

AUGUST HOLIDAY

by

T. C. Hudson

It was August 1931, and the industrial depression that started circa 1929 still had several years further to deepen before myopic Westminster, realised Hitler actually posed a threat to this country, and implemented a rearmament programme commensurate with the seriousness of the situation for which it was to blame.

On the Isle of Wight, the shipbuilding and engineering firm whose hammerhead crane dominated the Medina Estuary had for eighteen months received no orders of consequence to follow that for three ships which was nearing its completion; so it came as no surprise to Graham Wexley when the packet containing his wages was accompanied by a the pink slip informing him that due to a lack of new orders his services as a draughtsman would no longer be required.. Unmarried and the last man to be transferred from the machine-shop to the engine drawing office it was his lot to be the first to go.

Although he knew the queue of men 'on the dole' in Cowes already had grown to an unprecedented length, enjoying robust health and possessing the self-confidence natural to a man of twenty two, he was not unduly worried; his confidence bolstered by the fact that living with his parents who ran a sub-post cum grocery, he would suffer no hardship while unemployed other than having to curtail his motor-cycling mileage.

"How do you feel about my going to Exeter tomorrow?" Graham looked enquiringly at his parents who, as was customary on Fridays, were taking advantage of a slack period in the shop to have their tea before customers with the money their husbands allowed them out of their earnings came in to buy what was necessary for the following week. A skilled mechanic's £3 a week and a labourer's thirty shillings left little, if anything, for luxuries.

"If you've got the money, go and enjoy yourself." His mother handed him a cup of tea,

"I'll second that," agreed his father. "It might be your last chance for some time to come, Even if your firm were to receive a big order next week, it could be a month or two before they start taking men back".

"Mr Burman said he'd take me back as soon as possible. Since I discovered that error in an assembly drawing he himself had checked, I've been his blue-eyed boy."

"Then he should've sacked the one who made the mistake," said Alice Wexley.

"He couldn't do that, Ma. It was his wife's nephew."

John Wexley grunted. "It's always been either consanguinity or the secret handshake. Never right, but nothing's going to alter it."

"As far as money's concerned, I'm all right. I've been putting by a bit every week to cover this holiday. I imagine thirty pounds'll be enough for the train fare, what I give Elsie, and the char-a-banc trips I want to make, and still give me a bit to spare..

"Elsie'll be disappointed if you don't go." His mother refilled the teapot. "In her letter she said she'd arranged for Margery to sleep next-door, so you could have her room; that is if Fred's not doing 'double home' next week.

"By the way, how old is Margery? I've not seen her since she was so high."

"Between seventeen and eighteen, but don't get any romantic ideas. She's practically engaged to a chap who works in the same office."

"Don't worry. When I marry it'll be to someone with pots of money. Not an engine-driver's daughter."

His father grinned. "That's the right spirit, my boy. I rather fancy the idea of a top-hat wedding".

"I hope my head won't ache before that happens," said his wife.

The following morning, viewed from the upper deck of the *Princess Helena*, one of the Southampton and Isle of Wight Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's veteran paddle-steamers, aboard which Graham was travelling to Southampton, the Solent gave no indication anything was amiss with British industry. In preparation for Cowes Week which would start the following Monday, extending from Old Castle Point westward to Egypt Light a miscellaneous fleet of yachts, including some of the most luxurious steam ones afloat, rode at their moorings, their hulls marbled by the play of sunlight on water, and their polished brass and chromium plating glinting like heliographs. With a guardian battleship in the offing, her three masts, two bell-topped funnels, and black hull decorated with gilded scrolls, the Royal Yacht, *Victoria and Albert* (built for Queen Victoria in the Eighteen Eighties) formed a focal point for clicking Kodaks.

Disembarking at the Royal Pier, having time to spare, he elected to walk to the Southampton West Station, wondering as he passed Pirelli's factory if they, too, had been compelled to reduce their workforce. Then, determined to banish all thought of unemployment for a week, he quickened his pace to arrive at the station in time to see one of the Southern Railway Company's superb *King Arthur* Class engines bring his train to a hissing and squealing stop beside the crowded platform.

Fully aware as he followed the railway official who was conducting him to his first class reserved seat that in his heather mixture plus fours, with chequered stockings setting off his muscular calves, and dark tan brogues he was as well dressed as any other male within sight, it occurred to him that his usual sixpenny tip would be inappropriate in the circumstances, so he took a two shilling piece from his waistcoat pocket and unobtrusively slipped it into the man's hand.

Apart from his window seat, the carriage already was full. Experience having warned him of the problems encountered by burdening oneself with heavy luggage (his mother when visiting her sister in Kent always travelled as if she were emigrating) he had restricted his to one easily handled case with a light raincoat strapped outside.

Pleased with himself for having had the foresight to book a seat, he watched the concourse, among which harassed *patres familias* endeavoured to control excited children who were afraid the train might leave them behind. An Indian woman in flowing yellow and green moved with typical decorum, reminding him of a line from a poem about which his English master had enthused. By Lovelace? No, Herrick – 'Then, then methinks how sweetly flows the liquefaction of her clothes'. He smiled inwardly at the recollection of the master saying that even the philistines it was his misfortune to teach must surely appreciate the beauty of that flight of fancy. With equal composure two nuns passed the window followed by a couple of naval ratings probably returning from leave to Devonport. Heading for the guard's van a troop of boy scouts carried camping equipment. On their heels two men were about to deposit their lightweight cycles.

While still an apprentice Graham had been a founder member of the Vectis Roads Cycling Club for which, since buying his B.S.A. motor-cycle, his enthusiasm had waned. Cycling on the hilly Isle of Wight was hard work.

When at last the *Atlantic Coast Express* began to chuff its way out of the station, he sat in anticipation of enjoying the scenery of rural Hampshire which, radiant in the sunshine was an artist's paradise. That among the verdant foliage with a chromatic range from deepest veridian (almost black in the shade) to a tint not far from pale yellow, sin and sorrow should exist as abundantly as elsewhere would have seemed incredible to any of the holiday makers in the passing train had they given it a moment's thought. That the carriage in which Graham sat was not untainted would, to him, have been more unbelievable.

Much later, after a stop at Salisbury, when the landscape lost some of its interest he turned from the window surreptitiously to study his fellow passengers. Seated next to him was a woman in an expensive looking well tailored beige jacket and skirt and salmon pink blouse. Covering most of her hair was one of the brimless hats that had become fashionable several years earlier. Asleep on her lap sat a girl of, he guessed, not yet two, clasping a teddy bear. In the third position was buxom older woman wearing a summer frock exuberantly patterned with crimson and blue flowers of a type unknown in the horticultural world. In contrast to her

neighbour's 'cloche' hat, hers was wide brimmed with a bunch of cherries attached to one side of the crown. Adding yet more colour, at the end, engrossed in a copy of *Wisden*, a man wearing a red and dark green striped blazer with an impressive insignia on the breast pocket and white flannels sat with an unlit pipe in his mouth. At the same end on the opposite side a middle-aged man in a dark grey suit, a clerical collar, and a rather large trilby-type hat affected by some members of the Cloth was accompanied by a soberly dressed woman of the same age. Beside her a severe faced woman was reading a novel., something foreign looking about her costume giving Graham the impression she was not English. This was confirmed when infrequently she spoke to a young woman occupying the window seat – a strikingly beautiful female who reminded Graham of Pushkin's wife, Natalya whose portrait he had seen in a book borrowed from a lending library by his mother, the only difference being that, instead of the Russian's curls, her medium brown hair was cut short to resemble that of a mediaeval page. Surmounting this becoming coiffure was a small insubstantial and purely decorative piece of millinery that indicated its provenance to be one of the famous international fashion houses. Had Graham had a woman's eye for details, he would have noticed she was wearing a summer weight, short sleeved, frock with a not too revealing square cut neck line which, above the waist, was tastefully embroidered with precisely the right colours to set off the pale grey material of which it was made. From time to time a glimpse of a gold propelling pencil told him she was solving the *Daily Mirror's* crossword puzzle.

Awakened by the sound of a passing train, the child by his side directed at him that blue-eyed look of angelic innocence only the very young possess, and holding her teddy bear at arms' length said what he interpreted as 'Teddy'. "A very nice one." He smiled and hoped she would turn her attention elsewhere. Although when children made friendly overtures he tried to act in an appropriate manner, he never felt at ease with them. For one thing, he could not bring himself to speak at their level, and to hear 'baby' talk made him squirm. Gurgling with pleasure, the infant extended the bear's paw for him to shake. Doing as requested, he said, "How do you do, Mr Bear?" which delighted her so much she wanted an encore.

"No, Elaine," said her mother, drawing her back into the position from which she had slipped. "You must not annoy the gentleman." Turning to Graham, she apologised. "She's so friendly." she added. Her voice, as he had expected it would be, was definitely upper class.

"That's quite all right" Then as an afterthought he asked if she would like to change places to enable the child to look out of the window.

"How extremely kind of you. It would keep her amused, if you are quite sure you don't mind."

"My pleasure." At that moment, as if by accident, his *vis-à-vis* dropped her paper, and when Graham retrieved it she told him he might keep it, as her knowledge of characters in English literature was too inadequate to complete the puzzle.

Having thanked her, he was about to turn away when a fleeting change in her expression intrigued him —a variation that vanished so suddenly he could not accurately define it, but thought it might have expressed pleading.

His first impulse was to put the newspaper in his pocket, for although the *Daily Mirror* was a family paper, usually illustrated with photographs of high society enjoying itself, or of royalty doing its duty, and not given to sensationalism, in all probability it would have news concerning the growing crisis which was something he wished for the next seven days to forget.. However, realising politeness required that he show an interest in it he changed his mind . The format was as usual, with more space covered by pictures than by words, plus a very popular strip cartoon for children featuring a penguin, dog, and rabbit, and a comparatively easy crossword puzzle with blank squares outnumbering those the woman he thought of as 'Natalya' had filled in, About to turn the page without paying too much attention to what she had written, he suddenly realised why the paper was given to him. Letters in twelve of the squares read 'PLEASE HELP ME'. Evidently taking advantage of the fact her companion could not read English the young woman had used this method to solicit his assistance. Looking at the clues, he saw not one referred to literary characters. But what was it she wanted him to do? Was the woman by her side a source of danger? Was it a joke? If so, what was the point? Was she mentally disturbed and travelling with a nurse? Recalling that almost imperceptible appeal in her eyes, he was convinced the S.O.S. was genuine. In which case he had on his hands what Sherlock Holmes

would have called 'a three pipe problem'. Were any of the other occupants of the carriage involved?

In his pocket, for light reading during the holiday he had *The Mind of Mr J. G. Reader*, a novel by the current mass producer of crime stories, Edgar Wallace. What, he wondered, would that fertile mind make of those apparently innocent people? To begin with, Elaine's mother could be eliminated, so, he thought, could the stout woman beside whom he now sat, although one could not be sure. The man next to the corridor, ostensibly on his way to play cricket (a long bag under the seat, had he been able to see it, would have confirmed this) was he with his pipe, blazer, and *Wisden*, just a shade too English? A clerical collar, too, would be a good disguise. If they were what they appeared to be, could he get one of them into the corridor to discuss what action, if any, should be taken? Under the pretence of reading the paper, he racked his brain for a solution.

Having taken enough time turning the pages without reading a word, he folded the paper and slipped it into his pocket. Then, producing his novel, he employed the same method to conceal his preoccupation with the problem. Were those three words the only message she intended to convey? To find out, he would have again to look at the paper. To do that in the carriage might easily arouse suspicion. It was at that juncture a new angle occurred to him – the layout of the message. Why. With so many empty squares, had she distanced on word from another, writing 'HELP' vertically instead of horizontally? There seemed to be only one answer – numbers!

Leaving his book on the seat, he made his way to the lavatory where he discovered 'PLEASE' was one across, 'HELP' eight down, and 'ME' seven across. 187. A telephone number? If so at what exchange? Assuming her destination to be Exeter, he doubted if any number would need only three digits. A dead end. Not unduly disappointed for he had known it was a long shot, he was about to return the paper to his pocket when a dot at the top and to the right of the figure seven, hitherto unnoticed, caught his eye. Would she know that in mathematics it was a device for indicating a recurring decimal fraction, and in this instance had used it to tell him the number should be repeated? He knew it was highly improbable, but with nothing else to help him, he thought it should not be discarded. If 1877 were a telephone number to whom would it connect him? He looked at his watch. They had not yet reached Crewkerne, so he had plenty of time for further cogitation.

When he re-entered the carriage, the seat formerly occupied by 'Natalya' was vacant. With difficulty preventing astonishment bordering on shock from showing, he sat and once more gave the impression of reading. This was an eventuality he had not anticipated. For the time being all he could do was wait to see if she came back. Judging by their complacency, none of the others were aware of anything extraordinary having happened during his absence. The cricketer was still absorbing Test Match statistics, the parson was reading *The Church Times*, and the grim-faced foreigner's novel had not been put aside. That the move was made while he was out of the way seemed significant. Had they waited for that opportunity and pushed her out of the window? His mind would not accept the possibility of Elaine's mother being a party to such a crime.

Had he been an older man imbued with the cynicism born of experience of the universal duplicity of many of his contemporaries, he might have felt inclined to bow out and let matters take their course without his interference: but being young with his imagination nurtured on the exploits of fictitious supermen – Cutcliffe Hyne's Captain Kettle, Captain McNeile's Bulldog Drummond, Sabatini's Bardelys the Magnificent – whom, while admitting his inferiority, he felt compelled to emulate, he knew he had to do something if it were only to inform the guard.

Curbing his impatience, he waited twenty minutes. Then, 'Natalya' having not come back, he again left his seat and headed for the guard's-van.

As he passed the long line of carriages, he could see very few vacant seats, and before reaching the end he had to push his way past one or two who had given up trying to find them. Scrutinising each interior as he passed to convince himself none contained the missing woman, it was not until he arrived at the last he saw her sitting with a man whose vigorous gesticulations suggested foreign origin.

So Natalya had been rescued from whatever danger threatened her by a fellow countryman. – a sight which, instead of pleasing, disappointed him; engendering the feeling that when a very

young boy he experienced when a glittering bauble from his Christmas tree, in his hands lost its magic,

Unable to stop lest he attract attention, he was just going to retrace his steps when something indefinable about 'Natalya's expression and lack of animation struck him as being inconsistent with her situation, the realisation of which left him in a dilemma. With nothing more substantial than a hunch to report, there was every possibility he would be making a fool of himself, so with a final quick glance at the pair he went back to his seat. Common-sense told him he well might be permitting imagination to create a situation in harmony with his desire.. After all, it was but a momentary glimpse which registered that expressionless face – the face one would have expected to show joy and relief at being rescued from peril – always, of course, assuming danger had existed.

"Lady gone," Elaine, who had been dozing, in her own language commented on the obvious.

"Yes dear, a gentleman came for her," said her mother, causing Graham to wonder if she heard what was said, and if she understood it. Which he thought improbable. French, yes. He guessed she would speak that fluently, but not Russian, Polish, or one of the Balkan tongues he thought might be 'Natalya's. An assumption with nothing to support it, he realised. What the other woman's reaction had been to the third party's arrival was another question to which he would like to know the answer. Was it prearranged or something unexpected?,

Still wrestling with the problem behind the unread criminal catching activities of the wily Mr Reader, he eventually decided not to consult the guard, but on arrival at Exeter to put the matter into the hands of the police, not failing to pass on his theory regarding the telephone number . With the crossword evidence to support his decision, he felt justified in still thinking there was something that required an investigation., If he were wrong, no harm would have been done; whereas if a crime was being perpetrated there might be time to frustrate those responsible.

Detraining at Queen's Street Station, he hurried via Paul's Street to the police station in Waterbeer Street where his story received interested attention, notes taken concerning his theory about the pencilled message, and assurance given the affair would be investigated without delay

Thankful not to have been ridiculed, he made his way to Fore Street, and boarded a tram which took him past the Guildhall, the superb Tudor façade of the Exeter Express and Echo's premises, and the Guildhall of the Weavers, Tuckers, and Shearmen, down the steep declivity to the end of Cowick Street from where his father's cousin's home in a quiet residential district was within easy walking distance.

"My, how you've grown!" Elsie Hexworthy, a personable woman nearing forty-five, kissed his cheek and led him into her spotlessly clean kitchen. "Did 'ee have a good journey?"

"Rather an eventful one, actually." He put his case on a chair.

"Sit down while I put the kettle on for a cup of tea, and then you can tell me all about it."

Seated facing him beside the empty fireplace, with only an occasional exclamation of astonishment, she listened while he repeated what he had told the police until, as the piece de resistance, he produced a copy of the paper bought to replace the one kept by the police, opened it and spread it on the table.

"I just don't know how 'ee could've done it. I'd never have thought of making a telephone number out of that. But then, your mother always said you were clever."

"A bit of luck, really. It simply came into my head all of a sudden."

"I just can't wait for Fred to come home. He's on the Teign Valley run this week. He always said you can't trust foreigners."

Knowing Frederick Hexworthy's knowledge of foreigners was limited to what he had learnt of the French during the 1914-18 war, Graham did not attach too much weight to his opinion of them. "I wonder if the police'll find out anything?" he said. "They've not much to go on."

"A good thing the maid was able to write English." Elsie went into the scullery to fill the teapot which, engrossed in Graham's story, she had forgotten.

"I dare say she was educated in this country – at Roedean or another of those high class schools probably. I'm inclined to think I shall hear no more about it. The police, however, did say they would keep me informed of any developments."

It was the following Tuesday, when the trio returned from the popular Lorna Doone char-a-banc tour which, for seven shillings and sixpence a head, had taken them to Malmsmead where they ate the sandwiches Elsie had prepared while seated on a stone bridge over a shallow trout stream, and through the Valley of Rocks, that a note on the doormat requested that Graham go to the police station at his earliest convenience.

"Eight o'clock. Too late tonight. I'll go early tomorrow morning." As he spoke he wondered if impatience to learn the news would keep him awake.

"'Tis to be hoped you'm not in trouble." Fred's pessimism was a legacy from the useless slaughter witnessed on the Somme.

His wife's rebuttal lapsed into the dialect spoken by her parents. "If her was, they'd have come to vetch 'en.

At nine the following morning, closeted with Inspector Hammett, Graham was apprised of his involvement in a plot as sinister as any to be found in current crime fiction. His 'Natalya' (in reality Fedorevna Chavadetska) was the daughter of a scion of a noble family who from 1910 to 1918 was the Czeckovian Ambassador at the Court of Kaiser Wilhelm the Second – Czeckovia being a small Balkan enclave which predatory neighbours, taking advantage of its powerful allies being at war, had invaded and divided among themselves. Fedorevna, herself, bore a title equivalent to an Italian contessa.

After the Armistice two high-ranking British officers posing as friends and protectors, had stolen the family's jewels worth a king's ransom. Appeals to the British Government had been ineffective. Besides having problems of its own, obviously it was reluctant to publicise the perfidy of two of the military hierarchy.

Fedorevna's parents were now dead, but her brother having reached adulthood several months earlier, travelling with false papers, had come to England to avenge the wrong done to his family.

Recently his sister had received a letter stating he thought he had located the criminals, but being younger than she had no distinct memory of them. He therefore wanted her to come over positively to identify them. His ring was enclosed to convince her the letter was genuine. Travelling with her former governess who had been retained as a trusted secretary, certain lapsus linguae made by the latter, plus an overheard telephone call had aroused hers suspicion that the letter was a forgery, and that she was walking into a trap. Constantly watched by her companion, she had been unable to seek assistance until as a last resort she had thought of using the crossword puzzle.

Using the telephone number, Inspector Hammett explained, they had found an isolated house on the banks of the River Exe not far from Countess Weir which, by coincidence, already was under surveillance; the Customs and Excise officials having suspected its tenant might be engaged in smuggling. Let for the season to a man named Dubrodski, so far the watchers had seen nothing incriminating, but the comings and goings of an ex-naval motor torpedo boat owned by Dubrodski were scrupulously recorded as a prelude to more aggressive action.

Enquiries made after Graham's visit to the station had provided the information that an angler, on Saturday afternoon, had seen a car deposit a man and two women at the door of Weir Lodge. The younger woman seemed to need help when walking.

Knowing that with so little factual evidence he was risking the issue becoming a mare's nest, Hammett had applied for and, with difficulty obtained, a search warrant. Then taking with him two constables who remained out of sight while he rang the bell and said that acting on information received he had come to enquire about a young woman who might have entered the house against her will. This had been vehemently denied by Dubrodski who said the person in question was ill. Refused permission to see her (a doctor's order being given as a reason) the Inspector showed his warrant, and supported by his men entered the house, The advent of two other men resulted in a scuffle with one constable receiving a knife wound. In a locked room both women, bound and gagged, were lying on a bed. Fedorevna's brother, betrayed by his unskilled detective work, was at the bottom of the English Channel. His sister, assumed to know as much as he, and the secretary whose usefulness was over, were to suffer the same fate. The

man on the train, posing as a messenger from her brother, had lured her from her seat and in the corridor injected a drug that sapped her will to resist. He, Dubrodski, the secretary and the other man, were now in custody.

"Thanks to you," said Hammet. From his desk he removed a brown envelope. "The young lady when I interviewed her in her hotel asked me to give you this."

The envelope contained a letter headed The Royal Clarence Hotel and a green velvet covered box about two and a half inches square with a gold crown in the centre. In it lay the most lovely watch Graham had ever seen – a gold half hunter, beautifully chased and inlaid with jewels. An inscription inside was in a language neither man could translate. Hammett whistled. "That watch must be worth thousands!"

With unsteady hands Graham opened the letter which ran:
Dear Mr Wexley,

I am employing this all too unsatisfactory mode of communication to convey to you my profound gratitude for saving my life. I had hoped to invite you to this hotel in order to thank you personally. Unfortunately by the time you receive this I shall be on my way to London to meet a barrister, after which, as advised by the police who fear I may be in danger from the two main criminals who are still at large, I embark for the Continent.

As a token of my gratitude and esteem I am enclosing my most cherished possession – a watch, given to my father by his friend the Tzar Nicholas the Second of Russia.

If current circumstances were as those which obtained before the war, you would I assure you be awarded my country's highest honour – the equivalent to your Order of the Garter. If at any time I can be of service to you or your family, do not hesitate to contact me at the address given below.

Yours most gratefully,

Fedorevna Chavadetska.

Back on the Isle of Wight, Graham gave his parents Elsie's affectionate message and Fred's kind regards, and assured them he had had a really wonderful time.

"But I suppose you never met your millionairess," joked his father.

"As a matter of fact, Dad, I did," Graham replied nonchalantly. From his pocket he took the gift for which Elsie had given him a soft leather drawstring bag "She gave me this."