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By Peter Benedict CHAPTER VI Peter Unfolds His Scheme

When Peggy was brought into the visiting-room to meet someone whom she had expected to come from home, and found herself facing Peter Milne down the short surface of the table, her first feeling was of acute disappointment. She said: "Oh, it's you!" in no flattering tone, as she sat down and leaned her elbows upon the table. She looked tired, but actively thoughtful, and most certainly not downed yet.

"Yes," said Peter meekly, "I'm sorry," meekly, but he had an unruly twinkle in his eye. For the first time Peggy found herself looking at him with real interest. He had one of those nondescript faces which escape remembrance very easily; and yet it was a good enough face in its way, alive and strong, with very keen blue eyes which changed expression and colour very rapidly with every change of the light on them.

He had found this quality of evading recognition very useful upon occasion. He was, now that he faced her neat small person squarely across the table, much bigger, or at least taller, than she had thought him; but the same deliberate insignificance religiously observed in his clothes diminished him so that only this direct comparison could give her his measure. She wondered why he was there, and at the thought her hopes rose again; for there must be a reason. She waited to hear it.

"You remember me, said Peter unnecessarily. "I was in Superintendent Barker's office. I was the man who laughed."

"I haven't forgotten," said Peggy.

At your remark about the police, I have every right to laugh at the police, after working in close conjunction with them for five years."

"Are you a policeman?" asked Peggy bluntly, doubling her fists under her square chin. "Is this one underhanded way of trying to get something more out of me? Because if it is, I'm sorry; you're wasting your time."

Peter smiled. His smile could be quite grave behind the philosophical lightness which was its surface expression.

"No," he said gently, "no, I'm not a policeman. Suppose I begin by telling you exactly who and what I am, and then you'll understand better what I want from you."

"Want from me—?" said Peggy startled.

"Yes, just that. You see, I'm merely a very small legal luminary who happened to find his real forte before he made a fool of himself with the ordinary court cases. I don't often practise law in the courts. My law is practised in dark corners of most of the cities of Europe, and a great many in Asia, too. Only a few officials in the world know it, but I am engaged in holding strings between all the international departments which are trying to stamp out the dope trade. International law is my study, and I am what you might call a liaison officer among the lot of 'em—one of many, be it said, and one of the least of many. Shadowy people, we are. I like the shadowy side of the business best. I don't confine my activities to an office."

"Well, during the past year there has sprung up in this country, and I might say all over this country, one of the biggest, and the most cunning, dope rings last years. Most dope rings last a short time and go out; they let things slip; and too, they have very keen rivals. Now these people seem to have obviated most of these difficulties for we know nothing whatever about them, except one little phrase which we got hold of by sheer luck from a blotting paper in a raided club—quite an innocent club, too, by the time we got there."

"So you see, we admit we're up against it. They are never shot of goods, yet we never intercept one single shipment. We have no information. But we've got to get hold of them. It may surprise you to know that if all drug supplies were cut off, we should have ten times more trouble than we have now, and the biggest scandal which has ever hit the world. The lid would blow off London. But we are employed to keep it within some sort of bounds, and it's straying; it's straying badly. Now, you see," he said, looking at her gravely, "I've trusted you completely. I do trust you. I believe every word of your story. Will you help me to smash this racket?"

Peggy, who had listened to this recital wide-eyed, sat back with a gasp. "Help you? Me? But how can I? To begin with, I'm suspect myself, and in prison into the bargain. How on earth—"

"I'm coming to that. You are a very valuable person, Miss Calder. You are the only person who knows what any member of the ring looks like. You've seen two of them. The man—and the girl—"

"Yes," she cried, her eyes beginning to sparkle.

"Would you recognize them again? If they were very much changed? If you saw them, say, in evening dress, and the woman minus what may have been a wig?"

(To be continued)

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