

THE NINE- POINTED STAR

BY
CLAUDE W. SYKES



PUBLISHERS
JOHN HAMILTON LTD
LONDON

CONTENTS

CHAP	
I A LATE CALL	7
II BACK TO THE BOARDS	16
III STRANGE EVENTS IN A COUNTRY VILLAGE	27
IV THE MAN FROM MANCHESTER	36
V PLANS AND FLIGHT	48
VI GURTHSTEAD	61
VII FOOD FOR THOUGHT	70
VIII A VISIT TO THE DOCTOR	81
IX MISS SWALES AT HOME	95
X TALLY HO !	105
XI DON RAMON MARTINEZ	120
XII ACCORDING TO PLAN	133
XIII MICE AND MEN	143
XIV THE MOUSE-TRAP	156
XV CROSS CURRENTS	168
XVI A STEP DOWN IN LIFE	182
XVII THE HUNTING OF THE SNARK	193
XVIII HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS	205
XIX THE STAELY HOMES OF ENGLAND	216
XX A SEAT IN THE GALLERY	226
XXI A BREACH OF CONTRACT	238
XXII EXCELSIOR	247
XXIII AIRWAYS AND THE CENTRAL C	254
XXIV THE CAFÉ HARMONIA	263
XXV THE BIG FIVE	275
XXVI THE FIGHT ON THE GLACIER	285
XXVII THE DESCENT	300
XXVIII THE FIGHT IN THE CITY	310

THE NINE-POINTED STAR

CHAPTER I

A LATE CALL

"'Tis better to have played and lost than never to have played at all."

I sat in my bath and peeled the caked mud off my knees. It had certainly been a hard game. We led at half-time, but Bigglesford just managed to scrape home. Still, three two was not a bad beating and we made them go all out.

One goal had fallen to my stick; that was an extra cause for satisfaction. Not that I had done anything extraordinary when I sent the ball between the posts, but it was a satisfying shot, and I knew that during the next few days I should think on it with pleasure at odd idle moments.

Clean once more, I lay back in the hot water, thinking lazily. One's bath is a good place for thought. Something stimulates the brain, perhaps the recumbent position, perhaps the hot water. I seem to have read of all sorts of big people hatching out ideas in their baths.

I thought of other hockey matches and other goals I had scored. I was always fond of hockey and regretted having to give it up when I went on the stage. That was the worst part of being on tour—no regular games. I should have had them every Saturday if I had stuck to the City job the dear old Guvnor found for me. But no, it would not have done; I was not made for an office life, even though the prospects were

good. The stage is a bad profession in many ways, but few actors want to give it up. When asked by stage-struck enthusiasts about entering the profession, they always utter a most emphatic "Don't," but when further pressed as to whether they would give it up if they could, they protest vehemently that this is the last thing they would dream of doing.

I knew in my heart of hearts that I wanted to return to the stage—but not yet a while. True, I felt as fit as a fiddle and there was no doubt that our old family medico would let me do anything I chose. I wondered what Mary would do with herself if I took another job. Well, we could let the house and she could have that year in Florence she had always promised herself study painting as she had long wished. Of course she had felt bound to stay at home and look after the old man, but there was no reason why she should keep house for me if she wanted to see a bit of the world. How curious, I reflected, that we both had artistic aspirations. Where did they come from? Not from the Guvnor, I felt sure. A dear old chap, but a typical military man, wrapped up in his regiment. Neither could it have been from our mother, though we knew only too little of her. Anyhow, there it was, and why should not Mary indulge her tastes as well as I? What was there to keep us at Hillwade if we wanted to leave? We were both comfortably off now. Why not have a shot at a West End engagement? It was not so hard to get on in London now as it was before the war, so I was told. But, after all, I was completely out of touch with the theatrical profession.

It had been a long break—that war. My thoughts went back to July 1914. It had been my first holiday for several years, and I was rather run down and needed a complete change. A subaltern in my father's regiment, keen on mountaineering, had taken me off to the Tyrol. I fell in love with the mountains right away, and the fateful days at the end of July were passed in a lonely club-hut, far from any newspapers. We heard

vague rumours of trouble, but the idea of a world war seemed utterly absurd in the peace of the mountains. Yet the rumours persisted, and Prowse thought he had better get back in case he was wanted. But it was too late. We reached Innsbruck to find a world at war, all frontiers closed and no chance of getting home. Prowse, as a British officer, was interned, but I remained at liberty, save for permission to leave Austria.

The Austrians treated me decently. The police did not worry me over much, and the people I met were tactful. For some time I stayed on in Innsbruck, and had quite a good time. Food was still plentiful, and money reached me regularly from home. The months went by, and I had my first taste of winter sport. Of course I thought the war would soon be over and I should return home none the worse for a very generous captivity.

But the war went on. The next spring Italy came in, and all foreigners were ordered to leave Innsbruck, which was too near the frontier. I went to Vienna and found the Viennese an easy-going people who tried to forget that there was a war on. Nineteen fifteen and nineteen sixteen passed quite pleasantly. Then came the pinch. Food was scarce and money did not reach me from England quite so regularly. Posts were disorganised—everything was disorganised; the Austrians could not stand the strain. By that time I spoke German fluently and managed to earn a decent income by giving English lessons. Later on, as I could sing a bit, I got an engagement in the chorus at the Theater an der Wien, that home of the Austrian waltz which sets the blood tingling.

The water was still hot, and I allowed my thoughts to dwell on that episode. It was a curious experience. I, an ambitious Shakespearean actor, to be singing in a musical comedy chorus in a foreign country for the amusement of my enemies! And yet I enjoyed it. It was good to get the greasepaint on again, even under those strange conditions, and it took my thoughts

off the war and the bad food, which grew daily scantier. My fellow-artists were a jolly lot, and for a time we were able to keep our spirits up and look on the humorous side of things. But only for a time. Our daily rations were now verging on starvation fare, and in nineteen eighteen we became as low-spirited as the audiences we made a pretence of amusing.

At last, when things seemed absolutely unbearable, the climax came. The German armies were defeated, the Austrian Empire crumbled away, the revolution flamed out, and suddenly one dull November day we heard news of the Armistice.

Home once more—then came the reaction. The years of starvation had taken their toll, and Nature demanded a penalty for the outrages committed on her. Nineteen nineteen saw me overshadowed by the wings of death. Many months passed before the doctors could promise me my life.

"But you can't go back to the stage yet; you must live in the country for a year or two, plenty of fresh air and good food." So ran the verdict of the great specialist, and I was luckily in a position to follow his advice. My father was well off, and there were only my twin sister and myself with him. Country life was pleasant enough, but I knew that sooner or later I should want to get back to the big cities. Yet somehow I did not feel inclined to make the effort. There had been the matter of my father's death. The poor old Guvnor was not permitted a long enjoyment of his rest and laurels. He had a busy time during the war, and I think that in the end he succumbed to sheer exhaustion of vitality—just as I was on the point of doing. But I had youth on my side and was able to pull through and actually play hockey again.

Of course I was obliged to stay on after the old man's death. There seemed so many formalities to attend to. All the same there was no reason why I should not make an effort to do something now, instead of idling about. Was I not in danger of letting things slide altogether,

of accepting in that somewhat uneventful comedy "Country Life," the permanent part of "Max Prescott, a gentleman of leisure?" Well, I must think things over seriously.

I tried to formulate plans, but soon gave them up. I could get no further than this evening. When the water grew cool, I would get out of my bath and dress, then eat an enormous tea and smoke and laze till dinner-time. After dinner three good fellows, members of the hockey team, were coming to play bridge. We should have some exciting games at twopence a hundred; I should win or lose a shilling or two, and we would yarn till the small hours, secure in the knowledge that tomorrow was Sunday and no one need get up early. And to-morrow—well to-morrow we may be—

CRASH! BANG, CRASH! Mary's fists hammered on the bathroom door. "Are you going to stay in that bath till midnight, Max? Tea has been ready this last half hour, and Suzette's here too."

"All right; shan't be five minutes."

Yes, the water was getting cold, and Suzette was a very nice girl. I had quite forgotten she was coming down for the week-end. I jumped out, scrubbed myself dry, and hurried into my clothes.

Everything seemed to go according to plan. I enjoyed my tea, I enjoyed the interval between tea and dinner still more—with Suzette's help. How delightful such an evening is after a hard game, and how thankful I felt to Providence that nothing was apparently going to mar it.

After dinner my three stalwarts duly rolled up. We adjourned to my den for our game. We were all players of about the same skill and often played together. My partner and I won the first rubber and lost the next two rather quickly.

"Shall we make it the best of five?" I asked.

No one objected; the night was still young.

"Well played," said my partner, after I had scraped home on a weak heart hand.

"I think I deserve a decent hand next deal," I remarked. "We've neither of us held much this evening."

"You certainly got all you could out of those hearts, my boy," generously conceded Jackson, commencing to deal. "We will see what fate and I can do between us."

He gave me an excellent hand. I scored four spade tricks over the book, so that we were one game in the fourth rubber.

"That's because you did your best with the hearts," said Jackson, and Sandeman, my partner chimed in: "Like life, you see. A mixture of free will and destiny. If fate deals you bad cards, you can't stand out against the aces and kings; but you've got to play your best, all the same. When you've made that extra trick that nobody thought you could, Fate turns round and deals you a rattling no-trumper."

I picked my hand from the table. One glance at the collection of aces and kings was sufficient.

"Grand slam," shouted Sandy as he swept the last trick up. "Score two rubbers all, and you may note, Prescott, that Fate is well pleased with you. She ought to give you some reward for the way you have employed your talents, over and above the petty cash that we shall lift off Osgood and Jackson. Don't pat yourself on the back, or the whimsical lady may be vexed. Just think of it all as cause and effect."

At that moment the telephone bell started.

"I am afraid that Fate has something against me after all," I said, "for that can only be Lucas."

Mr. Roger Lucas was one of the trials which seem to be sent to punish us for our transgressions. He was a retired solicitor, a member of the Hillwade Amateur Dramatic Society, which had roped me in as a producer. He was quite a good actor, but never obeyed the producer's instructions. He always wanted the centre of the stage for himself. His chief fault, as far as I was concerned, was that of ringing me up or rushing round at any hour of the day or night. When going to

bed or sitting down to breakfast I was liable to receive a visit from Mr. Lucas on some trivial and inessential point concerning his part. He would stay at least an hour, holding forth on the merits of some previous producer—the only man apparently who had really understood him.

Osgood, another member of the Dramatic Society, began to laugh.

"Shut up, Osgood, and deal," I said. "I'm not going to answer."

The game proceeded, punctuated at intervals by shrill disturbances from the telephone. Finally I heard the drawing-room door open and Mary's footsteps on the way to the instrument.

"She'll have the sense to tell him I'm out," I said.

"Won't wash," said Osgood, "you fixed up this game at the last rehearsal, and he knows it. You are fairly caught, old chap."

The man at the other end seemed to be doing most of the talking, Mary merely uttering "Yes" at intervals; at last we heard: "Will you hold the line, please; I'll tell him."

"Max, you are wanted."

"If it's that old fool, Lucas, tell him I'm dead; say they killed me at hockey this afternoon. Say I shot myself because we lost, say anything you like, but I won't speak to him."

"It isn't Mr. Lucas, Max; it's your friend, Selwyn Radwell, ringing up from Bedford."

"Good, but what's up with him?"

"He wants you to play for him next week at Birmingham; I said you would."

"The devil you did!" I rushed off to the phone.

Selwyn Radwell and I had been members of the same company before the war. Now he had started in management for himself with a repertoire of Shakespearean plays. This week he was performing at Bedford, only seven miles from us, so I had been in several nights to see the shows. In fact it must have been the meeting

with Radwell that had unsettled me this afternoon. I didn't think I could manage it, but friendship demanded a personal refusal.

MYSELF: Hallo! That you, Radwell? Look here, what's all this about my playing at Birmingham next week?"

RADWELL: I've just been telling your sister, old man, and she says you can do it.

MYSELF: Yes, but why me?

RADWELL: You remember Trehearne, who takes most of the parts you played in the old crowd? You met him on Thursday. Well, he's sprained his ankle this morning; got to lay up for a week.

MYSELF: Haven't you got an understudy?

RADWELL: We shoved young Cowan on for Morocco this afternoon, and Baxter for Laertes to-night. Both hopelessly overweighted. The boys have got it in them all right, but they can't do big parts in a hurry, and I don't want to muck the show at Birmingham. That's why I want you to come along and help me out—just till Trehearne's fit again.

MYSELF: Can't you get someone from Town? Plenty of good actors out of work.

RADWELL: I can't get at the agents till Monday morning, and you don't expect me to pick up a pub-crawling laddie from Maiden Lane to-morrow. You can manage it quite well; all parts you've played before.

MYSELF: If I could, I would, but I'm frightfully busy this next week, heaps of things I can't get out of.

MARY: (at my elbow) Max, you've nothing particular on. I'll make your excuses to everybody, and you can get away from Mr. Lucas.

RADWELL: I heard that distinctly. You've absolutely nothing to do, so you've jolly well got to come, only for a week. And as to salary—well, what does salary matter to you now, you bloated plutocrat! Anyhow, you know I'll do the right thing.

MYSELF: It's not the money, old man—

RADWELL: (cutting me short). Then what the hell is it? Look here, you must come. I can't put those boys on at Birmingham. They were hopeless to-day. We are in a hole, man, and you've got to get us out of it.

MYSELF: (giving in). All right: I suppose I shall have to manage it.

MARY: I should jolly well think so.

RADWELL: (having heard again). And so should I. Thanks, Miss Prescott. Oh, I forgot she can't hear. Then it's settled.

MYSELF: Seems so. Look here, what's your train call? You must get me over to-morrow so as to give me a run through on Monday. And I've no time to pack, and there's no train to Bedford till after two unless you get the 6.30 in the morning. I'd go up by road, only my bus has magneto trouble—

RADWELL: Don't you worry, old man. I'm going by road myself. Little two-seater, Morris Cowley. I'll call for you about twelve, then?

MYSELF: Right ho! (after a second's pause, thinking of a final excuse). But look here, Radwell, just one moment—I say, are you there, Radwell?—hallo Radwell, hallo, hallo!

There was no answer. The astute Radwell had rung off before I had time to change my mind.