

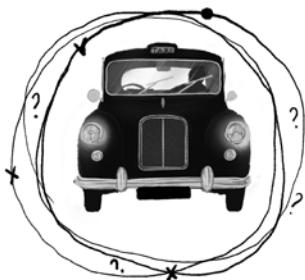


Edgar Wallace

*The Scotland Yard Book
of Edgar Wallace*

Volume I

*The Clue
of the Silver key*



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CHAPTER ONE

They were all in this business—Dick Allenby, inventor and heir-at-law; Jerry Dornford, man about town and wastrel; Mike Hennessey, theatrical adventurer; Mary Lane, small part actress; Leo Moran, banker and speculator; Horace Tom Tickler—alas, for him! —was very much in it, though he knew nothing about it.

Mr. Washington Wirth, who gave parties and loved flattery; old Hervey Lyne and the patient Binny, who pushed his invalid chair and made his breakfast and wrote his letters—and Surefoot Smith.

There came a day when Binny, who was an assiduous reader of newspapers that dealt with the more picturesque aspects of crime, was to find himself the focal point of attention and his evidence read by millions who had never before heard of him—a wonderful experience.

Mr. Washington Wirth's parties were most exclusive affairs and, in a sense, select. The guests were chosen with care, and might not, in the manner of the age, invite the uninvited to accompany them; but they were, as Mary Lane said, "an odd lot". She went because Mike Hennessey asked her, and she rather liked the stout and lethargic Mike. People called him "poor old Mike" because of his bankruptcies, but just now sympathy would be wasted on him. He had found Mr. Washington Wirth, a patron of the theatre and things theatrical, and Mr. Washington Wirth was a very rich man.

He was also a mysterious man. He was generally believed to live in the Midlands and to be associated with industry.

His London address was the Kellner Hotel, but he never slept there. His secretary would telephone in advance for the Imperial suite on a certain day, and on the evening of that day, when supper was laid for his twenty or thirty guests, and the specially hired orchestra was tuning up, he would appear, a stout, flaxen-haired man in horn-rimmed glasses. The uncharitable said his flaxen hair was a wig, which may or may not have been true.

He was perfectly tailored. He spoke in a high, falsetto voice, had a trick of clicking his heels and kissing the hands of his lady guests, which was very Continental.

His guests were handpicked. He chose—or Mike chose for him—the smaller theatrical fry; members of the chorus, small part actresses, an obscure singer or two.

Once Mike had suggested a brighter kind of party. Mr. Wirth was shocked.

“I want nothing fast,” he said.

He loved adulation—and had his fill of it. He was a generous spender, a giver of expensive presents; people living on the verge of poverty might be excused a little flattering.

You could not gate-crash one of Mr. Washington Wirth’s parties, invitations to which came in the shape of a small oblong badge, not unlike the badge worn by the ladies in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, on which the name of the invited guest was written. This the recipient wore; it served a double purpose, for it enabled Mr. Wirth to read and address each of his guests by her name.

Mary Lane was well aware that the invitation was no tribute to her own eminence.

“I suppose if I had been a really important guest I shouldn’t have been invited?” she said.

Mike smiled good-naturedly.

“You are important, Mary—the most important person here. The old boy wanted to know you.”

“Who is he?”

Mike shook his head. “He’s got all the money in the world,” he said.

She laughed. Mary Lane was very lovely when she laughed.

She was conscious that Washington Wirth, albeit occupied with the cooing attention of two blonde lovelies, was watching her out of the side of his eyes.

“He gives lots of parties, doesn’t he?” she asked. “Dick Allenby told me today that they are monthly affairs. He must be rich, of course, or he wouldn’t keep our play running. Honestly, Mike, we must be losing a fortune at the Sheridan.”

Mike Hennessey took his cigar from his mouth and looked at the ash. “I’m not losing a fortune,” he said. Then, most unexpectedly: “Old Hervey Lyne a friend of yours, Mary?”

She denied the friendship with some vigour. “No, he’s my guardian. Why?”

Mike put back his cigar deliberately.

The orchestra had struck up a waltz. Mr. Wirth was gyrating awkwardly, holding at arm’s length a lady who was used to being held more tightly.

“I had an idea you were connected,” he said. “Moneylender, wasn’t he? That’s how he made his stuff. Is Mr. Allenby related to him?”

There was a certain significance in the question, and she flushed.

“Yes—his nephew.” She was a little disconcerted. “Why?”

Mike looked past her at the dancers.

“Trying to pretend they enjoy it,” he said. “They’re all getting gold mounted handbags tonight—you’ll get yours.”

“But why do you ask about Mr. Lyne?” she persisted.

“Just wondering how well you knew the old man. No, he’s never lent me money. He wants gilt-edged security and I’ve never had it. Moran’s his banker.”

Mike was one of those disconcerting men whose speech followed the eccentric course of their thoughts.

He chuckled.

“Funny, that, Mary. Moran’s his banker. You don’t see the joke, but I do.”

She knew Leo Moran slightly. He was by way of being a friend of Dick Allenby’s, and he was, she knew, a frequent visitor to the theatre, though he never came “back stage”.

When Mike was being cryptic, it was a waste of time trying to catch up with him. She looked at her watch.

“Will he be very annoyed if I leave soon? I’ve promised to go on to the Legation.”

He shook his head, took her gently by the arm, and led her up to where Mr. Wirth was being delightfully entertained by three pretty girls who were trying to guess his age.

“My little friend has to go, Mr. Wirth,” he said. “She’s got a rehearsal in the morning.”

“Perfectly understood!” said the host.

When he smiled he had white, even teeth, for which no thanks were due to nature.

“Perfectly understood. Come again, Miss Mary Lane. I’ll be back from abroad in three weeks.”

She took his big, limp hand and shook it. Mike escorted her out and helped her into her coat.

“Another hour for me and then I pack up,” he said, “He never stays after one. By the way, I’ll bring on your gift to the theatre.”

She liked Mike—everybody liked Mike. There was hardly an actor or an actress in London who had not agreed to take half-salary from him. He could cry very convincingly when he was ruined, and he was always ruined when hard-hearted people expected him to pay what he owed them.

A lovable soul, entirely dishonest. Nobody knew what he did with the money, which he had lost for so many people, but the probability is that it was usefully employed.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with our play,” he said, as he walked with her along the corridor to the elevator. “Maybe it’s the title —Cliffs of Fate—what does it mean? I’ve seen the darn’ thing forty times and still I don’t know what it’s about.”

She stared at him, aghast. “But you chose it!” she protested.

He shook his head. “He did.” He jerked his thumb back to Mr. Wirth’s suite. “He said it made him feel a better man when he read it. It’s never made me want to go more regularly to the synagogue!”

He saw Mary depart, fussed over her like a broody hen. He liked Mary because she was real in a world of unreality. The first time he had taken her out to supper he had offered her a few suggestions on the quickest method, by which a young actress might reach stardom, and her name in lights, and she had answered him sanely and yet in a way that did not entirely wound his vanity—and the vanity of a fat man is prodigious.

Thereafter she went into a new category: he had many; she was the only woman in the world he really liked, though, it is said, he loved many. He strolled back to the hectic atmosphere of the supper room—Mr. Wirth was presenting the bags.

He was unusually cheerful: usually he drank very little, but tonight...Well, he had promised to drink a whole bottle of champagne if anybody guessed his age, and one of the three pretty girls had guessed thirty-two.

“Good God!” said Mike, when they told him.

As soon as was expedient, he took his patron aside.

“About time these people went, Mr. Wirth,” he said.

Mr. Wirth smiled foolishly; spoke with the refinement, which wine brings to some. “My deah, deah fellah! I’m quate ceepable of draving myself to deah old Coventry.”

Certainly, this was a new Mr. Wirth. Mike Hennessey was troubled. He felt he was in danger of losing a priceless

possession. It was as though the owner of a secret gold mine, from which he was drawing a rich dividend, were hoisting a great napping flag to mark its site.

“What you want,” he said agitatedly, “is something cooling. Just wait here, will you?”

He ran out, saw the headwaiter, and came back very soon with a little blue bottle. He measured a tablespoonful of white granules into a wine glass and filled it with water; then he handed this fizzling, hissing potion to the giver of the feast.

“Drink,” he said.

Mr. Wirth obeyed. He stopped and gasped between the gulps.

By now the last guest had gone.

“All right?” asked Mike anxiously.

“Quite all right,” snapped the other.

He seemed suddenly sober. Mike, at any rate, was deceived.

He did not see his friend to his car, because that was against the rules. Mr. Wirth, wrapped in a heavy coat, the collar of which was turned up, his hat at a rakish angle over his eyes, made his way to the garage near the hotel, had his car brought out, and was getting into it when the watcher sidled up to him.

“Can I have a word with you, mister?”

Mr. Wirth surveyed him glassily, climbed into his seat and shifted his gear.

“Can I have a word—”

The car jerked forward. The little interviewer, who had one foot on the running board, was sent sprawling. He got up and began to run after the car, to the amusement of the garage workers; car and pursuer vanished in the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

The trailer lost his quarry in Oxford Street and wandered disconsolately onward. A sort of homing instinct led him towards Regent's Park. Naylor's Crescent was a magnificent little side street leading from the outer circle. It was very silent; its small, but stately, houses were in darkness.

Mr. Tickler—such was his peculiar name—stopped before No. 17 and looked up at the window. The white blinds were drawn down and the house was lifeless. He stood, with his hands thrust into his pockets, blinking at the green door that he knew so well, at the three worn steps leading down, and the hollow steel railway that masons had fixed into the stonework to allow the easy descent of an invalid chair.

Inside was wealth, immense, incalculable wealth, and a stupid old man on the verge of the grave. Outside were poverty and resentment, the recollection of the rigours of Pentonville Prison, a sense of injustice. Old Lyne slept on the first floor.

His bed was between these two high windows. That lower window marked the study where he sat in the daytime. There was a safe in the wall, full of useless old papers. Old Lyne never kept money in the house. All his life he had advertised this habit. A burglar or two had gone to enormous trouble to prove him a liar and had got nothing for their pains.

There he was, sleeping in luxury, the old rat, under featherweight blankets specially woven for him, under a satin

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