

The Strange Case
by Edgar Wallace

IN the days of Mr. Reeder's youth, which were also the days when hansom cabs plied for hire and no gentleman went abroad without a nosegay in the lapel of his coat, he had been sent, in company with another young officer from Scotland Yard, to arrest a youthful inventor of Nottingham who earned more than a competence by methods which were displeasing to Scotland Yard. Not machines nor ingenious contrivances for saving labour did this young man invent--but stories. And they were not stories in the accepted sense of the word, for they were misstatements designed to extract money from the pockets of simple-minded men and women. Mr. Eiter employed no fewer than twenty-five aliases and as many addresses in the broadcasting of his fiction, and he was on the way to amassing a considerable fortune when a square-toed Nemesis took him by the arm and led him to the seat of justice. An unsympathetic judge sent Mr. Eiter to seven years' penal servitude, describing him as an unconscionable swindler and a menace to society--at which Willie Eiter smiled, for he had a skin beside which the elephant's was gossamer silk.

Mr. Reeder remembered the case chiefly because the prosecuting attorney, commenting upon the various disguises and subterfuges which the prisoner had adopted, remarked upon a peculiarity which was revealed in every part which the convict had played--his inability to spell 'able' which he invariably wrote as though he were naming the victim of Cain's envy.

'There is this identity to be discovered in every criminal, however ingenious he may be,' the advocate had said. 'Whatever his disguise, no matter how cleverly he dissociates one role or pose from another, there is a distinguishable weakness common to every character he affects, and especially is this observable in criminals who live by fraud and trickery.'

This Mr. Reeder remembered throughout his useful life. Few people knew that he had ever been associated with Scotland Yard. He himself evaded any question that was put to him on the subject. It was his amiable trait to pretend that he was the veriest amateur and that his success in the detection of wrongdoing was to be traced to his own evil mind that saw wrong very often where no wrong was.

He saw wrong in so many apparently innocent acts of man that it was well for his reputation that those who were acquainted with and pitied him because of his seeming inadequacy and unattractive appearance did not know what dark thoughts filled his mind.

There was a very pretty girl who lived in Brockley Road at a boarding-house. He did not like Miss Margaret Belman because she was pretty, but because she was sensible: two terms which are as a rule antagonistic. He liked her so well that he often travelled home on the cars with her, and they used to discuss the Prince of Wales, the Labour Government, the high cost of living, and other tender subjects with great animation. It was from Miss Belman that he learned about her fellow-boarder, Mrs. Carlin, and once he travelled back with her to Brockley--a frail, slim girl with experience in her face and the hint of tragedy in her fine eyes.

So it happened that he knew all about Mr. Harry Carlin long before Lord Sellington sent for him, for Mr. Reeder had the gift of evoking confidences by the suggestion rather than the expression of his sympathy.

She spoke of her husband without bitterness--but also without regret. She knew him--rather well, despite the shortness of their married life. She hinted once, and inadvertently, that there was a rich relation to whose wealth her husband would be heir if he were a normal man. Her son would, in due course, be the possessor of a great title--and penniless. She was at such pains to rectify her statement that Mr. Reeder, suspicious of peerages that come to Brockley, was assured of her sincerity, however great might be her error. Later he learned that the title was that borne by the Right Honourable the Earl of Sellington and Manford.

There came a slack time for the Public Prosecutor's office, when it seemed that sin had gone out of the world; and Mr. Reeder sat for a week on end in his little room, twiddling his thumbs or reading the advertisement columns of The Times, or drawing grotesque men upon his blotting-pad, varying these performances with the excursions he was in the habit of making to those parts of London which very few people choose for their recreation. He loved to poke about the slum areas which lie in the neighbourhood of the Great Surrey Docks; he was not averse from frequenting the north side of the river, again in the dock areas;

but when his chief asked him whether he spent much time at Limehouse, Mr. Reeder replied with a pathetic smile.

'No, sir,' he said gently, 'I read about such places--I find them infinitely more interesting in the pages of a--er--novel. Yes, there are Chinese there, and I suppose Chinese are romantic, but even they do not add romance to Limehouse, which is the most respectable and law-abiding corner of the East End.'

One morning the Public Prosecutor sent for his chief detective, and Mr. Reeder obeyed the summons with a light step and a pleasant sense of anticipation.

'Go over to the Foreign Office and have a talk with Lord Sellington,' said the Prosecutor. 'He is rather worried about a nephew of his. Harry Carlin. Do you know the name?'

Mr. Reeder shook his head; for the moment he did not associate the pale girl who typed for her living.

'He's a pretty bad lot,' explained the Prosecutor, 'and unfortunately he's Sellington's heir. I rather imagine the old gentleman wants you to confirm his view.'

'Dear me!' said Mr. Reeder, and stole forth.

Lord Sellington, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was a bachelor and an immensely rich man. He had been rich in 1912 when, in a panic due to certain legislation which he thought would affect him adversely as a great landowner, he sold his estates and invested the larger bulk of his fortune (against all expert advice) in American industrial stocks. The war had trebled his possessions. Heavy investments in oil lands had made him many times a millionaire. He was a philanthropist, gave liberally to institutions devoted to the care of young children; he was the founder of the Eastleigh Children's Home, and subscribed liberally to other similar institutions. A thin, rather sour-faced man, he glared up under his shaggy eyebrows as Mr. Reeder sidled apologetically into his room.

'So you're Reeder, eh?' he grumbled, and was evidently not very much

impressed by his visitor. 'Sit down, sit down,' he said testily, walked to the door as though he were not certain that Mr. Reeder had closed it, and came back and flopped into his chair on the other side of the table. 'I have sent for you in preference to notifying the police,' he said. 'Sir James speaks of you, Mr. Reeder, as a gentleman of discretion.'

Mr. Reeder bowed slightly, and there followed a long and awkward pause, which the Under-Secretary ended in an abrupt, irritable way.

'I have a nephew--Harry Carlin. Do you know him?'

'I know of him,' said Mr. Reeder truthfully; in his walk to the Foreign Office he had remembered the deserted wife.

'Then you know nothing good of him!' exploded his lordship. 'The man is a blackguard, a waster, a disgrace to the name he bears! If he were not my brother's son I would have him under lock and key to-night--the scoundrel! I have four bills in my possession--'

He stopped himself, pulled open a drawer savagely, took out a letter and slammed it on the table.

'Read that,' he snapped.

Mr. Reeder pulled his glasses a little farther up his nose (he always held them very tight when he was really using them) and perused the message. It was headed 'The Eastleigh Home for Children,' and was a brief request for five thousand pounds, which the writer said he would send for that evening, and was signed 'Arthur Lassard.'

'You know Lassard, of course?' said his lordship. 'He is the gentleman associated with me in my philanthropic work. Certain monies were due for land which we purchased adjoining the home. As you probably know, there are lawyers who never accept cheques for properties they sell on behalf of their clients, and I had the money ready and left it with my secretary, and one of Lassard's people was calling for it. That it was called for, I need hardly tell you,' said his lordship grimly. 'Whoever planned the coup planned it well. They knew I would be speaking in the House of Lords last night; they also knew that I had recently changed my secretary and had engaged a gentleman to whom most of my associates are

strangers. A bearded man came for the money at half-past six, produced a note from Mr. Lassard, and that was the end of the money, except that we have discovered that it was changed this morning into American bills. Of course, both letters were forged: Lassard never signed either, and made no demand whatever for the money, which was not needed for another week.'

'Did anybody know about this transaction?' asked Mr. Reeder.

His lordship nodded slowly.

'My nephew knew. He came to my house two days ago to borrow money. He has a small income from his late mother's estate, but insufficient to support him in his reckless extravagance. He admitted frankly to me that he had come back from Aix broke. How long he had been in London I am unable to tell you, but he was in my library when my secretary came in with the money which I had drawn from the bank in preparation for paying the bill when it became due. Very foolishly I explained why I had so much cash in the house and why I was unable to oblige him with the thousand pounds which he wanted to borrow,' he added dourly.

Mr. Reeder scratched his chin.

'What am I to do?' he asked.

'I want you to find Carlin,' Lord Sellington almost snarled. 'But most I want that money back--you understand, Reeder? You're to tell him that unless he repays--'

Mr. Reeder was gazing steadily at the cornice moulding.

'It almost sounds as if I am being asked to compound a felony, my lord,' he said respectfully. 'But I realise, in the peculiar circumstances, we must adopt peculiar methods. The black-bearded gentleman who called for the money would appear to have been'--he hesitated--'disguised?'

'Of course he was disguised,' said the other irritably.

'One reads of such things,' said Mr. Reeder with a sigh, 'but so seldom does the bearded stranger appear in real life! Will you be good enough

to tell me your nephew's address?'

Lord Sellington took a card from his pocket and threw it across the table. It fell to the floor, but he did not apologise. He was that kind of man.

'Jermyn Mansions,' said Mr. Reeder as he rose. 'I will see what can be done.'

Lord Sellington grunted something which might have been a tender farewell, but probably was not.

Jermyn Mansions is a very small, narrow-fronted building and, as Mr. Reeder knew--and he knew a great deal--was a block of residential flats, which were run by an ex-butler who was also the lessee of the establishment. By great good fortune, as he afterwards learned, Harry Carlin was at home, and in a few minutes the man from the Public Prosecutor's office was ushered into a shabby drawing-room that overlooked Jermyn Street.

A tall young man stood by the window, looking disconsolately into that narrow and lively thoroughfare, and turned as Mr. Reeder was announced. Thin-faced, narrow-headed, small-eyed, if he possessed any of the family traits and failings, the most marked was perhaps his too ready irritation.

Mr. Reeder saw, through an open door, a very untidy bedroom, caught a glimpse of a battered trunk covered with Continental labels.

'Well, what the devil do you want?' demanded Mr. Carlin. Yet, in spite of his tone, there was an undercurrent of disquiet which Mr. Reeder detected.

'May I sit down?' said the detective and, without waiting for an invitation, pulled a chair from the wall and sat down gingerly, for he knew the quality of lodging-house chairs.

His self-possession, the hint of authority he carried in his voice, increased Mr. Harry Carlin's uneasiness; and when Mr. Reeder plunged straight into the object of his visit, he saw the man go pale.

'It is a difficult subject to open,' said Mr. Reeder, carefully smoothing his knees, 'and when I find myself in that predicament I usually employ the plainest language.'

And plain language he employed with a vengeance. Half-way through Carlin sat down with a gasp.

'What--what!' he stammered. 'Does that old brute dare--! I thought you came about the bills--I mean--'

'I mean,' said Mr. Reeder carefully, 'that if you have had a little fun with your relative, I think that jest has gone far enough. Lord Sellington is prepared, on the money being refunded, to regard the whole thing as an over-elaborate practical joke on your part--'

'But I haven't touched his beastly money!' the young man almost screamed. 'I don't want his money--'

'On the contrary, sir,' said Reeder gently, 'you want it very badly. You left the Hotel Continental without paying your bill; you owe some six hundred pounds to various gentlemen from whom you borrowed that amount; there is a warrant out for you in France for passing cheques which are usually described by the vulgar as--er--"dud." Indeed'--again Mr. Reeder scratched his chin and looked thoughtfully out of the window--'indeed I know no gentleman in Jermyn Street who is so badly in need of money as your good self.'

Carlin would have stopped him, but the middle-aged man went on remorselessly.

'I have been for an hour in the Record Department of Scotland Yard, where your name is not unknown, Mr. Carlin. You left London rather hurriedly to avoid--er--proceedings of an unpleasant character. "Bills," I think you said? You are known to have been the associate of people with whom the police are a little better acquainted than they are with Mr. Carlin. You were also associated with a race-course fraud of a peculiarly unpleasant character. And amongst your minor delinquencies there is--er--a deserted young wife, at present engaged in a City office as typist, and a small boy for whom you have never provided.'

Carlin licked his dry lips.

'Is that all?' he asked, with an attempt at a sneer, though his voice shook and his trembling hands betrayed his agitation.

Reeder nodded.

'Well, I'll tell you something. I want to do the right thing by my wife. I admit I haven't played square with her, but I've never had the money to play square. That old devil has always been rolling in it, curse him! I'm the only relation he has, and what has he done? Left every bean to these damned children's homes of his! If somebody has caught him for five thousand I'm glad! I shouldn't have the nerve to do it myself, but I'm glad if they did--whoever they may be. Left every penny to a lot of squalling, sticky-faced brats, and not a bean to me!'

Mr. Reeder let him rave on without interruption, until at last, almost exhausted by his effort, he dropped down into a deep chair and glared at his visitor.

'Tell him that,' he said breathlessly; 'tell him that!'

Mr. Reeder made time to call at the little office in Portugal Street wherein was housed the head-quarters of Lord Sellington's various philanthropic enterprises. Mr. Arthur Lassard had evidently been in communication with his noble patron, for no sooner did Reeder give his name than he was ushered into the plainly furnished room where the superintendent sat.

It was not unnatural that Lord Sellington should have as his assistant in the good work so famous an organiser as Mr. Arthur Lassard. Mr. Lassard's activities in the philanthropic world were many. A broad-shouldered man with a jolly red face and a bald head, he had survived all the attacks which come the way of men engaged in charitable work, and was not particularly impressed by a recent visit he had had from Harry Carlin.

'I don't wish to be unkind,' he said, 'but our friend called here on such a lame excuse that I can't help feeling that his real object was to

secure a sheet of my stationery. I did, in fact, leave him in the room for a few minutes, and he had the opportunity to purloin the paper if he desired.'

'What was his excuse?' asked Mr. Reeder, and the other shrugged.

'He wanted money. At first he was civil and asked me to persuade his uncle; then he grew abusive, said that I was conspiring to rob him--I and my "infernial charities"!

He chuckled, but grew grave again.

'The situation is mysterious to me,' he said. 'Evidently Carlin has committed some crime against his lordship, for he is terrified of him!'

'You think Mr. Carlin forged your name and secured the money?'

The superintendent spread out his arms in despair.

'Who else can I suspect?' he asked.

Mr. Reeder took the forged letter from his pocket and read it again.

'I've just been on the phone to his lordship,' Mr. Lassard went on. 'He is waiting, of course, to hear your report, and if you have failed to make this young man confess his guilt, Lord Sellington intends seeing his nephew tonight and making an appeal to him. I can hardly believe that Mr. Carlin could have done this wicked thing, though the circumstances seem very suspicious. Have you seen him, Mr. Reeder?'

'I have seen him,' said Mr. Reeder shortly. 'Oh, yes, I have seen him!'

Mr. Arthur Lassard was scrutinising his face as though he were trying to read the conclusion which the detective had reached, but Mr. Reeder's face was notoriously expressionless.

He offered a limp hand and went back to the Under-Secretary's house. The interview was short and on the whole disagreeable.

'I never dreamt he would confess to you,' said Lord Sellington with

ill-disguised contempt. 'Harry needs somebody to frighten him, and, my God! I'm the man to do it! I'm seeing him to-night.'

A fit of coughing stopped him and he gulped savagely from a little medicine bottle that stood on his desk.

'I'll see him to-night,' he gasped, 'and I'll tell him what I intend doing! I've spared him hitherto because of his relationship and because he inherits the title. But I'm through. Every cent I have goes to charity. I'm good for twenty years yet, but every penny--'

He stopped. He was a man who never disguised his emotion, and Mr. Reeder, who understood men, saw the struggle that was going on in Sellington's mind.

'He says he hasn't had a chance. I may have treated him unfairly--we shall see.' He waved the detective from his office as though he were dismissing a strange dog that had intruded upon his privacy, and Mr. Reeder went out reluctantly, for he had something to tell his lordship.

It was peculiar to him that, in his more secretive moments, he sought the privacy of his old-fashioned study in Brockley Road. For two hours he sat at his desk calling a succession of numbers--and curiously enough, the gentlemen to whom he spoke were bookmakers. Most of them he knew. In the days when he was the greatest expert in the world on forged currency notes, he had been brought into contact with a class which is often the innocent medium by which the forger distributed his handicraft--and more often the instrument of his detection.

It was a Friday, a day on which most of the principals were in their offices till a late hour. At eight o'clock he finished, wrote a note and, phoning for a messenger, sent his letter on its fateful errand.

He spent the rest of the evening musing on past experiences and in refreshing his memory from the thin scrap-books which filled two shelves in his study.

What happened elsewhere that evening can best be told in the plain language of the witness-box. Lord Sellington had gone home after his interview with Mr. Reeder suffering from a feverish cold, and was

disposed, according to the evidence of his secretary, to put off the interview which he had arranged with his nephew. A telephone message had been sent through to Mr. Carlin's hotel, but he was out. Until nine o'clock his lordship was busy with the affairs of his numerous charities, Mr. Lassard being in attendance. Lord Sellington was working in a small study which opened from his bedroom.

At a quarter-past nine Carlin arrived and was shown upstairs by the butler, who subsequently stated that he heard voices raised in anger. Mr. Carlin came downstairs and was shown out as the clock struck half-past nine, and a few minutes later the bell rang for Lord Sellington's valet, who went up to assist his master to bed.

At half-past seven the next morning, the valet, who slept in an adjoining apartment, went into his master's room to take him a cup of tea. He found his employer lying face downward on the floor; he was dead, and had been dead for some hours. There was no sign of wounds, and at first glance it looked as though this man of sixty had collapsed in the night. But there were circumstances which pointed to some unusual happening. In Lord Sellington's bedroom was a small steel wall-safe, and the first thing the valet noticed was that this was open, papers were lying on the floor, and that in the grate was a heap of paper which, except for one corner, was entirely burnt.

The valet telephoned immediately for the doctor and for the police, and from that moment the case went out of Mr. Reeder's able hands.

Later that morning he reported briefly to his superior the result of his inquiries.

'Murder, I am afraid,' he said sadly. 'The Home Office pathologist is perfectly certain that it is a case of aconitine poisoning. The paper in the hearth has been photographed, and there is no doubt whatever that the burnt document is the will by which Lord Sellington left all his property to various charitable institutions.'

He paused here.

'Well?' asked his chief, 'what does that mean?'

Mr. Reeder coughed.

'It means that if this will cannot be proved, and I doubt whether it can, his lordship died intestate. The property goes with the title--'

'To Carlin?' asked the startled Prosecutor.

Mr. Reeder nodded.

'There were other things burnt; four small oblong slips of paper, which had evidently been fastened together by a pin. These are quite indecipherable.' He sighed again. The Public Prosecutor looked up.

'You haven't mentioned the letter that arrived by district messenger after Lord Sellington had retired for the night.'

Mr. Reeder rubbed his chin.

'No, I didn't mention that,' he said reluctantly.

'Has it been found?'

Mr. Reeder hesitated.

'I don't know. I rather think that it has not been,' he said.

'Would it throw any light upon the crime, do you think?'

Mr. Reeder scratched his chin with some sign of embarrassment.

'I should think it might,' he said. 'Will you excuse me, sir? Inspector Salter is waiting for me.' And he was out of the room before the Prosecutor could frame any further inquiry.

Inspector Salter was striding impatiently up and down the little room when Mr. Reeder came back. They left the building together. The car that was waiting for them brought them to Jermyn Street in a few minutes. Outside the flat three plain-clothes men were waiting, evidently for the arrival of their chief, and the Inspector passed into the building, followed closely by Mr. Reeder. They were half-way up the stairs when

Reeder asked:

'Does Carlin know you?'

'He ought to,' was the grim reply. 'I did my best to get him penal servitude before he skipped from England.'

'Humph!' said Mr. Reeder. 'I'm sorry he knows you.'

'Why?' The Inspector stopped on the stairs to ask the question.

'Because he saw us getting out of the cab. I caught sight of his face, and--'

He stopped suddenly. The sound of a shot thundered through the house, and in another second the Inspector was racing up the stairs two at a time and had burst into the suite which Carlin occupied.

A glimpse of the prostrate figure told them they were too late. The Inspector bent over the dead man.

'That has saved the country the cost of a murder trial,' he said.

'I think not,' said Mr. Reeder gently, and explained his reasons.

Half an hour later, as Mr. Lassard walked out of his office, a detective tapped him on the shoulder.

'Your name is Eiter,' he said, 'and I want you for murder.'

'It was a very simple case really, sir,' explained Mr. Reeder to his chief. 'Eiter, of course, was known to me personally, but I remembered especially that he could not spell the word "able," and I recognised this peculiarity in our friend the moment I saw the letter which he wrote to his patron asking for the money. It was Eiter himself who drew the five thousand pounds; of that I am convinced. The man is, and always has been, an inveterate gambler, and I did not have to make many inquiries before I discovered that he was owing a large sum of money and that one bookmaker had threatened to bring him before Tattersall's Committee unless he paid. That would have meant the end of Mr. Lassard,

the philanthropic custodian of children. Which, by the way, was always Eiter's role. He ran bogus charitable societies--it is extraordinarily easy to find dupes who are willing to subscribe for philanthropic objects. Many years ago, when I was a young man, I was instrumental in getting him seven years. I'd lost sight of him since then until I saw the letter he sent to Lord Sellington. Unfortunately for him, one line ran: "I shall be glad if you are able to let my messenger have the money"--and he spelt "able" in the Eiter way. I called on him and made sure. And then I wrote to his lordship, who apparently did not open the letter till late that night.

'Eiter had called on him earlier in the evening and had had a long talk with him. I only surmise that Lord Sellington had expressed a doubt as to whether he ought to leave his nephew penniless, scoundrel though he was; and Eiter was terrified that his scheme for getting possession of the old man's money was in danger of failing. Moreover, my appearance in the case had scared him. He decided to kill Lord Sellington that night, took aconitine with him to the house and introduced it into the medicine, a bottle of which always stood on Sellington's desk. Whether the old man destroyed the will which disinherited his nephew before he discovered he had been poisoned, or whether he did it after, we shall never know. When I had satisfied myself that Lassard was Eiter, I sent a letter by special messenger to Stratford Place--'

'That was the letter delivered by special messenger?'

Mr. Reeder nodded.

'It is possible that Sellington was already under the influence of the drug when he burnt the will, and burnt too the four bills which Carlin had forged and which the old man had held over his head as a threat. Carlin may have known his uncle was dead; he certainly recognised the Inspector when he stepped out of the cab, and, thinking he was to be arrested for forgery, shot himself.'

Mr. Reeder pursed his lips and his melancholy face grew longer.

'I wish I had never known Mrs. Carlin--my acquaintance with her introduces that element of coincidence which is permissible in stories but is so distressing in actual life. It shakes one's confidence in the

logic of things.'