

## *The Man in the Brown Coat*

### The Tobacconist's Story

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by Mary Kyle Dallas  
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“Excuse me, sir; when I first saw you come in, I thought you were—ahem!—*him*, sir—Havanas? yes, sir—a very fine quality, and cheaper than you can find them elsewhere. Have a light, sir? For whom did I take you? Law, sir, I—I took you for the gentleman in the brown coat!

“You see, you *are* a gentleman in a brown coat—and that’s how the mistake arose. And it is a curious coincidence that the first time he ever came into this shop, he came inquiring, as you did, for Havanas.

“Well, it is a story—though it’s a thing, no doubt, that happens every day. But a little event is a great one to quiet folks like me. Here I live, year in and year out, hardly going anywhere unless it is to church—I have a seat in Doctor Klicket’s—or to my brother John’s, at Elizabeth, where he has as fine a family as you ever saw. And I have no wife; though I admire the ladies. Yes, it was rather a remarkable event in *my* life!

“The rooms above, sir, are what you wouldn’t expect from the outside of the house. High ceiling, marble mantels, and a centre-piece. The gas is in, too, in a chandelier; but that the tenant I’m goin’ to tell you about put in himself.

“I had some trouble letting ’em, sir, at times; because, you see, folks willing to pay the price I asked didn’t want to live over a tobacconist’s shop. So, one year, the bill was up a long while, and I did nothing but show the room to folks that bothered my life out.

“One English party I never shall forget, for they were more than flesh and blood could stand. Glad I was then, you may guess, when, one day, a gentleman—a very young gentleman to hire rooms, walked into my shop; and, after seeing the rooms, said that he’d take ’em.

“‘Well, sir,’ said I, ‘of course, I’m glad to let ’em, but bachelor rooms are, at times, scenes of—of dissipation and champagne, sir; and I’m a very quiet man and a professor.’

“Said he, blushing:

“‘They’ll not be bachelor rooms, Mr. Longweed,’ said he, ‘I’m going to bring a wife here.’

“‘Oh, in that case,’ said I, ‘accept my apologies, and allow me to congratulate you.’

“Said he, ‘Thank you!’

“Paid a quarter in advance, bought a box of cigars, and walked out.

“No sooner had he gone than I sent for Mrs. Swasher, a person of color over the way, to give the place a cleaning.

“While she was doing it, I first saw the gentleman in the brown coat, sir. He bought four Havanas, and lit one; and, smoking it, he began to talk.

“‘House-cleaning?’ said he.

“‘Yes, sir,’ said I; ‘for a new tenant, a young married gentleman, sir.’

“‘Perhaps, the one I saw you let out ten minutes ago?’ said he, ‘a fair young fellow, in a blue neck tie?’

“‘That’s the gentleman,’ said I.

“‘Young to be married?’ said he.

“‘You are correct,’ said I: ‘very.’

“‘Well, you are going to be easy with him as to rent, I hope, seeing it’s not likely his salary is high?’ said the gentleman.

“‘Oh,’ said I, ‘no doubt he has plenty of money. Firstly, he asked me no questions, but agreed to take the rooms, and laid down a quarter in advance, and took the change out in a lot of such cigars as you are smoking; and, secondly, there’s a way about him as though he could do what he chose; a something that makes me know he don’t have to count shillings. The rent is low for the rooms.’

“And then I told him what they were, and what I charged, and he went up to see ’em.

“‘They’re not the rooms you’d have expected over my shop?’ said I.

“And said he, ‘*They are not.*’

“My new tenant moved in or began to move in next day. He did it in a helter-skelter way which I laid to his youth. Firstly he put up at the windows a pair of common shades, such as any poor mechanic might have, and then, after night, came with a man and such lace curtains as a Fifth Avenue family would be proud of, and put them inside.

“The next night came a pair of velvet carpets, and the man with the gas fixtures.

“Next night bedroom furniture, carved black walnut, and some mantel ornaments.

“Just after he’d gone away, leaving the key with me, and when I was about to shut up shop, in walked the gentleman with the brown coat, and bought some snuff, and chatted away about one thing and another, until I told him about my tenant’s new furniture.

“If there’s a thing I like to look at it’s a new set of furniture when it’s handsome,” said he.

“So I took him up and we looked at the things together. I did that every time any new thing came, he seemed to take such an interest in the young couple.

“Well, at last all being ready, my young tenant brought home his lady. She looked older than he did, and was very handsome—very. So fair with such pink cheeks, and such a waist, and they settled down in the rooms all alone, and had their meals sent in from a restaurant. The costliest things to be had, sir, and had wine by the basket. She was a very pleasant-spoken lady, but she seemed to have no female friends. Indeed, they had no company. Not a soul came to see them. I began to think it was a runaway match.

“Whatever it was, he was in business and was out all day, and she passed her time reading novels and smoking cigarettes. And she never went out all day. But in the evening they went to places of amusement, and Sundays they spent together.

“Perhaps you think the gentleman in the brown coat had stopped coming; but no, sir. He knew all about it, and even had a peep at the lady.

“‘She was handsome,’ he said, ‘and the young gentleman proved to have good taste.’

“And then he laughed. I took it from his laugh that the gentleman in the brown coat was not over respectful to ladies in his own mind.

“He knew all about ’em, sir, for it was the young gentleman’s request that I should take messages and keep bills and things for him and let no one go up stairs to trouble the lady. So I knew about what he spent, and talking always was my failing. I’m free to confess it, sir, I always liked to talk.

“After awhile I began to notice one thing. My young gentleman began to look worried, pale and strange. He said he was well, but something ailed him—something, I knew. Perhaps he was working too hard, I thought. But now instead of running with a smile up stairs, he’d walk up slow, and he didn’t play on the guitar and sing as he used. It was just a month from his moving in that I noticed this, and I began to wonder whether the lady had a sweet temper with her pretty face.

“I don’t listen, sir. I would scorn to do it. But I know that she was sulky sometimes, and then parcels of new clothes would come and she’d cheer up.

“At last I heard her scolding about a velvet cloak, openly on the stairs, and he banged the door after him. But at five that day came a cloak, in a box—a splendid thing, sir, as ever eyes were set on.

“The gentleman in a brown overcoat walked in behind the boy that brought it.

“From Stewart’s,’ he said. ‘Let’s take a peep,’ and did it as cool as a cucumber.

“Price three hundred dollars,’ says he.

“Tie it up again, Mr. Longweed.’

“Do you know what salary your young gentleman gets?’

“Said I, ‘No, sir.’ Said he, ‘Twice that a year.’

“Said I, ‘Then he won’t be in debt.’

“This is paid for,’ said he, showing me the receipted bill inside the cloak.

“Now, my friend, do you smell a rat?’

“Said I, ‘No, sir, not that I’m aware.’

“Figuratively,’ says he, ‘you have a nice pair of tenants up stairs, Mr. Longweed, I regret to say.’

“Good Lord, what do you mean?’ said I. He winked.

‘Said he, ‘No matter,’ and out he walked.

“Ten minutes after in came my young man.

“He looked so pretty and fair and innocent that I felt angry to have listened to a word against him. And it came into my head to give him a hint that he had an enemy. Said I:

“Look here, sir. I’ve no business to ask perhaps. But is there anyone who has a right to ask questions about you, and find fault with your spending too much money?’

“He grew pale as I looked at him.

“Does any one?’ said he.

“And I told him of the man in the brown coat. He stared at me harder, with eyes starting from their sockets.

“Good Heavens!’ said he. ‘Good Heavens!’

“If it’s a runaway match, and he is your father, or the lady’s,’ said I, ‘why not try to make it up.’

“Then he laughed.”

“‘God bless you,’ said he, and shook my hand and went up stairs.

“‘I went out to take my tea, and while I was taking it there came a rapping on my counter. I went in. There stood the gentleman in the brown overcoat, with two policemen.

“‘Your tenant is in, Mr. Longweed?’ said he.

“‘Yes, sir,’ said I.

“‘Show us up,’ said he. ‘I don’t mind telling you now that I’m Detective Catchall, may be you’ve heard of me, and your young clerk upstairs has been robbing his employer on a scale that is almost worthy of admiration. The boldest thing that I’ve known in my experience.’

“‘I had to sit down then, I felt faint.

“‘I can’t keep you from going up,’ said I. ‘But to think it of him. It’s dreadful. Poor boy.’

“‘And then, sir, though I knew the man in brown was only doing his duty as a protector of the public property ought, I hated him.

“‘They went up, and I heard a noise—they were knocking at the door, I thought; but in a moment down came Detective Catchall.

“‘Have you a key?’ he said. ‘I believe that fellow has shot himself.’

“‘And so he had. We opened the door, and there they lay, both of them, stone dead, in each other’s arms. He had killed her first, and then himself.

“‘Mrs. Swasher, the colored person who was sent for, tells me that the lady’s beauty was all paint, and that she was really not young and not handsome, and—but no matter, sir, I never wanted to know about it. The young gentleman had respectable friends, and was well reared, and it was this lady that was the cause of all.

“‘I know he was wicked and the gentleman in a brown coat was, as I said before, only doing his duty. But I wish I hadn’t talked to him; and I couldn’t sell him a cigar to save my life; it is weak of me—criminal, maybe—I don’t know. But I can’t help it, and that’s the truth. Another match, sir? A cigar is a good thing on a cold walk and—Good evening.’”

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