sensible people began to ponder. Everyone, of course, appreciated the fact that Messrs. Mills and Co., prompted by the highest authorities, had insisted on not jeopardising the safety of the *Artemis* by shouting on the housetops that she was carrying the plans of Port Arthur on board. Hostilities in the far East were on the point of breaking out, and I need not insist, I think, on the obvious fact that silence in such matters and at such a time was absolutely imperative.

"But what sensible people wanted to know was, what part had Captain Markham played in all this?

"In the evening of that memorable December 2nd, he was sitting amicably by the fire with the mysterious stranger, who was evidently blackmailing him, and with the jewel-case, which contained the plans of Port Arthur open between them. What, then, had caused Captain Markham to change his attitude? What dispelled the fear of the

stranger? Was he really assaulted? Was the jewel-case really stolen?

"Captain Jutland, of the *Artemis*, has explained that he was only on shore for one hour at Portsmouth on the memorable morning of December 3rd, namely, between 10.30 and 11.30 a.m. On landing at the Hard from his gig, he was met by a gentleman whom he did not know, and who, without a word of comment, handed him some papers, which proved to be plans of Port Arthur.

"Now at that very hour Captain Markham was lying helpless in his bedroom, and the question now is, who abstracted the plans from the jewel-case, and then mysteriously handed them to Captain Jutland? Why was it not done openly? Why?—why? and, above all by whom?"—

(*Yes, why? Close the ROYAL at this point, and try and puzzle out the problem for yourselves.*—Ed.)

CHAPTER IV.

"Indeed, why?" I retorted, for he had paused, and was peering at me through his bone-rimmed spectacles. "You must have a theory," I added, as I quietly handed him a beautiful bit of string across the table.

"Of course, I have a theory," he replied placidly; "nay, more, the only explanation of those mysterious events. But for this I must refer you to the scrap of paper found by Jane Mason, and containing the four fragmentary sentences which have puzzled everyone, and which Captain Markham always refused to explain.

"Do you remember," he went on, as he began feverishly to construct knot upon knot on that piece of string, "the wreck of the *Ridstow* some twenty years ago? She was a pleasure boat belonging to Mr. Eyres, the great millionaire financier, and was supposed to have been wrecked in the South Seas, with nearly all hands. Five of her crew, however, were picked up by H.M.S. *Pomona*, on a bit of rocky island to which they had managed to swim.

"I looked up the files of the newspapers relating to the rescue of these five shipwrecked mariners, who told a most pitiable tale of the loss of the yacht and their subsequent escape to, and sufferings on the island. Fire had broken out in the hull of the *Ridstow*, and all her crew were drowned, with the exception of three sailors, a Russian friend, or rather secretary, of Mr. Eyres, and a young petty officer named Markham.

"You see, the letters stow had given me the clue. Clearly Markham, on receiving the message in the morning of December 2nd, was frightened, and when we analyse the fragments of that message and try to reconstruct the missing fragments, do we not get something like this:

"*If you lend a hand in allowing the Artemis to reach Port Arthur safely, and to land her cargo there, I will no longer hold my tongue about the events which occurred on board the Ridstow.*"

"Clearly the mysterious stranger had a great hold over Captain Markham, for every scrap of evidence, if you think it over, points to his having been *frightened*. Did he not beg the clerk to find someone else to meet Captain Jutland in Portsmouth? He did not wish to *lend a hand* in allowing the *Artemis* to reach *Port Arthur safely*.

"We must, therefore, take it that on board the *Ridstow* some such tragedy was enacted as, alas! is not of unfrequent occurrence. The tragedy of a mutiny, a wholesale murder, the robbery of the rich financier, the burning of the yacht. Markham, then barely twenty, was no doubt an unwilling, perhaps passive accomplice; one can trace the hand of a cunning, daring Russian in the whole of this mysterious tragedy.

"Since then, Markham, through twenty years' faithful service of his country, had tried to redeem the passive crime of his early years. But then came the crisis: The cunning leader of that bygone tragedy no doubt kept a strong hand over his weaker accomplices.

"What happened to the other three we do not know, but we have seen how terrified Markham is of him, how he dare not resist him, and when the mysterious Russian—some Nihilist, no doubt, at war with his own Government—wishes to deal his country a terrible blow by possessing himself of the plan of her most important harbour, so that he might sell it to her enemies, Markham dare not say him nay.

"But mark what happens. Captain Markham terrorised, confronted with a past crime, threatened with exposure, is as wax in the hands of his unscrupulous tormentor. But beside him there is the saving presence of his wife."

"His wife?" I gasped.

"Yes, the woman! Did you think this was a crime without the inevitable woman! I sought her, and found her in Captain Markham's wife. To save her husband both from falling a victim to his implacable accomplice, and from committing another even

more heinous crime, she suggests the comedy which was so cleverly enacted in the morning of December 3rd.

"When the landlady and her daughter saw the jewel-case open on the table the evening before, Markham was playing the first act of the comedy invented by his wife. She had the plan safely in her own keeping by then. He pretended to agree to the Russian's demands, but showed him that he had not then the plan in his possession, promising, however, to deliver it up on the morrow.

"Then in the morning, Mrs. Markham helps to gag and strap her husband down; he pretends to lie unconscious, and she goes out, carrying the jewel-case. Her brother, Mr. Paulton, of course, helps them both; without him it would have been more difficult; as it is, he takes charge of the jewel-case, abstracts the plan and papers, and finally meets Captain Jutland at the Hard and hands him over the plan of Port Arthur.

"Thus through the wits of a clever and devoted woman, not only are the *Artemis* and her British crew saved, but Captain Markham is effectually rid of the blackmailer, who otherwise would have poisoned his life, and probably out of revenge at being foiled, have ruined his victim altogether.

"To my mind, that was the neatest thing in the whole plan. The general public believed that Captain Markham (who obviously at the instigation of his wife had confided in Messrs. Mills and Co.) held his tongue as to the safety of the *Artemis*, merely out of heroism, in order not to run her into any further danger. Now I maintain that this was the masterstroke of that clever woman's plan.

"By holding his tongue, by letting the public fear for the safety of the British crew and British ship, public feeling was stirred to such a pitch of excitement that the Russian now would never *dare* show himself. Not only—by denouncing Captain Markham now—would he never be even listened to for a moment, but, if he came forward at all, if he even showed himself, he would stand before the British public self-convicted as the man who had tried through the criminal process of blackmail to terrorise an Englishman into sending a British ship and thirty British sailors to certain annihilation.

"No; I think we may take it for granted that the Russian will not dare to show his face in England again."

And the funny creature was gone before I could say another word.