

"Tommy told me that their clerk phoned him saying that you hadn't arrived there, and that they'd waited more than an hour for you!"

Hawke wasted no time on argument. He phoned the solicitors, and the clerk promptly denied having made any call to the detective's flat that morning. The exchange then confirmed the call which had been received from Tommy. M'Phinney and Hawke went to the public booth at the end of Dover Street, where they were lucky enough to find a loiterer who had seen Tommy enter a taxi shortly before 11.30. There the trail petered out.

"Jackdaw?" Hawke repeated the name on return to Dover Street.

He was showing M'Phinney the impudent letter he had received that morning, when the phone rang again.

"A little black bird whispering in your ear, Hawke—a Jackdaw," announced a laughing voice. "Don't bother to get the exchange to tell you where I'm speaking from. It is a call-box at King's Cross, and I shall be away long before you can get over here. I am ready for your subscription, and I am afraid I find that the cost of feathering a nest has risen. I find I shall want five thousand pounds from you! All in pound notes, Hawke."

"And what makes you think I'll give you five thousand pounds?" demanded the detective.

"The fact that I am sure your assistant—the inimitable Tommy Burke—is worth all that to you," came the retort. "Tommy is in my nest, Hawke. He is not very comfortable, I am afraid, for he is tied to a bedstead and gagged. Also, if

you don't do what I want, Hawke, he will be even less comfortable, for, although I hate violence, I need funds. My partner, a delightful gentleman known as Killer, also needs funds, and he doesn't share my dislike of violence. If I don't get that five thousand to-night, Killer proposes to chop off the right hand of your right-hand man, Hawke, and deliver it to you in a parcel. If we don't get the money to-morrow, you'll get his left hand; and so on, ad infinitum—or rather, until there is no Tommy left to post to you."

"You wouldn't dare!" snapped Hawke.

"My dear old sleuth, there's nothing I wouldn't dare, and there's nothing Killer wouldn't do, to collect funds, so you'd better listen hard to what I have to say."

## A Business Deal

VERY curt now, the smooth voice instructed the detective to put the notes into a case and take them to the Wylstbourne-Wellsea cross-roads on Wylstbourne Common—about 20 miles south-east of London—at a quarter to twelve that night.

"Wait at the cross-roads until a car stops there. I shall switch my lights off and then on again," explained Jackdaw. "Incidentally, the car will be a London one, which Killer collected for our use this morning. You will come across to the car alone, Hawke, and hand the case with the notes in through the window."

"Just remember, Hawke, don't try any funny business!" Jackdaw's

voice became grim. "Tommy will be in the back of the car, and Killer will be with him. If you have tipped off the police and tried to set a trap, or if you are not alone—in fact, if you try any trick—Tommy will be dead when you pick him up."

"On the other hand," added Jackdaw, laughing gaily again, "if you carry out instructions, and I find the notes in order, Tommy will be handed to you unharmed. We can both go our ways—you to work out how to trap me in the end, and me to collect the next subscription on my list."

"How do I know that you will hand Tommy over when you have the money?" demanded Hawke.

"You have my promise."

"And what is that worth?"

"As much as yours! Look here, Hawke, be sensible and treat this as a business deal," urged Jackdaw, now serious again. "I have put over a fast one on you by grabbing Tommy. To get him back, you have to pay five thousand pounds. Why not pay up and make sure he is safe, then bother about catching me later?"

Hawke actually laughed.

"You've got a cheek, Jackdaw!" he declared. Then to M'Phinney's amazement, he added: "All right, I agree that we treat this as a business deal. I shall be at the rendezvous to-night, and I shall bring you five thousand pounds in one-pound notes. If you promise me that you will hand over Tommy safe and sound, I promise you that I will come alone, that I will not surround the area with police, or anything like that. I realise that it would be

# The Laughing Jackdaw

futile, for you will obviously have scouts out, and not show up if you see any unusual activity in such a lonely spot.

"Also, Jackdaw," went on the detective calmly, "I will come unarmed, and not try to make any attack to capture you single-handed when handing over the money. In fact, I propose to carry out your instructions to the letter, so mind you keep your part of the bargain."

"I will—I promise," replied Jackdaw, and laughed again.

## The Only Way

"HAVE you gone quite mad?" demanded M'Phinney, when Hawke turned from the phone. "I was listening in on the other receiver, and I heard it all. Look here, Hawke, you can't give in so tamely to such a demand. I know what Tommy means to you, but this chap is crazy. We can easily trap him."

"Not so easily," retorted Hawke. "You can be sure that the car will be covered, and any tricks we try to put over, although they might catch the crooks in the end, are likely to give the man called Killer time to finish Tommy off. No, Mac, I'm not crazy. I have been thinking hard during that conversation, and there is only one way of handling this matter."

"And that is by paying over five thousand pounds!"

"Exactly. I'd better get on to the bank and arrange to collect the money," replied Hawke.

"You'll mark the notes, of course."