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# Anything Could Happen

By KURT BARLE

*A strange little story with a startling climax*

THE fog lay grayly in the shallow canyon of Payson Place. Now and then, caught by a sullen stray breath of the night wind, wraith-like fingers curled dismally upward about the snug windows of the substantial residences, only to vanish into the void above. The street lamps glowed dimly down on wet pavements, and the thoroughfare, save for a rare nightfarer groping through the vapor, or an occasional cab driving blindly into obscurity, was deserted.

Anything could happen. . . .

A bright fire crackling on a stolid hearth dispelled the bleakness of the evening in a room at 21 Payson Place. Obviously the quarters of a gentleman in comfortable circumstances, the furnishings of the softly lighted room were unpretentious, but in excellent taste. Bookcases, filled with rich and ponderous tomes, flanked the large windows looking out on the fog-ridden world, and countless trophies and mementoes told mute tales of former victories and by-gone travels. A fine old clock beat solemnly in a darkened corner.

It was growing late; scant seconds before, this ancient clock had tolled eleven times in tired, somber tones. Scarcely had the knell faded, when a bell somewhere in the remote confines of the brownstone building began an insistent tinkling.

A door slammed, its reverberations echoing dully through the quiet study. Voices were in the hall, and two men appeared in the massive oak doorway.

"Right in here, sir. I've had your den in readiness all evening."

The younger and taller of the two glanced about him appreciatively as he took off his mist-damped apparel. "It's good to be back, Clyde!"

"It's good to have you back again, sir." The bent servant's parchment-yellow features glowed with an expression almost paternal as his faded eyes worshipped his master, Richard Stores, adventurer and vagabond. "A year is a long time," he said.

A shadow crossed the returned wanderer's face. "Yes, it is. Damned long!" He moved to the window and stood there, staring out into the fog.

Clyde coughed politely. Richard Stores whirled about, his reverie broken.

"I'm sorry, Clyde. I won't need you any more tonight. One moment . . . Have the car ready at ten. I must confer with my dearly beloved uncle and the Empire's most esteemed statesman as soon as possible."

There was something bitter about his statement, something strangely acid, which caused the servant to stare in concern. He shot a quizzical gaze at his master, but Richard Stores' face was expressionless.

"Yes, sir—at ten." He moved to the door. "Shall I send Duke in? I believe he senses your return. I've had the very devil of a time with him tonight, if I may say so."

"Duke! Of course, send him in. For the moment, I'd forgotten. . . ."

"Good-night, sir."

RICHARD STORES moved back into the circle of light shed by a small lamp, packed his pipe, and dropped wearily into a chair. The yellow rays of the lamp and the intermittent flare of the fire sharply outlined features that were clean and hard, but unnaturally old; a countenance on which suffering had left an indelible imprint. Too, there was something else engraved about the gray-blue eyes and the bold cast of his jaw; something undefinable, perhaps a haunting, nameless fear.

He lighted his pipe, and the fine, powerful hand which held the lighter seemed to tremble.

Suddenly a joyful, full-throated bark disturbed the quiet. Through the door sprang a superb animal, a dog of uncertain breed but massive proportions. Stores laughed, and the dog leaped into the outstretched arms.

"Duke! Duke, you old devil!"

For a time the man played with him, talked to him, caressed the intelligent head. They were staunch friends, these two. Man and beast, they had unquestioningly shared privation and danger in the quest for high adventure.

But this latest, longest mission had required a change of method. Duke had been left behind.

The clock tolled the half-hour, and Stores' animation faded. He stroked the dog abstractedly. Occasionally, alien noises from the great metropolis resting dankly beneath the blanket of fog penetrated the fastness of the room, and then the everlasting, slow beats of the clock made the only break in the almost oppressive stillness. He closed his eyes, and smoke from his pipe drifted regretfully upward. . . .

"Clyde is right, Duke—a year is a long time. Long enough to make one afraid, horribly afraid." He spoke softly, mus-

ingly. "God, the utter loneliness! Man is a social animal, Duke. I've spent a year in hell; it might have been twenty. But I succeeded"—unconsciously his hand strayed to a coat pocket—"treaties, Duke . . . damnable things. Dynamite. . . ."

Dynamite! Worse than that: work of Satan. A year of his life torn from him for that. Tramping weeks, months alone under a burning sun through the slime and filth of the fever-infested lowlands. Following new trails; running down fresh clues; always new disappointments. Then, after nine months of grueling search, he had come on them. There had been a pitched battle; Richard Stores was no weakling. One man lay there, lower jaw almost severed by a slash of the machete, his split tongue lolling grotesquely amid yellow and broken teeth, and blood; but the packet was there.

Then the dread fever, and with it, madness. Delirium, visions. Sir Henry stood on the sandbar. "Burn them! Destroy! Fool!" But he had dug his clenched hands into the sand, and there had been grit and filth in his mouth. Then one night Sir Henry faded into the river.

Queer brown men regarded him; a witch-doctor gyrated about him, moaning incantations. Weeks later they had taken him to the coast.

A month's trip in an evil-smelling, sluggish freighter. One night he had rushed to the rail, the yellowed packet in his upraised hand, and abysmal fear and loathing in his heart. Jeering laughter had come from the forecastle, and something about his soul had snapped. He lowered the arm, determination oozing from him. Staggering to his quarters, he cursed himself, the heavy envelope like lead in his pocket.

And now he was home. . . .

". . . They'll plunge the world into an

annihilating war, Duke. Perhaps I should have destroyed them. But I'll keep my part of the bargain. I'm turning them over to Sir Henry in the morning. He and his scheming band of diplomats will have more than they bargained for, I'm afraid.

"Come what may, we'll forget this infernal business, Duke. We'll go to the continent. What about it, you handsome brute?"

The dog growled his willingness, and Stores laughed. Master and dog understood each other. He nodded, and both dozed under the lamp.

**H**E AWOKE with a start. There it was again; again the bell had rung. He looked at the clock, ticking eternally in the dim corner. After midnight. The fire had suddenly gone cold; nothing remained but a heap of dying embers. And Duke was acting queerly. Usually alert and aggressive, the dog was slinking back into a corner. Stores moved to the door.

Someone was coming down the hall.

Duke whined.

"Uncle!" Richard Stores stepped back in surprise.

Sir Henry made no reply, but moved quickly to the window. A slender, dynamic old man garbed in a disheveled topcoat on which moisture gleamed in sparkling abandon, he twined his emaciated hands together nervously, glanced swiftly at the clock, and hurried back to his nephew.

"The packet!" he said imperatively, and made an impatient gesture as Stores stared. "Don't stand there like a fool. Hurry!"

Richard Stores fumbled in his clothing, and gave the yellowed envelope to the old statesman. The latter pounced on it, tore it open, rapidly ran his bright eyes over

the contents. Then he sighed approvingly.

"It's all here, thank God. A match, quick! A match!"

The younger Stores handed his lighter over mechanically. Trembling hands seized it while Duke moaned in the darkness.

"You're mad!"

The flaming paper flashed in the ashtray, casting a ruddy glow over the glassy, pale face of the visitor. Blackened paper gleamed redly a moment, curling and twisting like an imp in torment; then the last spark died away.

Silence; silence broken only by the beat of the clock and the whine of the cowering Duke. Richard Stores looked mutely askance at the Empire's most publicized notable. The work of one hellish, precious year was ashes.

He noted a new expression on the old man's face—something ethereally serene and peaceful. And suddenly Richard Stores saw something else, something that made the back of his neck tingle.

A tuft of silver hair had strayed from under the black hat, and there was a stain on the strand—a dark, ominous, spreading stain. Even as his startled eyes beheld it, another scarlet drop fell to the floor.

"My God, you're hurt!" he exclaimed, and sprang forward.

The sudden, furious passion in the old man's voice seemed to root him in mid-air. "Go back! Don't touch me! Don't touch me, do you hear?" As suddenly as it had come his fury died, and he continued:

"Forgive me, Richard. I can't explain. There isn't time . . . time. . . ." The withered statesman seemed to ponder the word for a moment; then: "And I'm tired, so tired."

He talked on.

"I found out the significance—the full

significance of the packet only a few months ago. Since Wykoff confessed, Richard, I've led a tormented, tortured existence. We at the Home Office suspect many things, but this—dear Lord!—this was damnable. I sent you, Richard—I—and the blood of millions would have been on my head—and I'm an old man. I hoped and prayed you'd destroy the thing. There is no other way; Armstrong would have made war a certainty—he and the munitions trust.

"But now the deed is done. I can face my Maker calmly, Richard, quite calmly, with no regrets. Nothing else matters."

The aged head drooped. Wearily he pulled his collar closer about him and moved to the door, and Richard Stores was suddenly conscious of an abiding, tender reverence for the venerable helmsman who had so long guided the destiny of a nation. But then:

"Uncle," he cried. "Your forehead. Blood—"

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. I must go—" The voice faded.

Stores moved to forcibly prevent his aged relative's leaving, when an awful howl behind him made him twist about. Duke was poised with his forefeet on the window-ledge, his head lifted to the fog-obscured sky. He bayed again, a deep, mournful, haunting howl. Perspiration gathered on Stores' brow. Only once before had he heard Duke howl like that—when Stores' father had died some years before. Instinctively he turned to his visitor.

He was alone with Duke.

Frantically he rushed out into the hall. He called; the echoes mocked him. The street door hung on its hinges, and the fog was creeping in. For a moment he stood out on the clammy steps, fighting fruitlessly against the horrible fear that was slowly, surely insinuating itself about

his soul. Nobody. He turned back into the house, closed the door, and sought the sanctuary of his study. Helplessly he dropped into the chair, head in hands. Richard Stores, adventurer, vagabond, gentleman of leisure, was trembling.

The increasing chill in the room and the clock sounding the hour of one brought him back to clearer thinking.

Why had Sir Henry acted so queerly? His uncle was a bit of an eccentric, Stores knew that. His eccentricities had been the joke of the diplomatic staff for years. And he could understand his concern about the treaties.

But the blood on his forehead? Had he imagined that? Perhaps an illusion caused by the dim light? Well, there was one way of finding out.

He turned the switch and flooded the room. Going over to the spot where he had seen the drops fall, he surveyed the rug carefully. Thank God! no sign; no stain. His imagination again.

Relieved, he pulled out his tobacco and filled his pipe. Holding the lighter to the briar bowl, he paused. Something was wrong. Pondering, his eye fell on the ash-tray, and his face lost its color.

The tray in which he had seen the burning packet was empty. Not an iota, not a trace of charred paper.

"**H**ULLO, Richard," came a quiet voice from the doorway. "Pardon my walking in on you like this, but the latch was off, and I knew you were home."

The man in the chair looked up dazedly. It was Amos Wentworth. Wentworth, middle-aged and stout, had been a friend of the family for years, and served in a lawyer's capacity as manager of the huge estate.

"Sorry to bother you at this late hour, but my visit was necessary." He paused

uncertainly. "I'm afraid I have some bad news——"

The eyes of Richard Stores were fixed on the lawyer's face. Wentworth continued:

"The fog . . . your uncle's car . . . hit by the Express . . . dreadful. He is dead, Richard."

The man in the chair clenched his hands spasmodically. Then:

"When?"

"About eleven-thirty this evening, Richard. Death was instantaneous. A fractured skull. . . ."

Outside, the fog still lay grayly in the shallow canyon of Payson Place. . . .