

# Gallows of Chance

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

## The Story Thus Far:

**KIDNAPPED** by four masked men (following a visit to Lord Edward Keynesham and his sister, Lady Louise, in Norfolk County), Sir Humphrey Rossiter, England's Home Secretary, is spirited away to a mysterious house. There, placed on a gallows, he is told that, unless he will grant a reprieve to Cecil Brandt, a condemned murderer, he will himself be hanged. Adamant at first, he finally yields: not, however, until he is told that Brandt's wife has new evidence to offer.

Released, Sir Humphrey hears Katherine Brandt's story, prepares to order the reprieve—and faints. Hours later he comes to. *Cecil Brandt has been hanged!* . . . Scotland Yard goes into action. Almost immediately, Sir Humphrey and Katherine Brandt both disappear! . . . Working alone, Detective Park finds various principals in the strange drama, including the man who had built the gallows for three Americans—and no other a personage than *Lord Edward Keynesham!*

Sir Humphrey shows up. He declines to discuss his absence. To Scotland Yard's amazement, he will not permit detectives to guard him. . . . A lawyer calls on him, notifies him that he and Katherine Brandt are the executors of Cecil Brandt's estate. It appears that part of the estate (that part in America) is accounted for; there is, however, no record of the dead man's vast holdings in England. . . . Another visitor arrives: Mr. Richard Van Pleyden, a suave young American. A few words by way of preliminary; then—"Sir Humphrey, I am working for the syndicate. We want that key!"

Genuinely mystified, Sir Humphrey cannot produce "that key." Whereupon, Van Pleyden leaps at his throat, nearly throttles him. As he does so, Inspector Park (who has been promoted), gun in hand, steps into the room. And Van Pleyden leaps through a window, dashes away. At this point, Parkins, Sir Humphrey's butler, produces an envelope. It had, he explains, been delivered by a prison guard the day before Brandt had been hanged. It contains a medium-size key, bearing the inscription "*Grimmett 1431*."

Keynsam and Sir Humphrey meet at a club, have a confidential talk. Keynsam confesses that he and Cecil Brandt had been partners in some "great secret enterprise." Then—"I want to save your life, Humphrey. I want you to refuse that executorship."

Sir Humphrey eyes his old friend coldly. "That," he says, "I will never do."

## XII

**T**HAT afternoon the Home Secretary spoke with dry but convincing eloquence for an hour and three quarters upon the new Housing Bill. He also accorded a couple of interviews in his official apartment, and left the House just before six. He drove first to his solicitor's, whom he put in touch with Messrs. Debenham, Twiss & Debenham, with instructions to investigate the estate of the late Cecil Brandt, and to announce his probable acceptance of the executorship. He then drove to Angels' Court, Chelsea, where Katherine Brandt was once more safely established. He found her waiting to receive him.

"You get later and later," she complained, as she gave him her hand.

"My dear Katherine," he explained, "these meteoric disappearances for which you are, I fancy, a little more responsible than I am, interfere somewhat with my regular activities. I wonder how long we are going to be left alone now."

"But are we being left alone?" she demanded. "What's this about a burglary? It's in all the papers."

She handed him a news sheet, and he glanced through the headlines:

**BURGLARY AT THE HOME SECRETARY'S HOUSE IN CHESTOW SQUARE—  
NOTHING OF VALUE STOLEN**

"The headlines tell most of the story," he observed, sinking into the easy-chair which she had drawn over to

the fire. "The most important sentence is the last—'Nothing of value was stolen.'"

"Was it those mysterious enemies of yours again, do you think?" she asked anxiously.

**F**OR the moment," he confided, "we can only indulge in speculation. One of the most engaging young men I ever met in my life called to see me yesterday afternoon and, after making courteous conversation for a few moments, suddenly demanded, on behalf of himself and an unknown array of friends, that I yield up a key!"

"Humphrey!" she cried. "My dear Humphrey!"

"At any rate we know now what they're after," he remarked.

"A key?"

"Precisely. I failed altogether to convince that obstinate young man that I possessed no key which was not my own property. He called my attention to the fact that during my absence from home my belongings had already been ransacked in search of this article, as yours had been, and in kindly but forcible fashion gave me to understand that unless I parted with it I was likely to come to a violent and untimely end."

"But didn't you tell him that you know nothing about any key?"

"I did. He disbelieved me entirely. He showed signs, in fact, of laying violent hands upon me, when suddenly the detective whom I had forbidden Scotland Yard to place anywhere near the premises, made a melodramatic appearance and stopped the whole business."

"Did he arrest the young man?" Katherine asked eagerly.

"No such luck," Sir

Humphrey groaned.

"He went off through the window with a great crashing of glass, and so far as I know they've not caught him yet. . . . Now comes the humorous part of the whole thing."

"Humorous! What a brick you are, dear!"

She rose to her feet and paced the room restlessly, coming to a standstill finally by the side of his chair.

"Well, I appeal to you—isn't it humorous?" he demanded. "The world's finest burglars have opened my safe and desk with the utmost ease. They have ransacked my belongings in every quarter of the house. They have done the same to your trunks and your belongings, and all the time—where was the key?"

"You don't mean to say that you know?" she cried.

"The key," he confided, "was, during the whole of the time, in a soiled square envelope which I rather fancy had 'Wandsworth Prison' on the back of it, slipped

behind a dish on a shelf in my butler's pantry!"

She let go his shoulder, which her fingers had been gripping, and stood away from him. The light faded from her face. There was fear in her eyes.

"Then we have it after all," she faltered.

"You have not," he replied. "I have. I can't blame Parkins. It was left by a messenger at the door in the ordinary way on the evening after the Wandsworth affair. Parkins looked upon it, and I don't blame him, as being of no particular consequence, and he pushed the envelope on the shelf of the dresser, meaning to bring it out with the evening batch of letters. It was the day I was taken ill, so you can imagine that in the confusion he forgot all about it."

"But you have it now?" she persisted, still with that light of fear in her eyes. He smiled reassuringly.

"It is in my official safe," he told her, "in my official room in the House of Commons. No admittance to burglars. We can therefore deliberate about it."

"What I want to know," she cried passionately, "is—who are these men—people of consequence they must be—who are holding this rod of terror over our heads? What is it the key of? Does it belong to me or does it not? Did it belong honestly to Cecil or did it not? Do these men want to steal or have they a claim on it? How are we to get at the truth, Humphrey?"

**SIR HUMPHREY** glanced toward the sideboard, a perfect little Queen Anne affair with twin curved sides.

"It would assist my deliberations," he confided, "if you were to remember that it is half past six."



He snatched at an evening paper and read rapidly for a few seconds. "Tell us about it," Katherine begged nervously



Illustrated by  
T. D. Skidmore

She rang the bell. A parlor maid appeared with a silver salver on which were a pail of ice, a cocktail shaker and two beautifully cut glasses. From the cupboard were produced several bottles. Katherine mixed the cocktails.

"And now," she said, "tell me about the luncheon, Humphrey."

"The point about it was this," he recounted: "Edward Keynsham suddenly reappeared again, came over to my table at the club and asked if he could lunch with me."

"What did he want?" Katherine asked with subdued eagerness.

"He wanted me to renounce the executorship."

She moved a little nervously. Her eyes became very intent and compelling.

"Any reason?"

"He was not exactly candid. One had to read between the lines. He seems to have been associated with your husband in certain enterprises which a respectable person like a Home Secretary should know nothing about. Shall I give up the executorship, Katherine?"

"Would they leave you alone if you did?" she asked.

"I don't know that I want them to. After all, you know, I am an officer of the Crown. I have been very badly treated by these men, and I should like to know what it's all about."

"I wish I could tell you," she sighed. "I never dared ask Cecil anything. He was jealous of Lord Edward, just as he was of you or anyone else who came near me."

"Keynsham struck me as being far more natural today, at any rate," Sir Humphrey remarked, sipping his cocktail. "He may be perfectly honest. If he is he seems to have got himself into a most unholy mess somehow or other. Probably I shall understand all about it when I go into your husband's affairs. That, I suppose, is what they are so desperately afraid of. . . . The one great and terrifying reflection just now is that I actually have in my possession the object of their desperate searches."

"The key?"

"THE key," he assented. "Now, listen: Did Cecil ever say anything to you about owning a safe anywhere or having a key which was valuable?"

"Never in his life that I can remember."

"Of course that makes it all the more inexplicable," he sighed. "On the morning, or some time on the day, of his death a warder from Wandsworth Prison, bribed, I suppose, brought up and left at the house for me in an ordinary envelope a key, which Parkins mislaid and forgot all about. Not a line of

writing, not a single elucidating word—just a key. A plain, flat key of oxidized silver. It has the name Grimmett stamped upon one side of the shaft and 1431 in figures on the other side. Did you ever hear of anyone called Grimmett?"

"Never."

"In that case," Sir Humphrey sighed, "I am terribly afraid that I shall have to get back and see my friend Colonel Matterson again after all. I cannot do my duty to you as your husband's executor, with a possession like this sent to me at the last moment, and remain ignorant of what it means."

She left her chair again as though with a sudden impulse and came and stood by his side.

"Humphrey," she begged, "let these terrible people have it, then perhaps we shall be left alone. They tell me there is plenty of money in America as well as what there is here. The theater is mine and I can earn what I choose. I cannot bear the thought of the danger that key seems to bring. Let them have it."

"What?" he exclaimed. "Hand it over to that disagreeable, murdering young ruffian whose fingers I can still feel on my throat! Not on my life! I'm going to find out a little more about this business before I part with it. I was very rude indeed to them all down at Scotland Yard the other day, but I'm going to eat humble pie. I am going to have Matterson come and see me this evening when I get home."

"May I be there, too, please?" she begged. "You might let me share your cutlet."

He considered the matter.

"I wonder whether I ought to deny myself," he reflected. "You must remember through all his vagueness Edward was very definite on one point: he wanted me to give up the executorship, and the more I think of it the more I am convinced that his reason is the secret he fears I shall discover with the aid of that key."

"Bother the old key," she laughed, rising to her feet. "I'm going to put my hat on."

THEY found Inspector Pank, looking very harmless and benevolent, waiting on the doorstep of the house in Chestow Square.

"If I might suggest it, Sir Humphrey," he said, as Parkins was divesting the latter of his coat, "I think it would be an excellent idea if you wouldn't mind spending the evening in the drawing-room upstairs."

"Out of harm's way, eh?" Rossiter observed.

"Precisely, sir. However well guarded they are, your two ground-floor rooms, the dining-room and the library, are

simply an invitation to intruders. At the present moment I know where I am. I have searched the house thoroughly, and I know that there is no one in hiding. If you will dine and sit in the drawing-room I can have a man on the back stairs as well as on the front, and so far as the thing is humanly possible you will be safe. It will leave our hands much freer to deal with anything that might turn up."

"Would you mind that, Katherine?" Sir Humphrey asked.

"Why should I? I always look upon your drawing-room as a beautiful room wasted."

"We will go straight up there now, then," Sir Humphrey suggested, leading the way. "Show Colonel Matterson up when he arrives, and I shall want dinner for two served there later on, Parkins. Come along, Pank, and settle us down."

THE drawing-room was an apartment of faded beauty, of Victorian hangings and perfumes, with stiff but not unlovely furniture.

"Haven't sat up here for donkeys' years," Sir Humphrey remarked.

"You will be perfectly safe here anyway, sir," Pank assured him.

"Perfectly safe!" Sir Humphrey repeated. "God bless my soul, sounds as though we were back in the Middle Ages! I say, Parkins, can't you do something to make the room look more human? Bring up the flowers from below, and some decanters and glasses."

"Certainly, sir. Colonel Matterson has just arrived."

"Show him up," Sir Humphrey enjoined. "Katherine, my dear," he went on, as soon as the door was closed, "I am afraid this sort of thing is getting on your nerves."

"It isn't that," she insisted, dropping into a chair a little wearily. "I'm not thinking about myself at all. The one thing I regret is having brought all this trouble and annoyance upon you. Why, I can see the marks of that young man's fingers upon your throat now."

"Yes, I can feel them too, when I eat," Sir Humphrey acknowledged with a grimace.

The sub-commissioner entered the room. It was to his credit that he avoided all signs of self-complacency when he shook hands with Sir Humphrey and was introduced to Katherine.

"We are very sorry to hear of this last trouble, sir," he said.

"The young fellow nearly throttled me," Rossiter confided. "If you had not disobeyed orders, Colonel, I don't know where I should have been."

Matterson coughed.

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THE idea came into Harney's mind, unbidden and unwelcome, when he found out that Tom Farren had driven up to Canastego, as he did every spring, for a week of trout fishing. Until Farren's secretary gave him this information, Harney hadn't been able to think of any way of staying out of prison. He knew that Tom Farren would enjoy sending him there. He knew, too, that Farren was certain to find out about those bonds. When he came back and—

Harney's mind stopped in the middle of the thought and against his will changed one of the words! If Farren came back.

The suggestion seemed to have been whispered in his ear by somebody else. It frightened Harney. He had courage, but not of the kind that a man needs for facing a risk of death; he had imagination, too—imagination that instantly saw a vivid moving picture of hushed courtrooms and grave, slow-speaking judges, of suffocating, wire-meshed cells, of a door through which, in spite of tight-shut eyes, he saw a row of faces staring at a waiting, empty chair.

But the intruding thought persisted. If Farren never came back, nobody would know what had become of those bonds. And Farren was up at Canastego, in a different world—a world where there wasn't any homicide bureau, with a squad of clever detectives and a staff of laboratory experts; a world where such a man as Vincent Harney would be almost like a single clear-eyed stranger on a planet where all the natives were born blind.

If Tom Farren didn't come back . . .

Harney told himself, as he started on the three-hundred-mile drive, that he was going up as he had often gone before, to catch a few trout. There'd be a chance, too, of talking things over with Farren, who might be easier to deal with on his angling holiday, than in an atmosphere of hard-boiled business. There wasn't any other reason for driving up into the hills. The old-fashioned revolver under the linen in Harney's suitcase had nothing to do with his errand. Absolutely nothing.

He was still telling himself all this when he came to Canastego and drove on through the little village to the steep road that climbed up toward the Notch and Pokey Moonshine. Overhead the sky was bright, but dusk had settled in the valley and there was already a light in Eli Glidden's farmhouse, where Harney always boarded. Higher on the wooded hillside, and farther away, he could see another tiny blot of yellow between the trees. Farren, as usual, would be up there at Job Ransome's.

*If he never went back . . .*

THE Gliddens were at supper in their big, low-ceiled kitchen—Eli and his wife and the good-looking school-teacher who boarded with them. They took Harney's arrival calmly. Bessie Glidden set a place for him at the red-covered table; Eli nodded a placid welcome and went on eating; Dora Lane, the school-teacher, smiled briefly and held her tongue. She was prettier, Harney thought, than ever, and somehow more alive, more awake. Her silence was different from Eli's or Bessie's. If his mind had been free for such thoughts in this girl; as it was, he found more interest in the Gliddens. They fitted into the idea that had traveled up here with him.

Things were different up here, and people. The Gliddens made Harney feel as if he had made a Gulliver voyage to



some weird land of talking animals. They were like a team of their own heavy-footed horses. Most of the people in the hills were like that, Harney thought. It would be easier, safer up here, to . . . he would not let the sentence finish itself. He'd come up here to fish. That was all.

He wondered, as he listened to Bessie Glidden's unhurried flow of talk, why she didn't mention Farren. In the end he had to bring the name into the conversation himself:

"I suppose Tom Farren hasn't showed up yet?"

He saw Bessie's face stiffen a little.

"He's be'n up to Job Ransome's sence Sat'd'y."

HER voice had stiffened, too.

Her glance led Harney's to Dora Lane and he fancied that he caught in the girl's look a sudden flash, as if Farren's name, like a flint on steel, had struck a spark.

The queer thought thrust itself upon Harney that luck was trying to help him. He could guess, easily enough, the meaning of Bessie Glidden's changed look and voice, of Dora Lane's strange, hard brightness. Trust Tom Farren, wherever you found him, to be mixed up with a woman! And Bessie Glidden was wise enough, clearly, to know that Farren's friendship wouldn't do any girl much good.

Harney thought swiftly. That wild idea wasn't so fantastic, after all. Luck had played on his side so far, anyway. Farren was here in the hills, and he'd stopped being an outsider here. He'd made enemies—one enemy, at least, in Bessie Glidden. There might be others, more dangerous than Bessie. Harney remembered dimly a tall, lean, hawk-faced hill-billy who had hung about the Glidden place. He fumbled for the name. Jud Weston. Harney decided on an experiment. He grinned at Dora.

"How's the boy friend these days? Still sticking 'round?"

Color darkened the sun-bitten face; the eyes, too, darkened, a sudden anger in them that startled Harney. There was more life in this girl, he decided, than he had thought. Except, though, for the change of countenance, she did not answer. As if she had not heard she rose and began to clear the table. Harney went out to smoke with Eli Glidden on the doorstep. He told himself that he wasn't thinking about the chance of Farren's never going back to Pittland. And yet . . .

Eli Glidden, under shrewd prompting, reluctantly parted with scraps of information: Jud wasn't around so often nowadays because he was working down in Lassiter, and it was pretty far to walk. Harney caught at the word.

"Walk? Why, it's fifteen miles!"

"Tis if you go by the turnpike.

# Party Line

By Hugh MacNair Kahler

'Tain't over six mile by way of Pokey Moonshine." Eli jerked his head in the direction of the Notch. Following the movement, Harney's eye saw the light in Job Ransome's house, a yellow dot against the black loom of the hill. He could feel something click into place in his mind, like a piece in a picture puzzle. Those walks of Jud Weston's carried him past the place where Far-

ren was staying. And beyond that place, until you climbed down into the other valley, there wasn't a house.

"At that," he said, "Jud must be pretty crazy about Dora if he'll go twelve miles on the hoof, over that hill, to get a look at her."

"Wouldn't wonder," Eli admitted.

Harney let the matter rest. He'd found out enough for the present. Even



Illustrated by Donald Teague

"Why—why, it proves that Farren was alive and