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MR. TREADWELL AND MR. SNIPS

“Only the two maps, Mr. Lewis? And very tentative maps, I must say. They were apparently drawn by someone with only a modest knowledge of the underworld. This is a meager offering, sir, scarcely worth our time.”

Mr. Treadwell, the man who had spoken, wore a smile on his face – a smile that was habitual with him, as if he were in a constant state of subtle amusement. He was a large man with a trim white beard, dressed in brown tweed and with a comfortable look about him. He spoke in a light-hearted, easy tone, though his voice did not at all put Mr. Lewis at ease. Mr. Lewis, a small, pale man with the face of ferret and a tubercular cough, was rarely at ease, although never so ill at ease as he was just now. There was nothing artificial in Mr. Treadwell’s manner, and so Mr. Lewis was utterly incapable of reading him.

“As you can see,” Mr. Treadwell continued, “I brought one of my associates along today. You can call him Mr. Snips – or not, as you see fit. People have called him worse things, certainly.” Mr. Snips

apparently saw nothing funny in the quip, for he stared in a bored way in the direction of Admiralty Arch. Mr. Snips's hair was receding, and he wore a small toupee inexpertly glued on, something that was apparent now in the freshening wind. It might have been comical on anyone else.

They sat, the three of them, on metal chairs around a small table in front of Bates's Coffee House in what had recently been the Spring Gardens, although it was now an area with islands of lawn and occasional small trees. The day was cool, autumn leaves skittering past on the pavement before lifting into the air and whirling away. Behind them stood the Metropolitan Board of Works building with its Palladian façade, people going in and coming out through the high entry door that had been eccentrically fixed into the front corner of the building. Mr. Lewis, who was employed by the Board of Works, looked from one to the other of the two men, his own countenance slowly taking on an appearance of desperation in the extended silence.

"Snips is a whimsical name, Mr. Lewis, don't you agree?"

"No, sir. I mean to say... whimsical, sir?"

"You have no grudge against whimsy, I hope."

"No, Mr. Treadwell, I do assure you." He nodded at the alleged Mr. Snips, affecting a smile, and said, "I wish you a good morning, Mr. Snips." The man turned his head slowly to look in Mr. Lewis's direction, but his eyes held no expression at all and were apparently fixed on some distant object behind Mr. Lewis's chair, as if Mr. Lewis were invisible.

"Mr. Snips, allow me to present Mr. Lewis of the Board of Works, adjutant to the Minister of Rivers and Sewers," Mr. Treadwell said. "I very much hoped that Mr. Lewis would find the gumption to make a bold stroke on our behalf after taking

our earnest money and then betraying us to our meddling friend James Harrow. It was Mr. Lewis who provided Harrow with the ancient bird recovered from the sink-hole by a common tosher, a wonderfully preserved bird alleged to be aglow with an interesting variety of luminous fungus moss. And now Harrow is anxious to lead an expedition into the unknown realm beneath our city, there to discover we know not what, to our great dismay. But we cannot allow that to come to pass, can we Mr. Snips?”

“No, Mr. Treadwell, we cannot. We *will* not.”

“Mr. Lewis has thought to do penance for his sin by providing us with the odd map, such as you see here, but his efforts are less than enthusiastic. I have it on good authority that Harrow was given a set of first-rate maps, nothing like these mere sketches. His were *secret* maps, apparently, unavailable to the public – the public being your humble servant.” He pursed his lips and shook his head, apparently far from satisfied. “What do you say to that, Mr. Snips?”

“What do I *say* to it, Mr. Treadwell?” He regarded Mr. Lewis sharply now, as if memorizing his features. “I don’t *say* a thing. I *ask*, rather: does this man have any family to speak of?”

“Oh my, yes,” Mr. Treadwell said. “Seven children and a loving wife. They dwell in lodgings off Lambeth Road that are surprisingly smart, well beyond Mr. Lewis’s station, one would think. The Board of Works, however, provides wonderful opportunities to better one’s station with very little effort, you see. In this case the betterment was offered up by Dr. Harrow and a wealthy friend of Harrow’s by the name of Gilbert Frobisher, who has been very much in the news recently. Gilbert Frobisher has a deep purse, Mr. Snips, and he has allowed our friend Mr. Lewis to dip into it with an open hand. Mr. Lewis, understandably, has taken a special interest in their desires and very little interest in ours.”

“Then I suggest that we have Mr. Lewis draw straws, here and now, to choose who gets his thumbs lopped off, oldest or youngest child.”

Mr. Treadwell looked appropriately shocked to hear this. He held his upturned palms out before Mr. Lewis in a gesture of helplessness. “I’m afraid that Mr. Snips is a desperate rogue, Mr. Lewis, when the fit is upon him. I’m deeply appalled by his bloodthirsty suggestion.”

“The two maps was all I could reproduce in the moment, Mr. Treadwell,” Mr. Lewis said in a strained voice. “It would take a mort of time to have the Board’s maps copied out fair, and a solid reason for asking it, too, them being secret. This makes four maps in all, sir, this past month, which amounts to very nearly the agreed upon number.”

“Very *nearly* the agreed upon number, do you say? That’s scarcely mathematical, sir. If your banker used such a phrase, you’d be in the right of it to take him to task. But none of us are bankers, thank heavens. Our hearts are not bound in triple brass like the men in the counting houses. Now sir, something has occurred to me that might satisfy Mr. Snips.” He patted his coat pocket, nodded brightly, and drew out a piece of paper. “I’ll tell you what it is, Mr. Lewis, as plainly as I can manage. Dr. Harrow’s expedition is to be limited to three men and three men only. You see their names written down here, and I’ll warrant that you recognize all three. Two of them are, of course, Gilbert Frobisher and James Harrow. The third is a Professor Langdon St. Ives, one of Mr. Frobisher’s particular friends. Those three and no others are to be allowed permission to set out on this expedition. It is my wish that you limit the size of the expedition at the *very* last moment. Do I make myself quite clear? The area exposed by the

sink-hole will be closed to any but these three men.”

“But Mr. Frobisher has asked permission for a round dozen to accompany him and Dr. Harrow, sir, aside from Professor St. Ives – porters, learned coves from the university, a photographer from the *Times*, even Harrow’s sister. I cannot see how I can ...”

“Oh, I can see it quite clearly, Mr. Lewis, and I can see the result if my wishes are ignored. A photographer from the *Times*, do you say? And carrying first-rate maps? Heaven help us. We cannot countenance such a thing, can we Mr. Snips?”

“No, sir. Not for an instant.”

“Here is the way of it, Mr. Lewis. Permission to any but these three must be denied in the eleventh hour, as you value your children’s thumbs. Mr. Snips is unfortunately handy with his pruning-shears, which he keeps carefully honed. Come now, Mr. Lewis! I beg you not to disfigure your features in that antic manner. Keep it in your mind that if you fail us, you fail your family. I’ll thank you to have the four remaining maps in our hands by Tuesday. If you cannot have them copied out in a thoroughgoing manner, then fetch us the original articles – those that you haven’t already passed on to Harrow. Feign ignorance when the time comes to explain to your superiors why they are missing. You are apparently practiced at the art of prevarication. You’ll keep us informed, of course, as regards the Harrow expedition.”

Mr. Treadwell nodded meaningfully in Mr. Snips’s direction now, and Mr. Lewis swiveled his head in a mechanical way to follow his gaze, his face a rictus of fear. Mr. Snips had opened his shirt at the neck in order to reveal a curious necklace – a strand of wire upon which were strung a round dozen withered thumbs.

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