CHAPTER I

IN WHICH THINGS HAPPEN NEAR BARKING CREEK

The wind howled dismally round a house standing by itself almost on the shores of Barking Creek. It was the grey dusk of an early autumn day, and the occasional harsh cry of a sea-gull rising discordantly above the wind alone broke the silence of the flat, desolate waste.

The house seemed deserted. Every window was shuttered; the garden was uncared for and a mass of weeds; the gate leading on to the road, apparently feeling the need of a deficient top hinge, propped itself drunkenly on what once had been a flower-bed. A few gloomy trees swaying dismally in the wind surrounded the house and completed the picture—one that would have caused even the least imaginative of men to draw his coat a little tighter round him, and feel thankful that it was not his fate to live in such a place.

But then few people ever came near enough to the house to realise its sinister appearance. The road—it was little better than a cart track—which passed the gate, was out of the beaten way; only an occasional fisherman or farm labourer ever used it, and that generally

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by day when things assumed their proper proportion, and it was merely an empty house gradually falling to pieces through lack of attention. At night they avoided it if possible; folks did say that twelve years ago some prying explorer had found the bones of a skeleton lying on the floor in one of the upstairs rooms with a mildewed rope fixed to one of the beams in the ceiling. And then it had been empty for twenty years.

Even now when the wind lay in the east or north-east and the tide was setting in, there were those who said that you could see a light shining through the cracks in the shutters in that room upstairs, and that, should a man climb up and look in, he'd see no skeleton, but a body with purple face and staring eyes swinging gently to and fro, and tied by the neck to a beam with a rope which showed no trace of mildew. Ridiculous, of course; but then so many of these local superstitions are. Useful, too, in some cases; they afford a privacy from the prying attentions of local gossips far more cheaply and effectively than high walls and bolts and bars.

So, at any rate, one of the two men who were walking briskly along the rough track seemed to think.

"Admirable," he remarked, as he paused for a moment at the entrance of the weed-grown drive. "Quite admirable, my friend. A house situated as this one is, is an acquisition, and when it is haunted in addition it becomes a godsend."

He spoke English perfectly with a slight
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foreign accent, and his companion nodded abruptly.

"From what I heard about it I thought it would do," he answered. "Personally I think it's a damnable spot, but since you were so set against coming to London, I had to find somewhere in this neighbourhood."

The two men started to walk slowly up the drive. Branches dripping with moisture brushed across their faces, and involuntarily they both turned up the collars of their coats.

"I will explain my reasons in due course," said the first speaker shortly. "You may take it from me that they were good. What's that?"

He swung round with a little gasp, clutching his companion's arm.

"Nothing," cried the other irritably. For a moment or two they stood still, peering into the dark undergrowth. "What did you think it was?"

"I thought I heard a bush creaking as if—as if someone was moving," he said, relaxing his grip. "It must have been the wind, I suppose."

He still peered fearfully into the gloomy garden, until the other man dragged him roughly towards the house.

"Of course it was the wind," he muttered angrily. "For heaven's sake, Zaboleff, don't get the jumps. If you will insist on coming to an infernal place like this to transact a little perfectly normal business you must expect a few strange noises and sounds. Let's get indoors; the others should be here by
now. It oughtn’t to take more than an hour, and you can be on board again long before dawn.”

The man who had been addressed as Zaboleff ceased looking over his shoulder, and followed the other through a broken-down lattice-gate to the rear of the house. They paused in front of the back door, and on it the leader knocked three times in a peculiar way. It was obviously a prearranged signal, for almost at once stealthy steps could be heard coming along the passage inside. The door was cautiously pulled back a few inches, and a man peered out, only to throw it open wide with a faint sigh of relief.

“It’s you, Mr. Waldock, is it?” he muttered. “Glad you’ve got ’ere at last. This place is fair giving us all the ’ump.”

“Evening, Jim.” He stepped inside, followed by Zaboleff, and the door closed behind them. “Our friend’s boat was a little late. Is everyone here?”

“Yep,” answered the other. “All the six of us. And I reckons we’d like to get it over as soon as possible. Has he”—his voice sank to a hoarse undertone—“has he brought the money?”

“You’ll all hear in good time,” said Waldock curtly. “Which is the room?”

’Ere it is, guv’nor.” Jim flung open a door. “And you’ll ’ave to sit on the floor, as the chairs ain’t safe.”

Two candles guttered on a square table in the centre of the room, showing up the faces of the five men who sat on the floor, leaning
against the walls. Three of them were nondescript specimens of humanity of the type that may be seen by the thousand hurrying into the City by the early business trains. They were representative of the poorer type of clerk—the type which Woodbines its fingers to a brilliant orange; the type that screams insults at a football referee on Saturday afternoon. And yet to the close observer something more might be read on their faces: a greedy, hungry look, a shifty, untrustworthy look—the look of those who are jealous of everyone better placed than themselves, but who are incapable of trying to better their own position except by the relative method of dragging back their more fortunate acquaintances; the look of little men dissatisfied not so much with their own littleness as with the bigness of other people. A nasty-faced trio with that smattering of education which is the truly dangerous thing; and—three of Mr. Waldock's clerks.

The two others were Jews; a little flashily dressed, distinctly addicted to cheap jewellery. They were sitting apart from the other three, talking in low tones, but as the door opened their conversation ceased abruptly and they looked up at the new-comers with the keen, searching look of their race. Waldock they hardly glanced at; it was the stranger Zaboloff who riveted their attention. They took in every detail of the shrewd, foreign face—the olive skin; the dark, piercing eyes, the fine-pointed beard; they measured him up as a boxer measures up his opponent, or a business
man takes stock of the second party in a deal; then once again they conversed together in low tones which were barely above a whisper.

It was Jim who broke the silence—Flash Jim, to give him the full name to which he answered in the haunts he frequented.

"Wot abaht getting on with it, guv’nor?" he remarked with an attempt at a genial smile.

"This 'ere 'ouse ain’t wot I’d choose for a blooming 'oneymoon."

With an abrupt gesture Waldock silenced him and advanced to the table.

"This is Mr. Zaboleff, gentlemen," he said quietly. "We are a little late, I am afraid, but it was unavoidable. He will explain to you now the reason why you were asked to come here, and not meet at our usual rendezvous in Soho."

He stepped back a couple of paces and Zaboleff took his place. For a moment or two he glanced round at the faces turned expectantly towards him; then resting his two hands on the table in front of him, he leaned forward towards them.

"Gentlemen," he began, and the foreign accent seemed a little more pronounced, "I have asked you to come here to-night through my good friend, Mr. Waldock, because it has come to our ears—no matter how—that London is no longer a safe meeting-place. Two or three things have occurred lately the significance of which it is impossible to disregard."

"Wot sort of things?" interrupted Flash Jim harshly.

"I was about to tell you," remarked the
speaker suavely, and Flash Jim subsided, abashed. "Our chief, with whom I spent last evening, is seriously concerned about these things."

"You spent last night with the chief?" said Waldock, and his voice held a tremor of excitement, while the others leaned forward eagerly. "Is he, then, in Holland?"

"He was at six o'clock yesterday evening," answered Zaboleff with a faint smile. "Today—now—I know no more than you where he is."

"Who is he—this man we're always hearing about and never seeing?" demanded one of the three clerks aggressively.

"He is—the Chief," replied the other, while his eyes seemed to bore into the speaker's brain. "Just that—and no more. And that is quite enough for you." His glance travelled round the room, and his audience relaxed.

"By the way, is not that a chink in the shutter there?"

"All the safer," grunted Flash Jim. "Anyone passing will think the ghost is walking."

"Nevertheless, kindly cover it up," ordered Zaboleff, and one of the Jews rose and wedged his pocket-handkerchief into the crack. There was silence in the room while he did so, a silence broken only by the mournful hooting of an owl outside.

"Owls is the only things wot comes to this damned museum," said Flash Jim morosely. "Owls and blinkin' fools like us."

"Stow it, Jim," snarled Waldock furiously. "Anyone would think you wanted a nurse."
“Gentlemen—please.” Zaboleff held up a protesting hand. “We do not want to prolong matters, but one or two explanations are necessary. To return, then, to these things that have happened recently, and which necessitated a fresh rendezvous for this evening—one which our friend Mr. Waldock so obligingly found. Three messengers sent over during the last three weeks bearing instructions and—what is more important—money, have disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” echoed Waldock stupidly.

“Absolutely and completely. Money and all. Two more have been abominably ill-treated and had their money taken from them, but for some reason they were allowed to go free themselves. It is from them that we have obtained our information.”

“Blimey!” muttered Flash Jim; “is it the police?”

“It is not the police, which is what makes it so much more serious,” answered Zaboleff quietly, and Flash Jim breathed a sigh of relief. “It is easy to keep within the law, but if our information is correct we are up against a body of men who are not within the law themselves. A body of men who are absolutely unscrupulous and utterly ruthless; a body of men who appear to know our secret plans as well as we do ourselves. And the difficulty of it is, gentlemen, that though, legally speaking, on account of the absurd legislation in this country we may keep within the law ourselves, we are hardly in a position to appeal to the police for protection. Our
activities, though allowed officially, are hardly such as would appeal even to the English authorities. And on this occasion particularly that is the case. You may remember that the part I played in stirring up bloodshed at Cowdenheath a few months ago, under the name of MacTavish, caused me to be deported. So though our cause is legal—my presence in this country is not. Which was why to-night it was particularly essential that we should not be disturbed. Not only are we all up against this unknown gang of men, but I, in addition, am up against the police."

"Have you any information with regard to this gang?" It was the Jew who had closed the chink in the shutters speaking for the first time.

"None of any use—save that they are masked in black, and cloaked in long black cloaks." He paused a moment as if to collect his thoughts. "They are all armed, and Petrovitch—he was one of the men allowed to escape—was very insistent on one point. It concerned the leader of the gang, whom he affirmed was a man of the most gigantic physical strength; a giant powerful as two ordinary strong men. He said.... Ah! Mein Gott——!

His voice rose to a scream as he cowered back, while the others, with terror on their faces, rose hurriedly from their seats on the floor and huddled together in the corners of the room.

In the doorway stood a huge man covered from head to foot in black. In each hand he
held a revolver, with which he covered the
eight occupants during the second or two
which it took for half a dozen similarly dis-
guised men to file past him, and take up their
positions round the walls. And Waldock, a
little more educated than the remainder of his
friends, found himself thinking of old tales
of the Spanish Inquisition and the Doges of
Venice even as he huddled a little nearer to
the table.
“Stand by the table, all of you.”
It was the man at the door who spoke in
a curiously deep voice, and like sheep they
obeyed him—all save Flash Jim. For that
worthy, crook though he was, was not without
physical courage. The police he knew better
than to play the fool with, but these were not
the police.
“Wot the——” he snarled, and got no
farther. Something hit him behind the head,
a thousand stars danced before his eyes, and
with a strangled grunt he crashed forward on
his face.
For a moment or two there was silence,
and then once again the man at the door
spoke.
“Arrange the specimens in a row.”
In a second the seven remaining men were
marshalled in a line, while behind them stood
six motionless black figures. And then the
big man walked slowly down in front of them,
peering into each man’s face. He spoke no
word until he reached the end of the line, and
then, his inspection concluded, he stepped back
and leaned against the wall facing them.
"A nauseating collection," he remarked thoughtfully. "A loathsome brood. What are the three undersized and shivering insects on the right?"

"Those are three of my clerks," said Waldock with an assumption of angry bravado. "And I would like to know——"

"In good time you will," answered the deep voice. "Three of your clerks, are they; imbued with your rotten ideas, I suppose, and yearning to follow in father's footsteps? Have we anything particular against them?"

There was no answer from the masked men, and the leader made a sign. Instantly the three terrified clerks were seized from behind and brought up to him, where they stood trembling and shaking in every limb.

"Listen to me, you three little worms." With an effort they pulled themselves together; a ray of hope was dawning in their minds—perhaps they were going to be let off easy.

"My friends and I do not like you or your type. You meet in secret places and in your slimy minds you concoct foul schemes which, incredible though it may seem, have so far had more than a fair measure of success in this country. But your main idea is not the schemes, but the money you are paid to carry them out. This is your first and last warning. Another time you will be treated differently. Get out of here. And see you don't stop."

The door closed behind them and two of the masked men; there was the sound as of a boot being used with skill and strength, and
cries of pain; then the door reopened and the masked men returned.

"They have gone," announced one of them. "We helped them on their way."

"Good," said the leader. "Let us continue the inspection. What are these two Hebrews?"

A man from behind stepped forward and examined them slowly; then he came up to the leader and whispered in his ear.

"Is that so?" A new and terrible note had crept into the deep voice. "My friends and I do not like your trade, you swine. It is well that we have come provided with the necessary implement for such a case. Fetch the cat."

In silence one of the men left the room, and as his full meaning came home to the two Jews they flung themselves grovelling on the floor, screaming for mercy.

"Gag them."

The order came out sharp and clear, and in an instant the two writhing men were seized and gagged. Only their rolling eyes and trembling hands showed the terror they felt as they dragged themselves on their knees towards the impassive leader.

"The cat for cases of this sort is used legally," he remarked. "We merely anticipate the law."

With a fresh outburst of moans the two Jews watched the door open and the inexorable black figure come in, holding in his hand a short stick from which nine lashes hung down.
"Heavens!" gasped Waldock, starting forward. "What are you going to do?"

"Flog them to within an inch of their lives," said the deep voice. "It is the punishment for their method of livelihood. Five and six—take charge. After you have finished remove them in Number 3 car, and drop them in London."

Struggling impotently, the Jews were led away, and the leader passed on to the remaining two men.

"So, Zaboloff, you came after all. Unwise, surely, in view of the police?"

"Who are you?" muttered Zaboloff, his lips trembling.

"A specimen hunter," said the other suavely. "I am making a collection of people like you. The police of our country are unduly kind to your breed, although they would not have been kind to you to-night, Zaboloff, unless I had intervened. But I couldn't let them have you; you're such a very choice specimen. I don't think somehow that you've worked this little flying visit of yours very well. Of course I knew about it, but I must confess I was surprised when I found that the police did too."

"What do you mean?" demanded the other hoarsely.

"I mean that when we arrived here we found to our surprise that the police had forestalled us. Popular house, this, to-night."

"The police!" muttered Waldock dazedly.

"Even so—led by no less a personage than
Inspector McIver. They had completely surrounded the house, and necessitated a slight change in my plans."

"Where are they now?" cried Waldock.

"Ah! Where indeed? Let us trust at any rate in comfort."

"By heaven!" said Zaboloff, taking a step forward. "As I asked you before—who are you?"

"And as I told you before, Zaboloff, a collector of specimens. Some I keep; some I let go—as you have already seen."

"And what are you going to do with me?"

"Keep you. Up to date you are the cream of my collection."

"Are you working with the police?" said the other dazedly.

"Until to-night we have not clashed. Even to-night, well, I think we are working towards the same end. And do you know what that end is, Zaboloff?" The deep voice grew a little sterner. "It is the utter, final overthrow of you and all that you stand for. To achieve that object we shall show no mercy. Even as you are working in the dark—so are we. Already you are frightened; already we have proved that you fear the unknown more than you fear the police; already the first few tricks are ours. But you still hold the ace, Zaboloff—or shall we say the King of Trumps? And when we catch him you will cease to be the cream of my collection. This leader of yours—it was what Petrovitch told him, I suppose, that made him send you over."
"I refuse to say," said the other.
"You needn’t; it is obvious. And now that you are caught—he will come himself. Perhaps not at once—but he will come. And then.... But we waste time. The money, Zaboleff."

"I have no money," he snarled.
"You lie, Zaboleff. You lie clumsily. You have quite a lot of money brought over for Waldock so that he might carry on the good work after you had sailed to-morrow. Quick, please; time passes."

With a curse Zaboleff produced a small canvas bag and held it out. The other took it and glanced inside.

"I see," he said gravely. "Pearls and precious stones. Belonging once, I suppose, to a murdered gentlewoman whose only crime was that she, through no action of her own, was born in a different sphere to you. And, you reptile)—his voice rose a little—"you would do that here."

Zaboleff shrank back, and the other laughed contemptuously.

"Search him—and Waldock too."

Two men stepped forward quickly.

"Nothing more," they said after a while.

"Except this piece of paper."

There was a sudden movement on Zaboleff’s part—instantly suppressed, but not quite soon enough.

Injudicious," said the leader quietly.

"Memory is better. An address, I see—No. 5, Green Street, Hoxton. A salubrious neighbourhood, with which I am but in-
differently acquainted. Ah! I see my violent friend has recovered.” He glanced at Flash Jim, who was sitting up dazedly, rubbing the back of his head. “Number 4—the usual.”

There was a slight struggle, and Flash Jim lay back peacefully unconscious, while a faint smell of chloroform filled the room.

“And now I think we will go. A most successful evening.”

“What are you going to do with me, you scoundrel?” spluttered Waldock. “I warn you that I have influential friends, who—who will ask questions in—in Parliament if you do anything to me; who will go to Scotland Yard.”

“I can assure you, Mr. Waldock, that I will make it my personal business to see that their natural curiosity is gratified,” answered the leader suavely. “But for the present I fear the three filthy rags you edit will have to be content with the office boy as their guiding light. And I venture to think they will not suffer.”

He made a sudden sign, and before they realised what was happening the two men were caught from behind and gagged. The next instant they were rushed through the door, followed by Flash Jim. For a moment or two the eyes of the leader wandered round the now empty room taking in every detail: then he stepped forward and blew out the two candles. The door closed gently behind him, and a couple of minutes later two cars stole quietly away from the broken-down gate along
the cart track. It was just midnight; behind them the gloomy house stood up gaunt and forbidding against the darkness of the night sky. And it was not until the leading car turned carefully into the main road that anyone spoke.

"Deuced awkward, the police being there."

The big man who was driving grunted thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," he returned. "Perhaps not. Anyway, the more the merrier. Flash Jim all right?"

"Sleeping like a child," answered the other, peering into the body of the car.

For about ten miles they drove on in silence: then at a main cross-roads the car pulled up and the big man got out. The second car was just behind, and for a few moments there was a whispered conversation between him and the other driver. He glanced at Zaboleff and Waldock, who appeared to be peacefully sleeping on the back seat, and smiled grimly.

"Good night, old man. Report as usual."

"Right," answered the driver. "So long."

The second car swung right-handed and started northwards, while the leader stood watching the vanishing tail lamp. Then he returned to his own seat, and soon the first beginnings of outer London were reached. And it was as they reached Whitechapel that the leader spoke again with a note of suppressed excitement in his voice.

"We’re worrying ’em; we’re worrying ’em badly. Otherwise they’d never have sent
Zaboleff. He was too big a man to risk, considering the police."

"It’s the police that I am considering," said his companion.

The big man laughed.

"Leave that to me, old man; leave that entirely to me."