



Photos by Walrand.

EXHIBITS AT THE AUCKLAND EXHIBITION.

JOHN FORDYCE'S PLOT.

(By William Murray Graydon.)

Karl Hamrach had gone home early that afternoon to prepare for the night journey, via Harwich, to Bremen, whither he had been summoned on urgent business. The second partner of the firm had a dinner engagement, and so it fell to Matthew Quin's lot to settle up the day's work and leave instructions for the morrow. It was nearly 8 o'clock when he left the emporium, and as he strode westward through the gloomy, deserted city streets, he wondered how many months would pass before he sat down to his desk again. For the next morning he was to leave London, sailing from Tilbury docks for South Africa; thence to Johannesburg, via Kimberley, and ultimately to that part of Bechuanaland and the Kalahari desert, which lies northwest of the Transvaal. The object of the expedition was, of course, to collect a quantity of wild animals for shipment to England.

In King William street, near the monument, Quin was stopped by a man coming from the opposite direction; his features were almost hidden by the brim of his hat and the up-turned collar of his overcoat.

"Mr Quin?" he said.

"That's right. But I fear you have the advantage of me."

"I'm John Fordyce."

Quin at once recalled the name. He knew little of the man, though, except that he had several times dropped in to see Karl Hamrach.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I was on my way to the office—Mr Hamrach said I should probably find you there," was the reply. "If you will kindly read this."

He produced an envelope, and Quin opened it by the light of a tobacconist's window. It contained the following brief letter, undoubtedly in the handwriting of his employer:—

My Dear Quin, The bearer, John Fordyce, has a request to make. It appears reasonable, and I would suggest that you grant it. Good-bye, and good luck to you.—Yours in haste, KARL HAMRACH.

"Where did you get this?" Quin asked.

At Liverpool street station, from my friend Mr Hamrach, was the satisfactory answer.

"And what do you wish?"

"A slight favour," said John Fordyce. "You sail for South Africa in the morning, I believe, and you are taking out a lot of supplies for the expedition. I want to ship some goods—tinned goods in boxes—to Johannesburg, and I am anxious that they should go straight through. There will be no trouble about that, if you will allow me to put your name upon them and send them to your ship, the Cumberland Castle, as if they were a part of your equipment. I will mark each with a blue cross, and the charges shall be prepaid when they are delivered at the dock."

"Suppose they are opened by custom officers?" suggested Quin.

"They won't be," was the calm reply. "The protection of your name will carry them through untouched. Mr Hamrach assured me that the equipments for his expeditions passed in all countries."

"Yes; that's true," admitted Quin. "And when the stuff reaches Johannesburg?"

"It will be called for immediately. You will give it upon receipt of an order from a certain Robert Smith."

Quin did not reply immediately. He saw through the matter, he believed; but he did not like it, and he wished it was in his power to refuse. The letter was genuine, however, and there was no alternative unless he chose to disregard his employer's wishes. He thought of telegraphing to Harwich to make sure that there was no mistake or misunderstanding, but he changed his mind when he remembered Karl Hamrach's peppery disposition.

"Send the boxes to the steamer, if you like," he said, curtly.

"Thank you, very much," replied John Fordyce, who had been waiting with calm confidence. "I shall not forget your kindness. Are you going my way?"

"No," muttered Quin.

He watched Karl Hamrach's mysterious fellow vanish in the fog. Then he hailed a passing cab, stepped into

it, and gave his Bloomsbury address to the driver.

"I don't care to be saddled with such a responsibility," he reflected, as he rolled along towards the bank. "Of course, it's all a trick to run some valuable goods into the Transvaal free of duty. Hamrach may have a finger in the speculation himself, but it's more reasonable to suppose that he is only obliging a friend. Anyway, he needn't have selected me for a catspaw."

With that Quin dismissed the matter from his mind, for he had more important things to think of. But ten heavy boxes, bearing his own name and marked with blue crosses, joined his legitimate luggage on the hold of the Cumberland Castle the next morning. They accompanied him to Johannesburg, where he arrived in due course of time, and were promptly chained and carted off by a drayman, who presented an order signed by Robert Smith. This was not the end of the affair, as Quin hoped. He was to learn more of the boxes of "tinned goods" in the future, and renew his brief acquaintance with the mysterious John Fordyce.

The months which followed, eventful as they were in their own way, have no direct bearing on the narrative. In October of the same year, after a trying but successful expedition to the Kalahari desert, Quin found himself back in Johannesburg. A week after his arrival, at the close of the day, he was standing at the window of his hotel room. Below him was the bustling main street of that mushroom town, which now boasted three railways, a magnificent stock exchange, fine banks and churches, club-houses and shops.

On the previous day the valuable and large lot of animals, accompanied by Carruthers and a number of helpers, had left by rail for Delagoa Bay, whence they would be shipped to England. The next morning Quin was to start for Cape Town by way of Kimberley, there to catch a fast mail steamer. He had already purchased his ticket, and he had no intention to remain longer in Johannesburg. The town was in a restless, unsettled state, owing to the wrongs of the Outlanders. Their unjust treatment by the Boer Government, and the heavy taxation to which they were subjected, threatened to lead speedily to a crisis of one sort or another.

"It's bound to come," reflected Quin, whose sympathies were, of course, with the Outlanders, "and before the close of the year, if I'm not mistaken."

As he turned from the window he heard a loud rapping, and without waiting for an invitation a man entered the room and shut the door behind him.

"Hallo! you here?" Quin exclaimed in surprise, for he instantly recognised his visitor as John Fordyce.

"Yes; I've been in Johannesburg four months," was the reply. "I'm sorry to ask another favour of you, Mr Quin; but I knew you were going down country to-morrow, and I thought you wouldn't mind taking a small packet with you."

As he spoke he produced a bulky envelope, sealed with wax, and addressed to a prominent broker of Cape Town.

"It's quite harmless, but important," he added. "It refers to a stock speculation."

"Really, this is too much," said Quin, in a vexed tone. "Why don't you send it by post?"

"Because the Boer officials are in the habit of opening letters," Fordyce replied, "and if the deal that I intend to make came to their knowledge they would not hesitate to use it to their own advantage on the exchange."

Quin was aware that this was true, and the fact went far to allay what slight suspicion he felt.

"You are almost a stranger to me, Mr Fordyce," he said, "and your request is certainly a cool one. But I don't like to refuse so small a service, and I'll take the letter, if you will give me your word of honour that it contains no more than what you have stated."

"It refers to a deal in stocks—that is all," declared Fordyce. "I'm awfully obliged to you, sir, and if you ever want a good tip you'll know where to get it. I must be off at once—I have a pressing engagement. Thanks again for your kindness."

With that he thrust the envelope into Quin's hands, opened the door, and was gone. His rapid footsteps died away.