

# **Danger of Defeat**

*By Edward Marston*

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*In fond memory of my grandfathers,  
both of whom fought in the Great War as young men  
and who were profoundly changed by the experience*

# CHAPTER ONE

February, 1918

When the telephone rang in the middle of the night, Harvey Marmion was immediately awake. He jumped out of bed, shivered in the cold, grabbed a dressing gown, then pulled it on as he hurried downstairs to pick up the receiver in the hall. Superintendent Claude Chatfield barked orders into his ear. Marmion barely got a word in. When the line went dead, he ran upstairs, dressed quickly and quietly, then left his wife still sleeping soundly in bed. Ellen would understand. An absent husband meant that there was an emergency. Living with a detective inspector had made her accustomed to his sudden disappearances. Marmion was effectively on duty around the clock.

While he waited for the police car to arrive, he tried to process the information that Chatfield had given him. There had been an incident somewhere in Limehouse. A policeman had been shot. Marmion knew the area well. When he had first joined the Metropolitan Police Force, he had pounded the streets of Poplar and Limehouse. Memories of that period in his life flooded back into his mind – bad memories for the most part. It had been hard, unremitting, often dangerous work but he had come to see that it was a good apprenticeship for him. Going



back there, however, was bound to generate mixed feelings.

When the police car picked him up, it was driven to the house where Joe Keedy now lived. Marmion used the knocker to rap out a summons. The sergeant responded at once, leaping out of bed, dressing at speed, then tumbling out of the front door before diving into the back seat of the car beside Marmion. The vehicle drove off. Keedy was angry.

‘I hope there’s a bloody good reason to get us up this early,’ he said.

‘There’s the best reason possible, Joe. A police constable has been shot dead.’

‘Oh, I see. That’s different.’

‘He and his partner disturbed burglars in Limehouse.’

‘Did they get away?’

‘No,’ said Marmion. ‘They were tracked to their house. You ought to be grateful to Chat for calling on us. It sounds serious. In any case,’ he joked, ‘what could be nicer than hearing the superintendent’s voice at four in the morning? It was music to my ears.’

Keedy stifled a response. He could think of something far more satisfying to do at that hour of the night, but it involved Marmion’s daughter, Alice, to whom he was engaged. What would be typical police banter with any other colleague was impossible with his future father-in-law.

‘Why did the superintendent pick on us?’

‘We’ve got form, Joe. Don’t you remember that you once persuaded a man not to commit suicide by jumping into the Thames?’

‘That was ages ago.’

‘And I once stopped a drunken husband from slitting his wife’s neck when she dared to argue with him. I simply talked

to him quietly until he eventually dropped the knife and burst into tears. Unfortunately,’ said Marmion, ruefully, ‘it doesn’t always end so happily.’

‘More’s the pity!’

‘Something tells me that we’re facing a much bigger crisis this time.’

Keedy closed his eyes. ‘Wake me up when we get there.’

Superintendent Chatfield had reacted to the situation with speed and efficiency. He arrived at the scene to find dozens of uniformed policemen watching a small, terraced house from a safe distance. Inside, he was told, were the three suspects. One of them, at least, possessed a gun and had already shown his readiness to use it. Chatfield had no wish to see another policeman killed so he proceeded with caution. Men had already been deployed to the rear of the house in case the burglars tried to escape that way. He checked on them to see if they had spotted any movement inside or outside the house. Chatfield then returned to the front of the house with his megaphone. Before he could use it to begin negotiations, however, he saw a police car turn into the street and come to a halt. Marmion and Keedy jumped out and ran across to him. Chatfield was glad to see the detectives.

‘Three men are holed up in that house,’ he told them, pointing a finger. ‘I’m hoping to persuade them to come out, but they may have other ideas.’

‘Blimey!’ exclaimed Keedy, looking around. ‘You’ve got plenty of manpower here, sir. It’s like the Siege of Sidney Street.’

Chatfield shook his head. ‘It’s not a bit like it, Sergeant,’ he argued. ‘In that instance, there was a huge police presence, bolstered by officers from the City of London Police and

sharpshooters from the Scots Guards. Also, it was three years before the war broke out, so it was easy to rustle up reinforcements. We can't do that now.'

'There's another difference, sir,' observed Marmion, looking up and down the dark street. 'Most people are still asleep in their beds. The sound of gunfire in Sidney Street brought everyone out of their houses. The police had a job to control the crowds.'

'I'm hoping for a peaceful solution,' said Chatfield. 'I'll try to lure them out.'

'Do we have any idea who they are?'

'We have a name for one of them. According to a next-door neighbour, he's Dan Haskins. He rented the house a month or so ago and, apparently, gets on well with everyone. He told the neighbour that he works as a nightwatchman in a factory in Ben Jonson Road.' Chatfield rolled his eyes. 'In fact, as we've now discovered, he's a burglar and so are his associates. That's the other difference between this situation and the one in Sidney Street,' he went on. 'In the latter case, we were up against a murderous gang of Latvians. At least the burglars inside this house will understand English.' He raised the megaphone. 'It's time to have a conversation with them.'

When Alice Marmion came downstairs, wiping the sleep from her eyes, her mother had been up for some time. Ellen had lit a fire in the living room and was now making tea in the kitchen. She was pleased that her daughter had spent the night at home for a change. Ordinarily, Alice lived in a rented room several miles away.

'I'm sorry if the noise woke you up,' said Ellen.

'What noise?'

'The telephone rang.'

‘I didn’t hear it.’

‘You must have heard the police car screeching to a halt outside. That’s what brought me awake. I expect there’s been an emergency of some sort. Your father had to charge off somewhere.’

‘I was fast asleep, Mummy. Never heard a thing. I know that being in the Women’s Police Force can’t compare with what Daddy and Joe do, but spending all day on your feet is very tiring. I was really exhausted last night.’

‘You’ll have to get used to this, Alice.’

‘Used to what?’

‘Waking up and finding there’s nobody in the bed beside you.’

‘I see what you mean.’

‘When you and Joe are married, he’s going to be hauled out in the middle of the night from time to time.’

Alice sighed. ‘I suppose that it’s the price I pay for having a husband who is a Scotland Yard detective. Ah well,’ she added with a smile. ‘There are compensations.’

Crouching in the doorway of a nearby house, megaphone in hand, Chatfield tried to persuade the burglars that there was no escape. Armed policemen stood ready to storm the building, but the superintendent hoped that it would not be necessary. He had persuaded criminals once before that they had no option but surrender. This time, however, his words were having no visible effect. Not a single sound came from the house where Dan Haskins lived.

‘Perhaps they’ve hopped it, sir,’ suggested Marmion.

‘Impossible,’ said Chatfield, tetchily. ‘We’ve got the place surrounded.’

‘Are you quite sure that someone is inside it?’

‘Of course, I am.’

‘Have you seen anyone at the window, sir?’ asked Keedy.

‘No,’ admitted Chatfield, ‘but they were spotted entering the building. A light was switched on in the front bedroom. It went off soon after I arrived. They can hear me perfectly well. Why don’t they answer me?’

‘They must have sneaked off somehow, sir,’ said Keedy.

‘They’re still there, Sergeant. I’d stake my pension on it.’

‘Then what do we do?’

‘We bide our time and make them sweat,’ replied Chatfield. ‘When they least expect it, we’ll batter the door down and catch them napping.’

‘Can I go with them?’ volunteered Keedy, excited by the prospect.

‘You’ve no means of defending yourself.’

‘I’ll have the advantage of surprise.’

‘Leave it to those with firearms,’ advised Marmion.

‘I don’t want to miss all the fun,’ complained Keedy. ‘I’ll take a gun, if you insist. I’ve been trained to use one. The superintendent tried to persuade them to come out and they ignored him. Brute force is the only answer.’

‘It’s too dangerous, Joe.’

‘You know me. I never run away from danger.’

‘Then that’s settled,’ decided Chatfield. ‘After ten minutes, the door will be smashed open, then in you go.’

He summoned two burly policemen, each holding a shotgun. While the superintendent gave them their orders, Marmion was trying to persuade Keedy to reconsider. The last thing he wanted was for his future son-in-law to take such a risk. His words went unheard. Keedy was poised for action. Nothing would stop him. When he was offered a bulldog revolver, he checked

to see that it was loaded. Keedy felt invincible. Ten minutes ticked past, then he and the two policemen braced themselves. On a command from the superintendent, the three of them crept forward. One of the policemen used the butt of his shotgun to batter the door open, then Keedy led the way inside.

A gunshot was heard and Keedy howled in pain. Marmion gasped in horror.

After breakfast with her mother, Alice Marmion was about to leave the house and go to work when the telephone rang. Ellen lifted the receiver and spoke into it. Pleased to hear her husband's voice, she was soon aghast. Alice could see that she was hearing dreadful news. As soon as the call was over, Ellen put down the receiver with a trembling hand.

'What's happened, Mummy?' cried Alice.

'It's Joe . . .'

'What about him?

'He's been shot and rushed to hospital.'

Alice shuddered. She felt as if her whole future was suddenly in doubt.