

THE WEIRD OF CAXTON

One cold November morning in 1903 I had called upon my friend John Carter to find his landlady, Mrs Heidelberg, in a state of considerable anxiety. It seemed that she had entered the sitting room at nine o'clock to find him sitting bolt upright on the floor, a position that he had apparently occupied for most of the night.

"I fear that it may be apoplexy," the poor woman cried, wringing her hands and speaking in that slow, halting fashion which is the mark of an Austrian, "though I am not surprised frankly. Such peculiar hours he keeps and his meals are often half finished."

Allaying her fears as best I could, I made my way up the narrow stairs to the cosy sitting room that had been the scene of so many of our past adventures. Mrs Heidelberg had not exaggerated, it seemed, for, as I opened the door, I was confronted by my friend's lean form, squatting cross-legged in the centre of the room, his keen eyes fixed steadily in front of him. Fearing that he had fallen into some kind of catatonic trance, I knelt down and hit his face with the flat of my hand. Suddenly he turned his head and laughed loudly.

"Well Rigden," he exclaimed, "it may be a bizarre way to greet one's friend but it does wonders for the nerve endings."

I asked him what on earth he meant by this peculiar practice of sitting on floors.

"Perhaps you have not heard of Hatha Yoga," he replied, rising from his position. "It is a system of relaxation and meditation practised by the Tibetan monks. I first encountered it during my visit to the forbidden city of Lhasa. No doubt you will recall that episode?"

I nodded. The story of Carter's travels across East Asia and his subsequent investigation into the affairs of the notorious Madame Blavatsky is a subject I hope eventually to reveal to my readers when the controversy has ceased to trouble the occult world. For now I have kept detailed notes of the affair and since my colleague has allowed me unlimited access to the records, no doubt the public will one day be enlightened.

"What do you make of this, Doctor?" Carter exclaimed. He handed me a small brown envelope, containing a telegram. The message inside read: MUST SEE. URGENT RE WEIRD GRESHAM. 11 AM TODAY.

"Hardly coherent," I remarked.

"At first glance, no. It would indicate that the person who dictated it was certainly in a great hurry. Or maybe the Post Office clerk was half asleep. Either way it presents something of a conundrum."

"But it makes no sense at all!" I objected.

"Now look again. That phrase: "Weird Gresham", for example..."

"Gresham is a name, weird an adjective."

"Or is it? Weird can also be taken to mean a curse. In which case we can proceed to: "Must see you urgently re the curse at 11 a.m. today."

"And Gresham is the name of the sender?"

"Precisely. Now, Rigden, behind you is a volume of Burke's Peerage. If you would be so kind..."

I handed him the book.

"Green, Greer, ah, here we are. "Gresham, Lord. Born ninth October, 1870. M.Sc. Cantab., D. Litt. Married, Twenty-ninth descendant of Lord Arthur Gresham. Residence, Caxton Mote, Suffolk, etc., etc. Mmm. Brief, but to the point. Vintage Burke."