

# **Kate Plus Ten**

## **By**

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***Freeditorial*** 

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### **PROLOGUE**

‘STRATEGY,’ growled the General, ‘is the comfort of heroes.’

‘And the science of Generals,’ piped the little girl sitting crossed-legged at his feet.

The old man looked down at her suspiciously under his white shaggy brows and chuckled.

‘I wish you were a boy,’ he complained. The little girl laughed shrilly and looked up at her grand- father with big shining eyes, for if Katharine Westhanger adored any human being in the world, it was the grim old man, white- maned and eagle-faced, whose constant companion she was.

They sat under a big elm on a hot day in June.

From where they sat there was as cheerful a view as County Galway could offer. On their left was the ancient home of the Masserfields, of which General Sir Shaun Masserfield, that great strategist, was the last representative in the tail male. Beyond the house lay a big black field where leisurely labourers were digging and stacking the peat. In a smaller field with broken stone walls grazed four cows which formed the last of the Masser field stock.

It was a poor house and a poor estate. Poverty showed in the broken windows of the east wing—visible from where they sat—which had been long since abandoned to rats and mice and lumber, in the peeling plaster work, in the

unkempt garden, even in the General's own shiny attire.

He looked down at the girl and smiled.

'Faith,' he said, 'ye've been reading strategy, have ye?'

Katharine nodded.

'Tis a wonderful science,' said Sir Shaun with a sigh. 'I've written six books on the subject, and I've been robbed on every one of 'em!'

An old man with bowed shoulders came out of the house, and without hurrying made his way through the garden to pick those dead leaves which caught and offended his eye. He came up to the two and knuckled his forehead.

'The dinner is sarved, ye'r honour's lordship.'

The General got up with the aid of his stick.

'The dinner is sarved, Kate,' he repeated solemnly and hand in hand they went back to the house, and over a leg of pork—most untempting meal for a hot day, yet the General and his granddaughter did it full justice—they resumed their discussion on what was to the General the profoundest subject that civilization offered.

It is unnecessary to say that General Sir Shaun Masserfield was an authority. His books, particularly his *Modern Artillery as Applied to the Principles of Strategy*, have been translated into every language. He was for many years at the head of a department at the War Office, and at least two of his works have been adopted as text-books for the Italian army.

The girl listened in silence as the old man waxed more and more eloquent on his favourite subject, 'Napoleon's defeat of Schwarzenberg' and those wonderful battles which led to the armistice of 1814, and then—

'It seems such a waste,' she said.

He stared at her.

'Waste,' he roared, '—waste of what?'

'Of life and money and everything,' she said.

'Ye're a silly little donkey,' he growled. 'What can you know about it, a child of thirteen!'

‘Colonel Westhanger says— ’

‘Colonel Westhanger,’ snapped the old man, ‘is a fool and a rascal! He is a bigger fool, and a bigger rascal, than your father,’ he added violently. ‘The Westhangers are all fools, and Molly Maguires. Bad luck to them! If teeth were diamonds, ye’d have to live on pap!’

The little girl listened unmoved to this tirade against her nearest relations.

‘Colonel Westhanger says,’ she continued, ‘hat if all the genius which was put into war— ’

‘It’s little he has put in,’ sneered the old man, ‘the bould militiaman!’

‘He is in the regular army,’ corrected the girl.

‘It’s nothing for the army to be proud of,’ countered the General, thumping the table with the handle of his knife; ‘and did he talk about strategy? The poor stupid man!’

Katharine shook her head laughingly. ‘Oh, General,’ she said (she never called him by any other term), ‘of course he didn’t talk about strategy. He only said what a waste it was of money, and life, and everything.’

‘And he put money first, I’ll swear.’

‘Of life and everything,’ said the girl, not noticing the interruption, ‘when all the science and cleverness could be applied to making money.’

‘To making money! ’ repeated the General triumphantly. ‘That is the sort of fool he is. He couldn’t make money by strategy or anything else. God knows what is going to happen to you when I die, for this estate goes to my own brother’s son, a miserable reptile of an Orangeman, and your father is no more capable of keeping you than I am of being dishonest.’

He cut himself another thick slice of pork before he spoke again, and then he asked a little curiously, as though he had been turning the matter over in his mind – ‘And how would a knowledge of strategy help a man to make money?’ he asked.

The girl rolled up her serviette before she replied.

‘There are many ways,’ she said quietly, ‘but I don’t think that Colonel Westhanger or father could make it. They aren’t great strategists like us,’ she said calmly.

The old man chuckled.

‘Us!’ he repeated; ‘and how would you make money?’

Katharine Westhanger shook her head. ‘I cannot tell you right off,’ she said; ‘there are so many ways.’

‘Give me one,’ asked the General, pushing back his chair.

‘Well,’ she said slowly, ‘suppose we sent Terence down to the railway station and took the grease cap off his wheel, and when he got to the road past the O’Gormans’ the wheel came off. What would Terence do?’

She looked up at the ceiling and worked out each development of the situation in slow, even tones.

‘First of all Terence would go up to the O’Gormans’ house, and the Major’s agent would lend him his grand new chaise.’

‘Well, we could borrow it anyway,’ said the General, ‘so what’s the good of that foolery?’

‘All the world would know we had borrowed the chaise to impress the gentleman who is coming down from Dublin to buy your pictures.’

‘How did you know I was selling the pictures?’ asked the General sharply. It was a subject on which he was rather sore. The two Vandykes which hung in the gaunt entrance hall of the house represented the last of his valuable possessions, and only the eccentric behaviour of certain Mexican stocks in which he had invested many years before, and the consequent stoppage of his income—he had long since mortgaged his pension—would have induced him to part with these relics of Masserfield prosperity.

‘How did I know?’ she answered; ‘how does a General know what is happening out of sight?’

‘You have been spying,’ he accused, but she shook her head.

‘Never mind how I know, dear,’ she said; ‘let me go on with the story. Terence brings the fine stranger back, and we meet him near the O’Gormans’. We go up to the O’Gormans’ grand house and we ask for the Major, who, being a good Irish landlord, is now in London with Mrs. O’Gorman and the children.’

‘The Major said I could use the house while he was away. He has a fine library,’ said the General.

‘Take him to the library and show him the books. Have the pictures waiting for him there—it’s the surroundings that count. Mrs. O’Shea, the Major’s

housekeeper, will do anything for me.’

‘Where’s the strategy?’ asked the old man.

The girl laughed.

‘“To compel the enemy to fight on chosen ground secures for the attacker an advantage—”’

‘She’s quoting my own book at me,’ said the General in despair; ‘but why make a mystery of it? Why not go straight away to Mrs. O’Shea, and tell her what you want to do?’

‘We should then be there by design. Otherwise we shall be there by accident,’ said the girl decisively. ‘If by design, the enemy will know, for we shall be at the mercy of any chance word which Mrs. O’Shea might drop. If by accident, our presence at the Hall will be understood by both parties.’

‘A tricky business,’ growled the General. ‘Kate, there’s either a great strategist, or a great criminal, lost in you.’

She got up and pulled her skirts down over her thin legs.

‘I don’t think anything is lost yet,’ she said complacently.

THIS is one little glimpse of Katharine Westhanger’s childhood. It was a childhood spent almost entirely in the company of old Shaun Masserfield, for the visits to her disreputable father and her no less questionable uncle were few and far between.

They were legally her trustees for the small property which her mother had left, but which the General suspected, and the girl knew, had long since been dissipated by her ‘guardians,’ and it was necessary from time to time that they should make some show of conferring with her. In the main she was alone, ‘completing her education in Ireland,’ as her father would glibly explain.

She read much, thought a great deal, and she had the vast experience of her grandfather to draw upon.

A year before his death, when she was nearing fifteen, an event occurred which probably did more to shape the after-course of her remarkable life than any other. There was a jack-of-all-trades employed about the house who was variously gardener, coachman, valet and general factotum to Sir Shaun.

Terence (he seems to have had no other name) was a townsman. He had been born, and lived the earlier years of his life, in the city of Dublin. Whatever

might be his faults, he was devoted to the girl, and there was no service which mortal man could render that he hesitated to give.

One afternoon Kate was waited upon by an inspector of police. Her grandfather had gone to bed with an attack of rheumatism, and she received the officer of the law in the poverty-stricken drawing-room with its framed photographs and mahogany furniture.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Westhanger,’ said the inspector with a cheery smile. ‘I am sorry to bother you, but we are having a little trouble in this neighbourhood, and I thought you might help me.’

She knew well enough what the trouble was, before he began to speak.

‘In three weeks there have been three burglaries in this neighbourhood, and it is very clear that the work is being done by a local man. Major O’Gorman’s, Lord Pretherston’s and Mr. Castlereigh’s houses have been broken into and property has been taken. All the stations have been watched and the roads have been patrolled, and no strangers have been seen here or hereabouts.’

‘And do you think it is grandfather?’ she asked innocently.

He laughed.

‘No, miss,’ he said; ‘but it is very possible that it is somebody h this house.’

‘Me?’ she asked with affected alarm.

‘I put all my cards on the table, Miss. I think it is your man Terence. He has had a conviction in Dublin, as I suppose you know.’

‘For burglary?’

‘For petty larceny,’ said the inspector. ‘Can you tell me where he was last night?’

She nodded. ‘I can tell you almost ail his movements between six o’clock and eleven,’ she said readily.

‘The burglary was committed at ten, if you will excuse the interruption, so that if you can account for Terence between nine and ten that will satisfy me.’

‘Won’t you sit down, inspector?’ She seated herself. ‘At nine o’clock, or perhaps it was ten minutes to nine, because the dining-room clock is ten minutes fast, Terence came in with my supper. The General was in bed, and Cassidy and his wife had gone to see his mother, who is ill.’

‘So that there were only you and Terence in the house?’

‘And the General,’ she smiled; ‘but the General was in bed. At half-past nine Terence cleared away, and at a quarter to ten I rang the bell for my coffee. Then I remembered that the bell was out of order, and went to the kitchen. When Terence brought the coffee I was writing a letter, and I asked him to wait till I had finished it because the bell not being in good working order I didn’t want to go down into the kitchen again as I did for my coffee. The clock had struck ten before I had finished my letter, and I then began another letter to Mullins the grocer, which was finished by ten minutes past ten. Terence left the house—’

‘That’s all right,’ interrupted the inspector, obviously disappointed; ‘it cannot be Terence, because the burglar was seen to leave from the balcony of Lord Pretherston’s house at five minutes to ten. He was shot at when he was crossing the lawn. I am sorry to have bothered you. By the way, where is he now?’ he asked.

‘He is in the stable. Shall I call him?’

The inspector hesitated.

‘No, it is not necessary. May I ask you not to mention the fact that I called?’

She waited until she saw the police officer mount his horse and, riding through the drive, go galloping along the ugly road that led to the village, and then she rang the bell. The old servitor appeared.

‘Tell Terence I want him,’ she said.

Terence came in a little apprehensively, a lank young man with a smiling eye and with well-plastered hair. Terence had the reputation of being a local dandy.

‘Close the door, Terence,’ said the girl quietly. ‘What is the matter with your hand?’

‘I cut it, m’lady,’ said Terence, putting the bandaged hand behind him.

‘You were shot,’ said the girl calmly; ‘you were shot while you were crossing Lord Pretherston’s lawn. Where do you keep the loot?’

The man turned a sickly white. ‘I’ll swear...!’

‘Don’t be silly, Terence,’ said the girl. ‘Show me all you have stolen.’

‘For the Virgin’s sake, Miss, don’t betray me!’ gasped Terence. ‘I must have been mad...!’

‘You are being mad now,’ said the girl coolly.

‘Gee up. Don’t make an exhibition of yourself! Show me where all the things are you have stolen. You were out last night from eight to ten-thirty. I saw you sneaking back to the house from my window.’

At the back of the house was a big tool shed where the peat-cutters kept their implements, and in the floor of this a square hole had been dug, which had been cunningly framed in and covered by a trap-door. The trap in its turn was hidden by a large chest which had been drawn across it. Terence alone had the key, and only Terence ever entered the little building.

‘It took me a month to dig and fix it,’ said Terence with dismal pride. ‘Oh, whirra!’

From the interior of the ‘safe deposit’ Terence extracted three small hand-bags. Two of them were new, and one the girl recognized as the property of her grandfather.

‘Bring them to the house,’ she said. She led the way to her room, ushered him in and closed and locked the door. ‘Now, we will see what you have.’

It was a remarkable display, for the man’s operations had been thorough, and since most of his robberies had been committed in a restricted period of time before the alarm had spread, and householders had paid extra attention to the fastening of their windows and the security of their valuables, the haul had been amazingly big.

There was a pearl collar and a pearl necklace which the girl recognized as Mrs. O’Gorman’s. There were two big wads of banknotes, and as far as the girl could judge about £200 in gold contained in a little wash-leather bag.

‘How could you get rid of the jewellery?’ she asked.

The young man, a dejected figure sitting on the edge of a chair, shook his melancholy head. ‘Sure, ’twas a bad day for me entirely when I came here,’ he moaned.

‘Listen, you wretched creature,’ said the girl impatiently, ‘how can you get rid of this jewellery?’

‘I’d be selling it in Dublin, miss. There’s an ould man—’

‘That will do,’ she said. With skilful fingers she separated the jewellery and packed it securely in a large cardboard box, wrapping each jewel in paper.



‘Where do you live in Dublin? Have you an address?’ she asked.

The man looked at her suspiciously.

‘I stay wid my brother,’ he said.

‘Write his address down here.’

She gave him a sheet of paper, and after a moment’s hesitation he crossed to her little writing-table and laboriously wrote.

‘Now fill in this form,’ she said. She took from her stationery case a yellow parcels’ post label and stood over the man directing him. When he had finished she blotted the form, took £5 from the heap of gold and handed it to him. Then she sat down, her hands folded on her lap, her two steady eyes fixed upon him. ’

‘Terence,’ she said, ‘there is a train leaves Galway for Dublin at eight o’clock tonight. It will take you three hours to walk to Galway, or you can put the pony in the car and drive over and leave it with Donoghue.’

He stared at her with mouth wide open.

‘What will ye be afther doing, miss?’ he whispered.

‘I shall send these things on by parcels post. Go to your brother’s house. You should receive the parcel tomorrow afternoon,’ she said calmly. ‘My advice to you is to sell the jewels and get out of Ireland as quickly as you can. America is a good place for a man with your ability.’

‘And you are not sending for the police?’ he asked after a long pause.

She shook her head.

A slow cunning smile dawned on his face.

The arrogant thought which flowed through his shallow brain was revealed when he said with a smirk, ‘You may be getting yourself into trouble for my sake, m’lady?’

She looked him up and down, and he wilted under the scorn in her eyes.

‘I shall have my reward, Terence,’ she said steadily. ‘I am taking the money as my share.’ She opened the drawer of her table and swept the package of notes and the bag of gold into its interior, then closed the drawer with a snap.

He put his hand to his head in a gesture of bewilderment.

‘Sure, miss, ye’re joking!’ he gasped. ‘Why, if ye are found out—if I give ye away...!’

She laughed.

‘Go quickly, Terence,’ she said quietly. ‘If you walk you’ve got three hours to consider what chance you have of being believed.’

It took longer than three hours for Terence to settle the matter to his satisfaction. He was still wrestling with the problem a week later, from the deck of the big Cunarder when she swung out of Queenstown Harbour.

## CHAPTER 1

THE Earl of Flanborough pressed a bell-push by the side of his study table, and, after an interval of exactly three seconds, pressed it again, though the footman’s lobby could not have been far short of fifty yards from the library, and the serving-man was never born who could sprint that distance in three seconds.

Yet, in such awe was his lordship held that morning by his man-servants, his maid-servants and everything within his gates, that Sibble, the first footman, made the distance in five.

‘Why the dickens didn’t you answer my bell when I ring?’ snapped the Earl and glared at his red-faced servant. Sibble did not reply, knowing by experience that, even as silence was insolence, speech could be nothing less than impertinence.

Lord Flanborough was slightly over middle age, thin, bald and dyspeptic. His face was mean and insignificant, and if you looked for any resemblance to the somewhat pleasant faces of the Feltons and Flanboroughs of past generations which stared mildly or fiercely, or (as in the case of the first Baron Felton and Flanborough, a poet and contemporary of Lovelace) with gentle melancholy from their massive frames in the long hall, you looked in vain. For George Percy Allington Felton, Earl of Flanborough, Baron Felton and Baron Sedgely of Waybrook, was only remotely related to the illustrious line of Feltons, and had inherited the title and the heavily mortgaged estates of his great-uncle by sheer bad luck. This was the uncharitable view of truer Feltons who stood, however, more remotely in the line of succession.

Lord Flanborough had been Mr. George Felton of Felton, Heinrich & Somes, a firm which controlled extensive mining properties in various parts of the world, and the one bright spot in his succession to the peerage lay in the fact

that he brought some two millions sterling to the task of freeing the estates of their encumbrances. He was a shrewd man, and an unpleasant man, but he had never been so objectionably unpleasant until he assumed the style and title of Flanborough; and never so completely and impossibly unpleasant in the period of his lordship as he had been that morning.

‘Now, what did I want you for?’ asked Lord Flanborough in vexation, ‘I rang for something – if you had only answered at once instead of dawdling about, I should – ah, yes – tell Lady Moya that I wish to see her.’

Sibble made his escape thankfully. Lord Flanborough pulled at his weedy moustache and looked at the virgin sheet of paper before him. Then he took up his pen and wrote –

‘LOST OR STOLEN

‘Valuable pearl chain, consisting of eighty-three graduated pearls. Any person giving information which will lead to its recovery will receive a reward of two hundred pounds.’

He paused, scratched out ‘two hundred pounds’ and substituted ‘one hundred pounds.’ This did not satisfy him, and he altered the sum to ‘fifty pounds.’ He sat considering even this modest figure, and eventually struck out that amount and wrote, ‘will be suitably rewarded.’

He heard the door click, and looked up. ‘Ah—Moya. I am just tinkering away at an advertisement,’ he said with a smile. The Lady Moya Felton was twenty-two and pretty. She recollected in her admirable person many of the traditional family graces which had so malignantly avoided her parent. Well-shaped and of a gracious carriage, though no more than medium in height, the face with its delicacy of moulding was wholly Felton. If the stubborn chin, the firm mouth and the china-blue eyes had come from the dead and gone Sedgelys, the hair of bronze gold was peculiarly Feltonesque. When she spoke, however, the carping critic might complain that the voice lacked the rich quality upon which the family prided itself, for the Feltons were orators in those days when a parliamentary speech read like something out of a book. Moya’s voice was a trifle hard and without body; it was also just a little unsympathetic.

Lord Flanborough boasted with good cause that his daughter was a practical little woman,’ and at least one man beside her father could testify to this quality.

‘Dear, don’t you think it is a little absurd—advertising?’ asked the girl. She seated herself at the other side of the desk and, reaching out her hand, opened a silver box and helped herself to one of her father’s cigarettes.

‘Why absurd, darling?’ asked Lord Flanborough testily. ‘Lost property has been found, before now, by means of advertising. I remember, years ago when I was in the city, there was a fellow named Goldberg – ’

‘Please forget all about the city for a moment,’ she smiled lighting her cigarette, ‘and review all the circumstances. Firstly, I had the pearls when I was at Lady Machinstone’s house. I danced with quiet, respectable people— Sir Ralph Sapson, Sir George Felixburn, Lord Fethington, Major Aitkens, and that awfully nice boy of Machinstones’. They didn’t steal them. I had the pearls when I left, because I saw them as I was fastening my fur cloak. I had them in the car, because I touched them just before we reached the house. I don’t remember taking them off—but then I was dead tired and hardly remember going to bed. Obviously, Martin is the thief. She is the only person who has access to my room, she helped me undress; it is as plain as a pikestaff.’

Lord Flanborough tapped his large white teeth with his pen-holder, a practice of his which annoyed his daughter beyond words, though at the moment she deemed it expedient to overlook the fault. The loss had frightened her, for the pearls were worth three thousand pounds, and she was one of those people whose standard of values had a currency basis.

‘I have asked Scotland Yard to send their very best man,’ said Lord Flanborough importantly. ‘Where is Martin?’

‘Locked in her room. I have told Fellows to sit outside her door,’ said the girl, and then interestedly, ‘When will the detective arrive?’

Lord Flanborough picked up an open telegraph form from the table. ‘“Sending Inspector Pretherston” – by Jove!’ He blinked across the desk at his daughter.

‘Pretherston,’ she repeated thoughtfully, ‘isn’t it strange?’

‘Pretherston—hum,’ said her father, and looked at her again. If he expected to see any confusion, any heightening of colour, even so much as a faltering of glance, he was relieved, for she met his gaze steadfastly, save that there was a far-away look in her eyes, and a certain speculative narrowing of lids.

The romance was five years old, and if she cherished the memory of it, it was the charity which she might show to a favoured piece in her china cupboard; it was something to be taken out and dusted at intervals.

Michael Pretherston was a bad match from every point of view, though his

invalid cousin was a peer of the realm and Michael would one day be Pretherston of Pretherston. He was hideously poor, he was casual, he had no respect for wealth, he held the most outrageous views on the church, society and the state; he was, in fact, something as nearly approaching an anarchist as Lord Flanborough ever expected or feared to meet. His wooing had been brief but tempestuous. The girl had been overwhelmed and had given her promise. Recovering her reason in the morning, and realizing (as she said) that love was not 'everything,' she had written him a letter of fourteen pages in which she had categorically set forth the essential conditions to their union. These called for the abandonment of all his principles, the re-establishment of all his shattered beliefs and an estimate of the cost of placing Pretherston Court in a state of repair for the reception of the Lady Moya Pretherston (nee Felton).

To her fourteen pages, he had returned a thirty-two-page letter which was at once an affront and a justification for anarchy. It was not a love-letter, rather was it something between a pamphlet by Henry George and a treatise by Jean Jacques Rousseau, interspersed with passionate appeals to her womanhood and offensive references to her 'huckster-souled' father.

'He was always a wild sort of chap,' said Lord Flanborough; shaking his head darkly. 'I understood that he had gone abroad.'

'I suppose there are other Pretherstons,' said the girl; 'still it is strange, isn't it?'

'Do you ever feel... ?' began her father awkwardly. She smiled and laid down her cigarette on the crystal ash-tray.

'He was wholly impossible,' she agreed. There came a gentle tap at the door and a girl entered. She was dressed neatly in black, and her prettiness was of a different type to that of her employer (for Lady Moya indulged in the luxury of a secretary).

It was a beautiful face, with a hint of tragedy in the downturned lips, and, it seemed, a history of mild sorrow in her big grey eyes. Yet of sorrow she knew nothing, and such tragedy as she had met had left her unmoved. Her abundant hair was of a rich brown, the hand that clasped a note-book to her bosom was small and artistic. She was an inch taller than Lady Moya, but because she did not show the same erectness of carriage, she seemed shorter.

'Father, you asked me to let you have Miss Tenby this morning,' said Lady Moya, with a nod for the girl. 'I don't know whether you will still want her!'

'I am so sorry this dreadful thing has happened, Lord Flanborough,' said the girl in a low voice; 'it must be terrible to feel that there is a thief in the house.'

Lord Flanborough smiled good-humouredly.

‘We shall recover the pearls, I am certain,’ he said. ‘Don’t let it worry you, Miss Tenby—I hope you are comfortable?’

‘Very, Lord Flanborough,’ said the girl gratefully.

‘And the work is not too hard, eh?’ The girl smiled slightly.

‘It is nothing – I feel awfully ashamed of myself sometimes. I have been with you a month, and have hardly earned my salt.’

‘That’s all right,’ replied his lordship with great condescension, ‘You have already been of the greatest assistance to me and we shall find you plenty of other work. I was glad to see you in church on Sunday. The vicar tells me that you are a regular attendant.’

The girl inclined her head, but said nothing. For a while she waited, and then at a word of polite dismissal she left the library.

‘Deuced nice girl, that,’ said his lordship approvingly.

‘She works well and quickly, and she can read French beautifully—I was very fortunate,’ said Moya carelessly.

‘What were we talking about when she came in? Oh, yes – Michael Pretherston. I wonder now –’

The door opened and a footman announced – ‘Inspector Pretherston, m’lord.’

‘Inspector Michael Pretherston, you silly ass,’ corrected the annoyed young man in the doorway. It was Michael then!

A little older, a little better-looking, a little more decisive—but Michael as impetuous and irresponsible as ever.

‘He spoilt my entrance, Moya,’ he laughed as he came with rapid strides toward the girl. ‘How are you after all these years?—as pretty as ever, confound you! Ah, Lord Flanborough, you’re wearing well—I read your speech in the House of Lords on the Shipping Bill—a fine speech, did you make it up your self?’

Moya laughed softly, and saved what might have been a most embarrassing situation – for his lordship was framing a dignified protest against the suggestion that he had shared the honours of authorship.

‘You are not changed, Michael,’ she said, looking at him with undisguised, but none the less detached admiration; ‘but what on earth are you doing in the police force?’

‘Extraordinary,’ murmured Lord Flanborough, and added humorously, ‘and an anarchist, too!’

‘It is a long story,’ said Michael. ‘I really received my promotion in the Special Branch—the Foreign Office branch—and was transferred to the C.I.D. after we caught the Callam crowd, the continental confidence tricksters. It is disgraceful that I should be an inspector, isn’t it? But merit tells!’

He chuckled again, then of a sudden grew serious.

‘I’m forgetting I’ve a job to do—what’s the trouble?’

Lord Flanborough explained the object of his urgent call, and a look of disappointment appeared upon Michael Pretherston’s face.

‘A miserable little larceny,’ he said reproachfully. ‘I thought at least Moya had been kidnapped. Now, tell me all that happened on the night you lost the pearls.’

Step by step the girl related her movements, and the periods at which she had evidence that the pearls were still with her.

‘And then you reached your bedroom,’ said Michael, ‘and what happened there? First of all, you took your fur wrap off.’

‘Yes,’ nodded the girl.

‘Were you in a cheerful frame of mind or were you rather cross?’

‘Does that matter?’ she asked in surprise.

‘Everything matters to the patient and systematic officer of the law. Temperamental clues are as interesting and material as any other.’

‘Well, if the truth were told,’ she confessed, ‘I was rather cross and very tired.’

‘Did you take your cloak off, or did your woman?’

‘I took it off myself,’ she said, after a pause, ‘and hung it up.’

He asked her few more questions.

‘Now we will see the sorrowful Martin,’ he said; ‘and let me tell you this,

Moya, that if this girl is innocent, she has grounds for action against you for false imprisonment.'

'What do you mean?' demanded Lord Flanborough with asperity. 'I have a perfect right to detain anybody I think is guilty of theft.'

'You have no more right to lock a woman in a room,' said the other calmly, 'than I have to stand you on your head. But that is beside the point. Lead me to the prisoner.'

The prisoner was very pale and very tearful, a middle-aged woman who felt her position acutely, and between sobs and wails made an incoherent protest of her innocence.

'I suppose you have searched everywhere?' asked Michael, turning to the girl.

'Everywhere,' she replied emphatically. 'I have had every box and every corner of the room examined.'

'Suppose the string of the pearls broke, would they all fall off?'

'No, they would still remain on, because each pearl was secured. Father gave them to me as a birthday present, and he was very particular on that point.'

'I would like to bet,' said Michael suddenly, 'that those pearls are not out of this room. Show me your wardrobe.'

The girl's wardrobe occupied the whole of one wall of her dressing-room, and the tearful Martin opened the rosewood doors for his inspection.

'This your fur coat, I presume? Did you examine this after the loss?'

'Examine the cloak!' said Lady Moya in surprise; 'of course not. What has the cloak to do with the loss? There are no pockets in it.'

'But if I know anything about the fur cloaks that are fashionable this season,' said Michael wisely, 'I should say that there is a possibility that this luxurious garment had a great deal to do with the loss. In fact, my dear Moya,' he said, 'your mysterious loss has been duplicated and triplicated this year. In two cases the police were called in, and in the other case the owner had the intelligence to find her lost trinket without assistance.' He lifted the cloak down very carefully and opened it to show the silk lining, and there, caught in one of the long flat hooks, dangled the pearls.

The girl uttered an exclamation of delight and slipped them from its fastening.

'Wonderful, isn't it?' said Michael drily. 'That is what has happened, not three



times but half a dozen times since these flat hooks have been introduced. You take the cloak off in a bad temper, the hook catches the chain, breaks it, you bundle the cloak in your wardrobe, and there you have the beginning of a great jewel mystery.'

'I can't tell you how delighted I am,' said the girl. 'Michael, you're wonderful!'

Michael did not reply. He turned to the frightened waiting woman with a kindly smile. 'I am so sorry you have been worried about this, Mrs. Martin,' he said; 'but when people lose very valuable property they are also inclined to lose their very valuable heads. I am sure Lady Moya is sorry, and will make you due compensation for any inconvenience you have been put to.'

The girl stared at him resentfully.

'Of course, I am awfully sorry, Martin,' she said coldly.

'Oh, my lady,' said the woman eagerly, 'I am only too pleased that you have recovered your chain. The worry of it has made me quite ill.'

'You can have a week's holiday,' said Lord Flanborough magnificently. 'I will get you a free railway ticket to Seahampton,' he added.

'So you see, Mrs. Martin,' said Michael, with that bland air of his which scarcely veiled the sarcasm so irritating to his lordship, 'your generous employers will leave no stone unturned to minister to your comfort, regardless of expense. And when you are at Seahampton, Mrs. Martin (I trust you will not lose the return half of your free ticket) you will be allowed to walk up and down the promenade on equal terms with the aristocracy and breathe the ozone which, ordinarily, is created for your betters. You may sit on the free seats and watch the pageant of life step past you, and, reflecting upon the generosity of your betters, you may appreciate the good fortune which brought you into hourly contact with the aristocracy of England. And on Sundays, Mrs. Martin, you may go to church where quite a number of the seats are also free and may even share a hymn-book with a Gracious Person who is so vastly above you in social standing that he will never recognize you again, and there, I trust, you will pray with a new fervour that the deliberations of the House of Lords may receive divine inspiration.'

'Oh, indeed I will, sir,' said Mrs. Martin, almost stunned by his eloquence. He left the woman overwhelmed, and returned with a very ruffled Lord Flanborough and an indignant Moya to the library.

'What utter nonsense you talk, Michael!' said the girl angrily. 'I don't think it

was kind of you to attempt to set my servants against me.'

'Beastly bad taste,' said Lord Flanborough, 'and really, Pretherston, you came here as an officer of the law and not as an old acquaintance, and I think that you exceed your duties, if you don't mind my saying so.'

'Old acquaintances,' said Michael, picking up his hat and his coat from a chair where he had put them before the interview, 'are especially made to be forgotten, a peculiarity of which one is reminded in that Bacchanalian anthem which is sung at all public dinners where sobriety is bad form. I was merely endeavouring to inculcate into the mind of your slave a few moral principles, beneficial to you, and to society.'

'Don't tell me that,' growled Lord Flanborough, 'as though I didn't recognize your sarcasm.'

'Children, and the lower orders, never recognize sarcasm,' said Michael with a broad smile. He held out his hand and somewhat reluctantly his lordship extended his own flabby paw.

'Before I go,' he said, 'I suppose I had better take a full account of this case. You haven't a secretary or anybody to whom you can dictate the circumstances? You see, I have to make a report to my cold-blooded superiors.'

Moya had reached the stage where the remains of her friendship with Michael Pretherston had not only died, but had been cremated in the fires of her smothered anger, and she was as anxious to see the end of this interview as was her father.

'Perhaps you will ring for Miss Tenby,' she said after a pause. Her father pressed the bell and the waiting Sibble answered it.

'Send Miss Tenby,' said his lordship.

'And I do hope, Michael,' said the girl severely, 'that when Miss Tenby is here you will not make such extravagant comments as you did before Martin.'

'Miss Tenby,' interposed Lord Flanborough, 'will not welcome such talk. She is a young girl with—er—'

'I know, I know,' said Michael solemnly, 'she is genteel. She does forty words a minute on the typewriter and goes to church, filling in her odd moments with needlework and accompanying you on the piano.'

'It must be a wonderful thing to be a detective,' said Moya sarcastically. 'As a

matter of fact, Miss Tenby is one of the fastest typists in the world.'

Michael swung round on her with an odd look on his face.

'Fastest typists in the world,' he repeated, with all the humour gone out of his tone. 'Does she sing?'

It was the girl's turn to be astonished.

'Yes, she does, and very beautifully.'

'Does she prefer Italian opera?' he asked.

At this the girl laughed aloud. 'Somebody has been telling you all about her, and you are trying to be mysterious,' she accused. Further conversation was cut short by the arrival of the girl, who walked in, closed the door, and came straight to the desk.

She stopped dead at the sight of Michael. Moya saw the meeting, saw the girl stiffen and her sorrowful eyes fixed upon the detective's face.

'Why, Kate!' said Michael Pretherston softly. 'Well, well, well! and to think that we meet again under such noble auspices.'

Miss Tenby said nothing.

'And what is the great game?' asked Michael banteringly. 'What beautiful impulse brought you to this sheltered home, and how is the Colonel and friend Gregori and all those dear boys? By the way, the Colonel must be out by now, Kate. What did he get—three years?'

Still Miss Tenby made no reply.

'What is the meaning of this?' demanded Lord Flanborough, feeling that the moment had arrived to assert himself. 'Do you know this lady?'

'Do I know her?' said Michael ecstatically. 'Why, I am one of her greatest admirers; am I not, Kate?'

The girl's sad face softened to a smile which showed the regular lines of her white teeth. She spoke, and her voice was gentle and appealing.

'It is perfectly true, Lord Flanborough,' she said quietly, 'Mr. Pretherston knows me. He also knows that my uncle, Colonel Westhanger, was mixed up in a very serious scandal which brought him within the reach of the law. It is perfectly true that when I was a little girl I was known as Kate. It is just as true that I am trying now to live down my association with law-breakers, and am

trying to rehabilitate myself in the world.'

'H'm!' murmured Lord Flanborough, a little taken aback, 'very creditable.'

Moya turned to Michael indignantly.

'I suppose that you think you are rendering a great service to the world, in trying to drag this poor girl down to the gutter, in exposing her to her employers, and in obtaining her dismissal from honest employment.'

'I do,' said Michael shamelessly.

'I think it is a barbarous thing to do!' said Moya angrily. She had not yet decided in her own mind as to what steps she would take in face of this revelation. In view of her own character, it is possible that 'Miss Tenby' would have a very short shift at her hands. But for the moment the opportunity for the display of benevolence and Christian charity was not to be passed over. She saw the girl's appealing eyes and clasped hands, and, for a moment, she felt a sincere thrill of pity for a brave sister struggling to escape the octopus tentacles of law and crime; for a moment she felt a genuinely unselfish desire to help another.

If she expected Inspector the Hon. Michael Pretherston—for such was his incongruous title—to wilt under her reproaches, she was disappointed. Michael had not taken his eyes from the secretary, nor had the twinkle in those eyes abated. He nodded to 'Miss Tenby.'

'Kate,' he said, 'you are really a wonder, and to think that you have never yet come into the clutches of the law until now.' 'Until now,' said the girl, quickly raising her voice.

He nodded.

'The Prevention of Crimes Act,' murmured Michael. 'I can take you' – he emphasized the 'can' – 'on a charge of obtaining employment with forged letters of recommendation, also with being a Suspected Person.'

The girl dropped her attitude of humility, threw back her head and laughed, showing her even white teeth.

'Oh, you Mike!' she railed him. 'Oh, you busy fellow!' Her amusement did not last long, for instantly her face was set again and the grey eyes blazed with rage. 'One of these days you will be too clever,' she said bitterly. 'I have seen better men than you, and cleverer men than you, go out, Michael Pretherston. You and your Prevention of Crimes Act! You can't put that bluff over me. The Act does not come into operation until you have a conviction against my

name, and that you will never get, you brute!’

‘Kate, Kate!’ murmured Michael, ‘there’s a lady present!’

She nodded.

‘I guess I’ll get my kit together,’ she said; ‘it hasn’t been exactly a holiday trip.’

‘My sympathies are entirely with you,’ said Michael; ‘it must have been awfully dull after the gay orgies of Crime Street.’

‘There is one thing I have always wanted to know,’ said the girl, pinching her lip thoughtfully. She walked to the desk, and Lord Flanborough was too much taken aback to arrest her progress. Without a word she opened the silver box on the table and took out a cigarette. ‘I have always wanted to know what kind of dope this dear old gentleman smoked.’

She looked at the cigarette critically, and with an exclamation of disgust threw it back on the desk.

‘Gold Flavours!’ she said scornfully. ‘Can you beat it, Mike? And he has a hundred thousand a year!’

‘You must make allowances for the decadence of the governing classes,’ said the soothing Michael. He turned and nodded farewell to Moya, and with Miss Tenby’s arm in his, he passed out of the room, and Lord Flanborough and his daughter looked at one another in speechless amazement.

## CHAPTER 2

‘YOU might do worse than lunch with me,’ said Michael Pretherston. He stood outside Felton House with the girl, whose belongings in one small Gladstone bag had been deposited on the kerb, pending the arrival of a taxi-cab.

‘Why should I lunch with you?’ she asked insolently. ‘I thought you were going to pinch me.’

‘Your vulgarity is appalling!’ said Michael, shaking his head in reproof. ‘I cannot pinch you in the vulgar sense. I have no desire to perform that operation in the corporeal sense. You had better compromise and lunch with me.’

The girl hesitated. ‘Think of my reputation,’ she said.

‘Thoughts of your reputation keep me awake at night,’ answered Michael lightly, and called a taxi.

They found a little restaurant in Soho, and in an underground cellar where the bad ventilation was compensated for by a blaze of light, they ate their simple little meal.

‘Now, Kate, I want to ask you what your little game is,’ said Michael, ‘and I need the information because I know it isn’t a little game.’

‘I was scared sick over those pearls,’ said the girl, ignoring the question; ‘it would have been horribly bad luck to have been taken for a job I had nothing to do with, and such a paltry job too!’

‘You owe me something,’ said Michael.

‘I owe you more than I can ever repay you,’ said the girl significantly.

‘I suppose one of these days,’ suggested the detective, after an interval of thought, ‘you will instruct some of your hired pals, Gregori or the Colonel or little Stockmar, to inflict on me a painful injury.’

‘You!’ said the girl scornfully; ‘if there were not men like you in the police, we should have been destroyed years ago! You are a sort of an insurance scheme, and it pays us to keep you alive and well. Why, Crime Street would go into mourning the day you were buried.’

‘You are not trying to be rude to me, are you?’ he asked.

She looked at him slyly from under her long lashes, and her eyes were dancing with fun.

‘Why do you think I went to Lord Flanborough?’ she asked.

He shook his head. ‘I’m blessed if I know,’ he confessed. ‘Of course I knew it was you the moment I heard of the rapid typewriting and the Italian songs. Now listen: I am not trying to speak to you for your good ...’

‘Don’t!’ she said laconically.

‘But I have often wondered why a well-educated girl and a nice girl, as far as I know to the contrary, should prefer the life of a crook to ...’

‘To earning £2 or £3 a week and working all day to earn it,’ she finished for him. ‘To living my life in one little room on a top floor in Bloomsbury, waiting my turn every morning for my bath. To being made love to by the assistant

manager! I have had the experience for professional purposes and I don't like it a bit, Mike.' She looked at him straight in the eyes. She had dropped her air of flippancy, her slang; the voice that spoke was not to be distinguished from that of any other gentlewoman.

'You see, a woman is differently circumstanced to a man. She wants nice things, and her attitude toward life, and indeed the whole of her conduct, depends entirely upon the degree of niceness she requires. Men don't do things for women for nothing. They lend to their men friends all the money in the world, and are grateful if they get it back. They expect nothing more than their money, and are surprised when they get it. But if I were a typist in a city office, and I borrowed £2 from the assistant manager or from the chief book-keeper, or a fiver from one of the partners, why, Mike, I should be booked for supper on Wednesday. Suppose a man lent you £2 and asked you in exchange, not only to repay the money, but to renounce all your dearest principles for the sake of the loan; if he asked you to betray the friends you had been loyal to, and lie where you had been truthful; break your word where you had been faithful, be a thief where you had been honest—would you surrender every reticence, every honourable instinct, every precious faith?'

Mike said nothing. For there was nothing to say. He paid the bill and escorted the girl to a cab.

'I am not going to be sorry for you,' he said. 'You are having The Life. One of these days I shall come along and take you; but I shall hate it. Hop it, Kate!'

Kate literally hopped into the waiting taxi, waved her hand in farewell and was gone.

Michael Pretherston stood for fully five minutes on the edge of the pavement meditating upon what the girl had said. She had struck a responsive note in his soul, for she spoke no more than was the truth, as he knew. He went, a little sadly, back to headquarters, remembering en route that he had forgotten to write the report.

Should he go back to the Yard and compose it from memory, or should he return to the unsympathetic atmosphere of Felton House?

He decided upon the latter, and surprised Lord Flanborough in the act of taking an afternoon nap.

Michael was full of apologies and was so unusually respectful that his lordship forgot to be annoyed.

'Moya's out,' he explained.

‘I will endeavour to bear up,’ replied Michael, seating himself at his lordship’s desk, and preparing to take a note of the circumstances which had led to his lordship’s call for assistance. He finished the report, blotted and folded it and placed the document in his pocket.

‘I want to ask you one or two questions, and they concern Kate—or Miss Tenby as you call her. I’m afraid I gave you a shock this morning.’

‘It was certainly a surprise,’ admitted Lord Flanborough cautiously. ‘Who is this Kate? We have made a very careful search of the house, but nothing is missing so far as we can tell.’

Mike laughed.

‘You needn’t worry about that. Kate is not a pilferer. Her real name is Katharine Westhanger; they call her Kate and she is the Colonel’s niece. Her age is nineteen or twenty, and from a child she has been brought up to regard the world as her oyster. Her mother was a wholesome parson’s daughter; her father was a rascal who was kicked out of the army in ‘89 for an offence against the law of property. Her maternal grandfather was General Sir Shaun Masserfield, who was a neighbour of my brother’s in Ireland and the greatest strategist the British army has ever held – Kate inherits his genius, but has not learnt his code. Her father died when she was sixteen, and her uncle, who is a greater scoundrel than her father was—the family on the Westhanger side has a criminal history which goes back at intervals for two hundred years—completed her education. Kate has been brought up to be a thief, but a big thief. She is, I believe the brains of the biggest criminal organization in the world. Every member of the gang has been taken, but no evidence has ever been offered against Kate. She plans the big swindles, and each one is bigger than the last—but never once have we traced the offence to her door.’

‘Why is it that the police—?’ began Lord Flanborough.

‘The police, my dear Flanborough,’ said Michael wearily, ‘are human beings who have to deal with human beings. They are not angels, nor thought-readers, nor are they clairvoyant. The laws of this country are so framed that the criminal has six chances to every one possessed by his enemy. We know Kate was concerned in that big bank-smashing exploit which took two million crowns from the treasury of the Bank of Holland. It was Kate who organized the raid upon the London jewellers in June of last year. Kate is the mother of Crime Street. You don’t know that thoroughfare, but one of these days I’ll introduce you to it, if you are curious—but I warn you that if you expect to steep your soul in sordidness, you will be disappointed—it is the most



respectable street in London. Her ingenuity is remarkable, her patience beyond praise, and that is partly why I have come back; I want to know why she was here, and what she was doing?’

‘As I say—’ began Lord Flanborough again.

‘For Heaven’s sake,’ interrupted Michael, ‘don’t tell me that you haven’t missed things! I tell you Kate would not touch a pin in your house. In the first place she is a well-off woman. Why in Heaven’s name should she bother her head about your belongings? I don’t suppose, if she had the full run of your house, she could find £100 worth of realizable property! No, that is not why Kate came to you. How long has she been here?’

‘Nearly a month,’ said Lord Flanborough, a little annoyed that the result of his own private investigations had so utterly failed to impress a representative of Scotland Yard.

‘What work has she been doing?’

‘Ordinary secretarial work for Moya. She came with excellent letters of recommendation.’

‘You can forget those,’ interrupted Michael testily. ‘The gentleman who wrote them lives at Number 9, Crime Street, and his name is Millet.’

‘She was a wonderful typist,’ began his lordship, who was seeking about in his own mind for some excuse which would explain why he had been deceived.

‘That I also know. She is, as you say, one of the fastest typists in the world. In fact, no aspect of her education has been neglected. She speaks five languages, and read French fluently she was nine. What work has she done for you?’

Lord Flanborough considered for a while.

‘She has copied a few letters and reports.’

‘What kind of reports?’

‘Reports from our South African companies. You see, Michael, I still retain the direction of most of my old interests.’

‘Were they very important—the reports, I mean?’

‘Yes and no,’ replied Lord Flanborough slowly, ‘they were merely reports of output, cost of production and projected shipments.’

‘On what other work was she employed?’

‘Let me think,’ said Lord Flanborough.

‘I am letting you!’ replied Michael tartly.

‘You used to have a very private code-book if I remember rightly.’

‘That is true,’ said Lord Flanborough, ‘but of course she did not see that.’

‘Where did you keep it?’

‘In my desk,’ said Lord Flanborough.

‘Is it possible that she could have seen it!’ ‘It is possible, but wholly impossible that she could have copied it.’

‘For how long a time together was she left alone?’

‘Five minutes was the longest period she was left in the library alone,’ said his lordship after consideration.

Michael fingered his chin.

‘Did you ever come into the library and find her in a semi-fainting condition?’ he asked.

Lord Flanborough looked at him with open-mouthed amazement.

‘Did she tell you?’

Michael shook his head.

‘No, she has told me nothing. I gather from your question that there was such an occurrence?’

‘It is remarkable that you should ask the question,’ said his lordship. ‘I did come in one morning to find the poor girl—er—the wretched girl—in a state of collapse.’

‘And you went out and got her a glass of water and sent for your housekeeper, I suppose,’ said Michael, his lip curling.

‘Yes, I did,’ admitted his lordship. ‘Which means, in plain language,’ smiled Michael, ‘that you surprised her in the act of examining some of your private documents, and that whilst you were getting the water and calling assistance, she was replacing whatever she was looking at where she had found it. Did she on any other occasion draw your attention, on your entering the room, to some peculiar circumstance, such as one of the pictures not hanging straight or

a broken vase?’

Again Lord Flanborough looked astounded.

‘Yes, once she pointed to the china cupboard, and asked me who cracked the glass. As a matter of fact, the glass was not cracked at all,’ he explained.

‘But you went over and examined it?’

‘Naturally,’ said his lordship.

‘That was exactly the same trick,’ said Michael. ‘Whilst you were making your inspection she was able to replace any documents she had been examining and close the drawer—if they were in a drawer. Now, I wonder what her game is?’

‘You don’t suggest,’ began his lordship in alarm, ‘that she is scheming to rob me?’

‘I hope not,’ said Michael gravely. ‘From the idea of your being robbed, the imagination reels.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t be so sarcastic. I am afraid you have never quite forgiven Moya—’

‘I bless Moya every time I think of her,’ said Michael quickly. ‘She rendered me the greatest service that one human being could render to another, when she refused me. I hope to do better than Moya. As Moya’s father, you utter a pained protest. I know, I know,’ said Michael, and he waved his hand cheerfully from the door.

### **CHAPTER 3**

MICHAEL PRETHERSTON was back at the Yard in time to catch his chief before he departed for the day.

Commissioner T.B. Smith, to whose recommendation this young scion of the aristocracy owed his promotion was not helpful.

‘If we took Kate on any charge it would not prevent the swindle going forward,’ he said. ‘You may be sure she has mobilized all her resources, and her little army is ready to the last button of the last gaiter. There is supposed to be a fellow watching her all the time, but he seems to have missed her rather cleverly. Anyway, I don’t think there is much to be gained from shadowing her, because she knows she is under observation and acts accordingly. But I

have a word of advice to you, my young Hibernian friend, and that is to keep a sharp eye on your own precious life. Kate is afraid of you.'

'She didn't give me that impression this afternoon,' said Michael sadly.

'Kate is a bluff; you mustn't take any notice of what she says. You accept a friend's advice, and go very carefully to work. I am not so sure that you didn't behave indiscreetly this afternoon.'

'That is impossible!' said Michael stoutly, and T.B. Smith laughed.

'The thing to have done was not to have recognized her, and to have kept her under observation, pursuing your inquiries in the usual way.'

'If you can suggest any method by which I could have prevented her from recognizing me, and recognizing the fact that I recognized her, I will admit that I was wrong,' and T.B. Smith agreed.

'You may be right,' he said; 'any way, look after yourself.'

Michael promptly forgot his chief's advice, and spent his evening making a solitary reconnaissance of Crime Street. Crime Street does not appear upon any plan of London, but if you will look at any large survey of the Hampstead district, you will find in a somewhat irregular tangle of buildings within a stone's throw of the Heath, a curious oval which is conspicuous on the plan, not only by its own symmetry but by the graceful lines of the thoroughfares which radiate therefrom.

This is Amberscombe Gardens. The centre of the oval is occupied by four houses – Numbers 2, 4, 6 and 8; the northern side of the gardens by five houses – Numbers 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9. Into Amberscombe Gardens from the north run three roads, the first of which (opening into the oval between Numbers 1 and 3) is called The Approach; the second, dividing Numbers 5 and 7, called Bethburn Avenue; the third, between Numbers 7 and 9, Coleburn Avenue. On the south side of the oval the arrangement of the streets is very similar. Originally the central space had been occupied by nine houses, but these had been pulled down by the proprietors of the remaining four, and a private garden, common to all four houses, had been laid out by the owners of these properties. So that on the southern side of the central oval there were no buildings but a wall bisected at regular intervals by plain garden doors which form such a common feature of London suburban residences.

In reality, the roadway to the north and south of the plot is all Amberscombe Gardens, but the oval which curves round to the north was at the period this story covers known to the police as 'Crime Street,' and in his description the

nine houses on both sides of the northern curve were involved.

Number 1, the most modest of all the buildings, was in the occupation of Dr. Philip Garon, an American practitioner who made frequent visits across the Atlantic and invariably returned to deposit a very handsome surplus in the local branch of the London and Western Counties Bank. Dr. Garon was successful as a result of the sublime assurance of every ocean-going passenger, that the notice, conspicuously displayed in the smoking-room warning passengers not to play cards with strangers, did not apply to him.

Number 3, a pretty house smothered in clematis in the proper season of the year, with its white window sashes and its sober red front, was the town house of Mr. Cunningham, who, apparently, had no initial and no Christian name. He was known to his intimate friends as Mush, the derivation of which is a little obscure. Mr Cunningham described himself as 'Independent,' which meant no more than that he was independent of the ordinary necessities of making an honest living. In a sense, he was by far the best known of the colony, for Mush had served two terms of penal servitude, one in an English and one in a French prison. He had the reputation of being able to cut holes in steel safes with a greater rapidity than any other gentleman in his profession, and it is said, probably with truth, that he had improved upon the oxyhydrogen jet and had introduced a new element which shortened the work by half.

The tenant of Number 5 was a gentleman, benign of countenance, and very good to the poor. He was called the Bishop by friends and foes alike. His real name was Brown, and he had been concerned in more bank swindles than any of the other colonists, though he had only one conviction to his discredit, and that a comparative fleabite of nine months hard labour.

The owner of Number 7 was described as 'Mr. Colling Jacques, Civil Engineer,' in the local directories. The official' police Who's Who noted that he was a wonderful pistol shot, and recorded, in parenthesis, that on the occasion of his arrest in connection with the smashing of the Bank of Holland, no weapon was found upon him, It was also added that there was no conviction against him in England, though he, too, had seen the inside of a French prison.

Number 9 was pointed out to sight-seers with a certain amount of local pride by the guide, as the home of Millet the forger, who had received on one occasion a fifteen years' sentence, but had been released after serving two years; an act of grace on the part of the authorities which earned for him a certain unpopularity with his peers, and was held to be not unconnected with the subsequent arrest of a few of his former associates; the suggestion being that Mr. Millet had turned King's evidence.

At Number 2 on the 'oval' side of the street, lived H. Mulberry, a respectable and methodical man, who went to his little office in Chancery Lane every morning of his life by the 9.15 a.m. and returned to his home at exactly 5.30 p.m. year in and year out. Mulberry was a begging letter writer on a magnificent scale. He had a wonderful literary style which seldom failed to extract the necessary emolument which he sought.

Number 4, a much larger house, indeed the second largest in Crime Street, was the habitat of 'Senor Gregori, a teacher of languages.' Unfortunately for him, he had in the course of his thrilling career taught other things than the liquid tongue of Spain. For example, he had taught the Bank of Chile that their 'unforgeable' notes, which, it was boasted, defied photographic reproduction, could be turned out by the tens of thousands, and that the six tints in which a gold bond was printed, offered no insuperable difficulty to a clever craftsman with an artist's eye and a sense of colour.

In Number 8 lived the two brothers Thomas and Francis Stockmar, of Austrian extraction, who were described as political refugees, but were undoubtedly criminals of a peculiarly dangerous type. The Stockmars were dour, white-faced men with short bristling hair and were certainly the least presentable of all the colonists.

Number 6 has been left to the last, for this was the most important house in Crime Street. It was a storey higher than any other, built squarely with no attempt at beauty. It is said that the third floor consisted of one room, and that from its many windows it was possible to command not only all the approaches to the northern side of the gardens, but those to the south; it has even been suggested that it was so planned, that in case of necessity the house could be converted into a fortress, from the third floor of which a last desperate stand might be made. This, then, was Number 6, the abiding-place of Colonel Westhanger and his brilliant niece.

Michael Pretherston was no stranger to Crime Street. He had made many visits to this locality, and it was at his initiative that the roadway of Amberscombe Gardens had been dug up one fine morning by a gang of road-breakers, and there had been revealed that remarkable subterranean passage which connected the one side of the street with the other. The passage-way led from the summer-house in the gardens of the oval to a stable in Number 3.

The colonists, however, swore stoutly that they knew nothing whatever of the existence of this passage, and that it must have existed years before they came to the street. The civil engineer, Colling Jacques, pointed out to the district surveyor that the very character of the passage suggested that this was some

storm-water drain which had been laid down and forgotten by the contractor. Or else it had been laid down in error and the contractor had been either too lazy, or too rushed, to break it up, There were many other explanations, none of which were wholly acceptable.

Michael, swinging his stick, passed that portion of the road in which the passage had run and wondered with a reminiscent smile where the new tunnel was, for that there was a new one he did not doubt.

Night was falling and Dr. Philip Garon's dining-room windows blazed with light. Mr. Mulberry's on the right was more modestly illuminated. Mr. Cunningham's house was in darkness, as also was 'The Bishop's. There were lights in the bedroom at Number 7, but Number 6 was black, as also was Number 8.

He saw Millet, who was smoking, standing at his garden gate, and crossed the road toward him, realizing that the keen-eyed gentleman had already observed his presence. Millet, a florid man with a genial, almost fulsome manner, met him with a friendly nod.

'Good evening, Mr. Pretherston,' he said. 'I hope you are not looking for trouble.'

Michael leant on the top bar of the gate and shook his head. 'I shouldn't come here for trouble,' he said. 'This is the most law-abiding spot in London.'

Mr. Millet sighed, and murmured something about misfortunes which overtake mankind, and added a pious expression of his desire to forget the past and to end his days in that security and peace which sin denies its votaries.

'Very pretty,' said Michael blandly; 'and how are all our good neighbours? I was thinking of taking a house here myself. By the way,' he added innocently, 'I suppose you don't know any that are to let?'

Mr. Millet shook his head.

'I am all alone here,' he said. 'If you were really serious about wishing to live in this neighbourhood, you could have a couple of rooms in my house. I should be honoured to act as your host, Mr. Pretherston.'

'And how is Kate?' demanded Michael, ignoring the invitation.

'Kate?' asked the puzzled Mr. Millet. 'Oh, you mean Miss Westhanger. I haven't seen her for several days – I think it was last Tuesday afternoon I saw her last.'

‘Yes, at 2.30- in the afternoon,’ mocked Michael. ‘She was wearing a blue dress with white spots, and a green hat with an ostrich feather. You remember her distinctly because she dropped her bag and you crossed to pick it up. You needn’t start the alibi factory working, Millet; I have nothing against Kate for the moment.

Mr. Millet laughed softly.

‘You will have your joke,’ he said.

‘I will,’ said Michael with grim emphasis, ‘but it is going to be a long time developing. I haven’t seen the Stockmars lately either.’

‘I never see them at all,’ Mr. Millet hastened to state. ‘I have very little in common with foreigners. Whatever there is against me, Mr. Pretherston, I am a patriot through and through. I am proud to be English, and I don’t take kindly to foreign gentlemen, and never will.’

‘Your patriotism does you credit, Millet,’ said the detective drily, as he prepared to move on. ‘I wish you would be patriotic enough to give me a tip as to what game is on.’ He lowered his voice. ‘You know all that is happening here, and you might do yourself a little bit of good.’

‘If I knew anything,’ said the other earnestly, ‘I would tell you in a moment, Mr. Pretherston; but here I am out of the world, so to speak. Nobody ever consults me, and I am glad they don’t. I want to be left alone to forget the past –’

‘Cut all that little Eva stuff out, Uncle Tom,’ said Michael coarsely.

Other eyes had watched Michael, from behind blinds, through unsuspected peep-holes; a dozen pairs of eyes had followed him as he took his slow promenade along Crime Street.

Colonel Westhanger, a tall grey man, stood in that big room on the third floor of his house, his hands folded behind him, his chin upon his breast, following every movement of the detective. Gregori, handsome and lithe, stood at his elbow, shading the glow of his cigarette in the palm of his hand.

‘Colonel mio,’ he said softly, ‘I would give much for an opportunity of meeting that gentleman in a nice dark passage, in one of those old Harrison Ainsworth houses which were so providentially built over a river.’

‘You will have your wish one of these days,’ said the Colonel gruffly. ‘I don’t like that fellow. He is not one of the ordinary run of policemen. They are bad enough, but this fellow knows too much.’



He nibbled his white moustache, shook his head and turned away from the window as Michael took his farewell of the forger.

‘Watch him on the other side,’ he said, ‘and send one of the boys out to follow him.’ He descended the thickly carpeted stairs to the first floor, which was the living-suite. The drawing-room into which he turned was a beautifully furnished apartment, and the girl who had been sitting at the piano, her nimble hands running over the keys, looked up as he appeared.

## CHAPTER 4

‘WHERE did he go?’ she asked.

‘He went to Millet,’ said the Colonel, throwing himself down to a divan and biting off the end of a fresh cigar. ‘I wonder what the dickens he wants?’ he mused.

Kate Westhanger made a little grimace.

‘You can never tell whether a policeman finds his duty a pleasure, or his pleasure a duty,’ she said. ‘I suppose he is just renewing acquaintance with Crime Street.’

‘Don’t use that phrase,’ snapped her uncle.

‘I shall use whatever phrase I wish,’ she said calmly. ‘You are getting nervous. Why?’

‘I’m not nervous,’ he protested loudly. ‘I am getting old, I suppose, and the job is such a big one. It is almost too big for me, and if I occupied the position I had a few years ago, Kate, I would drop it. After all, we have made a good deal of money, and we might as well all of us live to enjoy it.’

She was back at the piano again, and was playing with the soft pedal down.

‘Can’t you find anything more cheerful than the “Death of Asa”?’ growled her relative. ‘It is nerves, of course; I am awfully sorry.’

She got up and closed the piano with a bang which made him jump.

‘I don’t know what to do about Mike,’ she mused.

‘Gregori has a solution,’ said the Colonel.

‘To cut his throat, I suppose,’ said the girl coolly. ‘Gregori is so elemental and so horrific! I can’t imagine that he ever has cut a throat in his life. But I suppose he feels that it is in keeping with his sunny southern nature to talk like that. No, Colonel mio,’ she mimicked, ‘we have stopped short of murder so far, and I think we will remain on the safe side. My theory coincides with Mike’s. I was reading an article of his in a Socialistic paper the other day, and it was all about the Right to Live. I don’t believe in killing people. I believe in bleeding those who have grown apoplectic with their money, and I don’t even know whether I believe in that.’

‘What do you mean?’ The Colonel looked up at her under his shaggy brows. She shrugged her shoulders.

‘I mean,’ she said slowly, ‘I never know whether my views are my own views, or whether they are just your views, which I reflect like a mirror. You see, dear,’ she said, ‘I am very young, but I have a logical mind, and my logical mind tells me that no girl can have any very definite views at nineteen – not of her own, I mean. Perhaps when I am twenty-five I shall look upon you as a terrible person, and all this’ – she spread her hands out – ‘as something to think of with a shudder.’

‘In the meantime,’ said her uncle practically, ‘you are Miss Ali Baba, chief strategist of our little army and a very exigent young lady – by the way, Gregori is kicking.’

She looked at him with a contemptuous little twist of her lips.

‘There is a great centre forward lost in Gregori,’ she said. ‘What has moved that dago’s feet?’

‘Hush, hush, my child,’ cautioned her uncle. ‘Our admirable friend is upstairs, and anyway, it doesn’t do to speak disrespectfully of one’s criminal associates. There is a certain punctilio in our profession which you may have noticed.’

‘How queer it sounds,’ she said, leaning forward and clasping her knee. ‘Do you know, uncle, I cannot think straight. Ever since I was so high’ – she stretched her hand out before her – ‘I have never known a desire to secure anything I wanted, save by taking it from somebody else. At the school in Lausanne before I came back to Ireland I seemed to be amongst the queerest people, and, honestly, although you had warned me, I thought they were all mad. All their fathers made money in business, which seems to be a slow method of stealing allowed by the law. Think of the horrible monotony of working steadily day after day without any holidays, with no excitement, no adventures, save the artificial thrill of a theatre and the adventures that meet you on your way home.’

‘I didn’t even know there were those kind of adventures,’ said the Colonel, fingering his trim moustache, and enjoying with closed eyes the fragrance of his cigar.

‘Oh, yes,’ nodded the girl, ‘you meet all sorts of men who raise their hats and say “Good evening, miss,” or “Haven’t we met before?” I don’t think they have ever said anything else,’ she reflected thoughtfully; ‘they all belong to the “Good evening” or the “Met you before” school, and they all want to know if you are “going their way.” ’

‘What happens then?’ asked the amused Colonel, carefully removing his cigar in order that he might laugh without detriment to the accumulating ash.

‘I have only had one experience,’ said Kate. ‘It was with a young man with a horribly weak chin. He had studied in both schools, for his “Good evening” was followed by a request for information upon my immediate plans, and I let him walk with me. I expected something very dreadful, but he talked mostly about his mother, and the difficulties he had about getting a latchkey. He wanted to take my arm, but I told him it wasn’t done, and then he suggested that I should meet him on Sunday. By this time I had learnt all about his family, his mother, and the girl he was prepared to sacrifice to retain a continuation of our intimacy. I also discovered his name was Ernest, and that he was the cleverest man in his office.’

‘He wanted to kiss you, I’ll be bound,’ said the Colonel.

‘I think he did,’ admitted the girl, ‘but he didn’t say so. All he said was that he hoped it wouldn’t rain, and asked if he might write to me. I told him he might, but, unfortunately, he forgot to ask me my address –’

She broke off suddenly. ‘What is Gregori kicking about?’

‘That Madrid affair didn’t go off as well as it might have gone,’ said the Colonel, avoiding her eye.

She nodded. ‘I know; and Gregori blames me, I presume.’

‘Gregori never blames you,’ said the Colonel. ‘I think Gregori would knife anybody who said a word against you.’

‘No,’ she said, nodding her head, her eyes fixed on the opposite wall. ‘The Madrid affair went badly, in spite of the fact that there were forty-two sheets of manuscript, in Spanish and English, giving the most elaborate directions. It was a month’s work for me, and it was all wasted, with the greater part of a hundred thousand pesetas, because Gregori’s trusted Senor Rahboulla thought

he could improve upon my instructions, and joined the train at Cordova in a light grey suit when I told him to wear the conventional black of the madrilleno and insisted upon his making his entrance to Madrid from Toledo. I knew that Cordova was watched by the French and Spanish police, and I knew too that they would be looking for a stranger. Rahboulla advertised himself, was arrested, and the chain which I had carefully pieced together was broken. By the time he had shaken off the police and arrived in Madrid the closing hour of the Prado had been advanced from six to five, and the consequence is that the Velasquez is still in the picture gallery and we are a hundred thousand pesetas the poorer.'

The Colonel shook his head. 'You are a wonderful girl and I will admit you are right. Heavens! the patience required to work out these details!'

'The ideal criminal is a strategist,' said the girl. 'He foresees every move of the enemy and forestalls him. He makes a diversion at one point and his real attack at another. He prepares the way for retreat at the same time as he is preparing his advance. It took me six months to obtain all the information I wanted, and it took six minutes for Rahboulla to upset our plans.' She laughed. 'If things go wrong, you blame the General,' she said. 'Two years ago, Gregori the Kicker introduced an Italian into one of our schemes – the business of the Nottingham Post Office. That went wrong too.'

'There I admit you were right,' the Colonel hurried to say. 'Tolmini made a mess of it.'

'And tried to drag us all into it when he was caught,' said the girl. 'He went to prison under the impression that I had led him into a trap – though the fool was told the mail bags were not to be touched until the night shift came on duty.'

'Why do you mention him now with such emphasis?' asked the Colonel curiously.

'Because he's out of prison – and he'll be kicking too,' she replied, 'just as Gregori kicks!'

'Let the dead bury the dead,' quoted the Colonel. 'And how's the new scheme?'

'Much further advanced than you think. There are still one or two roads to be made smooth, one or two outposts to be rushed, some barbed wire to be cut.'

'By Gad!' cried the Colonel admiringly, 'you ought to have been a soldier, Kate.'

She leant back in the chair with her hands clasped behind her head and looked at him searchingly.

‘You were once a gentleman, uncle,’ she said in that direct way of hers, and Colonel Westhanger flushed and frowned.

‘Well, my dear uncle,’ she expostulated, ‘you are not a gentleman by the ordinary code now, are you?’

‘I have certain instincts,’ protested the Colonel gruffly. ‘Hang it all, Kate, you don’t let a fellow down very lightly.’

‘I suppose you are still something of a gentleman,’ said the girl reflectively. ‘The mere fact that you are annoyed at the suggestion that you are not, proves that. But what I mean to say is this: there was a time when you obeyed another code, when you thought stealing was a disgraceful thing and robbery under arms a crime. You must have associated with men on whose word you could rely and who would never commit a dishonest or a mean action – men who were prepared in battle to give their lives for you. And you must have commanded men who had the same views and have punished soldiers who stepped aside from the straight path and committed little crimes which, compared with yours, were as pins’ heads to the dome of St. Paul’s.’

‘I can’t see why you want to talk about the past,’ said the Colonel irritably. He was still a fine figure of a man, grey moustached, broad of shoulder, tall and straight of back, and had about him that indefinable something which men who have commanded men never entirely lose.

‘I am merely comparing you with me,’ she said. ‘You have the advantage of having seen both sides. Tell me, which is the better?’

‘Which do you think?’ he demanded suspiciously. She tossed her cigarette into the grate.

‘I think this is the better,’ she said frankly. ‘It is very pleasant and very exciting. And all the good people I have met have been very dull. I think that is because all good people are dull.’

‘There are some good people,’ said the Colonel virtuously, ‘who are very interesting.’

‘Not because of their goodness,’ rejoined the girl quickly. ‘if you meet a very popular good man it is because there is something about him which is not absolutely good. If you hear a man speak of a parson as a good fellow, you will generally discover that he goes to the National Sporting Club and sees

boxing or rides to hounds or does something which is quite unassociated with his professional duties or the exercise of his innocent qualities. But you have not answered me. Which is better?’

‘If I had my life to live over again ...’ began the Colonel with a wry face.

‘That’s silly,’ said the girl calmly. ‘You won’t have your life to live over again, so why speculate upon the possibility? Anyway, if you could live your life over again, you could not possibly benefit by your present experience, because you would not remember it. You have lived two lives; which is the better?’

‘You are in a queer mood tonight,’ said Colonel Westhanger, rising and stalking past her to the fireplace. ‘Have you got religion, or something?’

‘Which is the better?’ she asked again— ‘to be a free thief, or to be in the dull bondage of honesty?’

‘For your peace of mind the honest life is the better,’ said the Colonel. ‘You have no sleepless nights, no agony of mind which it is necessary to conceal with whatever skill you possess at every knock at the door, no fear of the police, no wondering what the next day is going to bring forth.’

‘Really!’ She looked up at him quizzically. ‘Do honest men never have any of those experiences? Do honest men get into debt, for example, and dread the coming of the collector? Does an honest man, who is getting grey, feel a little sickening sensation in his heart every time his employer looks at him thoughtfully?’

The Colonel turned round and snarled over his shoulder. ‘As you seem to have all your answers ready-made, I don’t know why you trouble to ask me,’ he snapped. ‘There are advantages and disadvantages on both sides of the picture.’

The girl was in a restless mood, and presently she sprang up, walked to the little window, opened the little square of shutter and looked out into the darkening street. Then she crossed to her little desk at one side of the fireplace. She sat down and wrote for a while, then as suddenly she dropped her pen and got up again. ‘You are going to ask another question,’ warned the Colonel.

‘Only one,’ she pleaded.

‘Well, fire away,’ he grumbled ungraciously. ‘What would induce you to forsake your career and apply your undoubted talents, as the assize judge said to poor dear Mr. Mulberry, to better purpose?’

‘Wealth,’ said the Colonel promptly; ‘enough stuff put aside to bring me in a

nice little income. And here again, let me say, Kate, that you and I could well afford to knock off – ’

She interrupted him. ‘That is a purely material inducement,’ she said. ‘What other – spiritual or ethical?’

‘Oh, rot!’ he snapped; ‘why do you ask these fool questions?’

‘Because I am wondering,’ she said, ‘what influence could be brought to bear upon me. The opinion of my fellow-creatures? No, I don’t care what they think. I know they are mostly fools, and so why should they influence me? Wealth? No, if I were as rich as Croesus I should go on for the sport of it. Punishment? No, I should use my spare time in correcting the faults in me which had resulted in my detection. I am afraid I am incorrigible, uncle, for there is something about this life which appeals to me no end – and now I am going to dress,’ she said, making for the door.

‘Going out?’ asked the Colonel in surprise.

She nodded.

‘But Gregori – ’

‘Gregori can wait,’ said Kate, ‘and Gregori bores me. He is always trying to make love.’

‘Is that remarkable?’ suggested the Colonel archly.

‘It is remarkably annoying,’ said the girl.

She flung open the door and stepped back. Gregori, politest of cavaliers, stood deferentially in the entrance, and she surveyed him coolly.

‘Were you listening?’ she asked.

‘Señorita!’ he said, shocked.

She laughed, and passed out.

Gregori watched her as she mounted the stairs till she turned out of sight, then he closed the door and came across to the Colonel.

‘Our little friend is hard on me,’ he said, but with no hint of malice in his voice.

‘She is a queer girl, Gregori,’ replied the Colonel, shaking his head.

‘She is a queer girl,’ repeated Gregori – ‘queer indeed, yes.’ He stroked his little black moustache. ‘She doesn’t like me.’

‘Whom does she like?’ snapped the older man.

‘You, I trust,’ smiled the Spaniard.

The Colonel tossed his head despairingly. ‘I hardly know,’ he said. ‘What a reversal of positions!’

The Spaniard took the seat the girl had vacated.

‘I know what you are thinking about,’ he nodded. ‘A few years ago she was the obedient child absorbing our code – today, she is the tyrannical mistress of the situation.’ He deftly unrolled and rolled a Spanish cigarette, licked its edges and fumbled for a match in his waistcoat pocket. ‘She is all brain, our Kate,’ he said admiringly; ‘but her heart, – pouf!’ He puffed out a cloud of smoke to emphasize the word.

‘There is no end to her energy,’ he went on. ‘Sometimes I think she is dangerous, and then when I come to consider all things it is impossible to say that she can be. After all, hers is only the plan. The responsibility for the bungling is with us – the plan is so perfect that you can hardly pick a hole in it. She works out to the last minute detail the chronology of a coup; she dresses it, rehearses it. She never fails. Yes, it was Rahboulla,’ he agreed, ‘and I was wrong to kick. What was it she called me?’ – a “centre forward” and a “dago.”’ He laughed softly.

‘She is very young,’ said the Colonel apologetically, ‘and a little impetuous of speech; she talks too much, I think.’

‘A pretty woman can never talk too much,’ said the gallant Gregori; ‘she can think too much and talk too little. A person who talks is like a lighted house with all the blinds up and the doors open, you know where you are. Now, Colonel mio, how far have we got with this new scheme?’

The Colonel brought a chair in one hand, and a light table in the other, to where the Spaniard sat, produced from his inside-pocket a bunch of memoranda, and in a few minutes the men were deep in the discussion of the most remarkable, the most startling and the most daring enterprise Crime Street had ever undertaken.

## CHAPTER 5



SEBO'S CLUB was crowded, for it was the dinner hour and Sebo's is the most extensively patronized of the dining clubs. Here, all that was beautiful, all that was smart, all that was famous and brilliant in the world of society, letters and the drama met on common ground – the inherent and universal desire which humanity had for careless comfort. A Cabinet Minister and his party sat at the next table to that presided over by a great revue actress; the owner of a Derby winner sat back to back against a famous Radical satirist. The editor of a great London daily could look across his table, and, without shifting his eyes, could count in his field of vision the pretty dancer from the Empire- drome, a royal physician, a peer of the realm and a ragtime singer.

The big dining-hall blazed with lights; the little tables were crowded together so as scarcely to leave room for the waiters, who, by some mysterious dispensation of Providence, seemed able to thread their ways through impossible spaces. The noisy coon band kept up its rhythmic pandemonium in one corner of the room, but did not drown the rippling laughter and the buzz of light-hearted talk. In the little vestibule, a young man, very tall and very thin, paced the tessellated floor with that evidence of resignation—which tells so eloquently the story of the Unpunctual Guest. He was very fair, and very pink. His countenance was vacant, and the vacancy was by no means relieved when he screwed a gold- rimmed monocle into his right eye.

Presently the glass doors swung and a girl came hurriedly toward him, holding out her gloved hand.

'I am awfully sorry I am late, Reggie,' she said with easy familiarity.

'If you were an hour late, or five hours late, or a day late,' said the young man with gentle ecstasy, 'I should be content to wait, Miss Flemming.'

She flashed a dazzling smile at him.

'I shouldn't be horribly shocked if you called me Vera,' she said. The young man went pinker than ever, coughed, stuttered, ran his gloved finger inside the high-upstanding collar about his thin throat, dropped his eyeglass, retrieved it, and did all this in the space of four seconds, thereby betraying his perturbation and his gratitude.

'You have a table, I suppose,' said the girl when she had returned from depositing her coat.

'Rather!' said the young man, and added after a second's thought, 'rather!'

He fussily shepherded her through the mass of tables, for his own attenuation enabled him to emulate the deeds of the agile serving-man, and brought her to

a corner table which was smothered with rare flowers. Heads were turned, sharp eyes focused the couple, some smiled, though for the girl the glances held nothing but admiration or cold-blooded appraisal, according to the sex of the observer.

‘Reggie Boltover,’ said one young man.

‘Who is Reggie Boltover?’ asked his companion.

‘A human being loosely attached to a million,’ was the laconic description.

The girl was radiant, the smile hardly left her face, and the eyes which glanced shyly up to her tall companion were full of wonder and delight.

‘So this is Sebo’s,’ she said; ‘isn’t it a dreadfully wicked place?’

Reggie Boltover’s face creased alarmingly – he, too, was smiling.

‘My dear Miss – my dear Vera,’ he said boldly, ‘should I bring you to a wicked place? Now I ask you, should I bring you to a wicked place, should?’

His conversational powers were not brilliant, but his heart was pure. He was not really a wicked young man about town, and his chief wickedness lay in his implicit belief that he was. He had met the girl one night by accident. A more daring friend of his, and nearer approaching Reggie’s own ideal of doggishness, had induced him (he protesting feebly) to call at a stage door where he was meeting a charming friend to take her to supper. The charming friend, in the generous large-hearted way of chorus-girls, had introduced her friend, Vera Flemming, a new-comer to the ranks of the chorus, and they had all supped together, and Vera had been very charming to Mr. Reggie Boltover, and he had asked her to go with him up the river, and had serious thoughts, because of her evident refinement, of introducing her to his mother, which shows that Reggie had reached the most dangerous stage of infatuation.

There was really nothing wrong about Reggie Boltover, and nothing remarkably terrible about this strangely initiated friendship. Chorus-girls are merely shop-girls with a taste for caviar and peaches. They are no more sinful than their sisters in the same social strata, and the only difference between them is that, whilst they are exposed to similar temptations, the chorus-girl has a larger field to pick from, and the candidates are much more presentable. A shop-girl accepts the hospitality of a tea-shop, the chorus-girl goes to the Fritz. Both have one consuming passion, a desire for good food for which they do not have to pay.

Reggie Boltover, who, to do him justice, knew everybody, entertained the girl

for half an hour by pointing out the various celebrities in the room, and Vera Flemming was interested without being enthusiastically so.

‘I would rather you talked about yourself,’ she said. ‘You are ever so much more interesting than these people.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Reggie, with a little giggle; ‘oh, no!’

‘You are, indeed, you are,’ she said earnestly. ‘Oh, come,’ said Reggie, ‘oh, come! no! I am not interesting, oh, dear no!’

His life, he admitted frankly, was very ordinary. All that he did was to sign a few cheques, liquidate a few debts, see a few ‘fellows’ about ‘things,’ and ‘there you are,’ said Reggie.

‘It must be wonderful to be in a position of power,’ said the girl musingly. ‘Of course, I come from a very poor family. We only think in shillings, where you think in thousands of pounds. And it is awfully hard to realize what it feels like to order people to do things, instead of being ordered.’

Reggie Boltover, who had never ordered anybody to do anything in his life, and would not have dared to dispute the judgment of the innumerable managers and directors whom his sainted father had appointed in his lifetime, wondered himself what it felt like. He had often meditated, with a shudder, upon necessity, which might one day arise, for his taking the initiative in the conduct of his business. He dimly realized that in time, all his managers and directors would die, and he had dimly speculated upon the question as to who would replace them. He had a feeling that perhaps one might go to Whiteleys and order some new ones, but it had never occurred to him that at his autocratic word managers and people of that description could be made out of mud, or that an order affecting the business which he was supposed to control, would be acted upon if he were to give that order.

‘Well, you know,’ he said, ‘I never really tell people to do anything. You see, I never see them except very occasionally. Of course, they make reports, and all that sort of thing, and I have a man who reads them, so everything is all right, and I just sign cheques and see a few fellows, and there you are.’

Under the genial influence of her sympathetic interest he expanded a little, and proved that he was not as wholly incompetent as he pretended to be. For instance, he knew that the iron works and shipbuilding yard which still bore his father’s name, and incidentally his own, made ‘a deuced lot of money’ every year, and that certain other properties made no money.

There was one property of which he spoke with great bitterness, but only

because his father, in his lifetime, had also spoken of that matter with similar violence and asperity. Apparently, the one redeeming feature about Boltover's Cement Works lay in the fact that it had no manager and therefore produced no reports. It was, in fact, a deserted shell of a building, so infamously unprofitable that Boltover senior (now in heaven) had directed almost with his last breath, if you believed Reggie, that his name should be erased from the official designation of the company.

'You see, it was bad cement. You know how cement is made, don't you?'

'I should love to,' said the girl, her eyes shining. 'I have often wondered.'

'Well,' said Reggie, looking round the table for something to illustrate the object lesson, 'You dig in the river, and you take out a lot of stuff, and you chuck it in a cart, and then you chuck it into a fire, and you pull it out and do something to it, and there you are! That's cement. Only our cement wasn't cement, if you understand. That is what made the beastly thing so awkward.'

'How wonderful!' said the girl; 'I shall always remember that.'

'Of course, we've got our eyes open,' said Reggie, now fairly launched upon the story of his life, 'and one of these days we shall catch a mug.'

'Catch a – ?' asked the girl, puzzled.

Reggie went very pink, but he was excited and grateful at this demonstration of the girl's refinement. 'Forgive the vulgarity, Miss – Vera; I mean we shall find a purchaser. I once nearly sold the beastly thing for £10,000, and the day the deed was to be signed, they took the poor chap away to a lunatic asylum. Poor old bird, not right in his bead, you know. That is why he wanted to buy our cement works. Comic, wasn't it? D'you know,' said Mr. Boltover suddenly, 'when I came round to the stage door that night, I never expected to meet you?'

She looked at him in innocent surprise. 'Didn't you really?' she said incredulously, as though the idea had occurred to her for the first time, and then, thoughtfully, 'I suppose you didn't.'

'I didn't expect to meet you,' repeated Mr. Boltover, who, when he had got hold of one complete sentence, held tight to it until his groping mentality had reached out and securely grasped another. 'No, I didn't expect to meet you, but I'm awfully glad. I feel I owe that young lady more than I can ever repay.'

He said this with an unusual display of sentimentality. 'That young lady,' was his companion's chorus-girl friend, who at that moment was retailing to her

youthful companion at the far side of the room such details of Vera's life as she had been able to secure in a seven-day acquaintance.

'Vera's not in our show now, of course,' she said. 'I don't think she had ever been on the stage before. She's an awfully fresh kid. Came late to rehearsals, and all that sort of thing, but I like her immensely.'

She smiled and bowed to Vera, who, at that moment had caught her eye.

'She's very pretty,' said her companion.

'Yes, isn't she?' agreed the girl, her interest in her friend suddenly evaporating. But there was one in that crowded dining-room whose every disengaged moment was employed in watching the girl and her companion. It involved his getting into the way of other waiters, and called down upon his head execrations in Neapolitan, Sicilian, and the choicest slang of the Montmartre. He was a man who had prayed for two years for such a moment as this, and his soul rejected in savage exaltation that so Heaven-sent an opportunity had come.

As the night wore on, his plan took a definite shape. For the consequence he cared nothing. Here was his opportunity, here was his enemy. He seized a moment, slipped through the service door and passed down a flight of stone steps to the crowded kitchen filled at that moment with a babble of sound as the orders were repeated across the steaming brass pots and the blistering hot plates. He passed through the kitchen to the larder department, and found what he sought in the big cool vault where the butchers worked. It was a long thin knife. He waited until the butcher's back was turned and slipped it up his sleeve, passed rapidly through the kitchen, ignoring the chef's demand as to his business, and reached the warm bright restaurant again.

He had no time to waste.

The butcher might at any moment detect the theft, and the thief be hauled into the service-room to explain his conduct. He made his way across the room to where Mr. Reginald Boltover and his fair companion sat.

Reggie thought the man had a message, but Vera, looking up, saw the man's evil face – and knew. She half twisted, half flung herself against Reginald Boltover as the waiter's hand came up to strike. She saw the knife glitter for a space of a second, and closed her eyes. Then there was the sound of a struggle, and she opened them in time to see the vengeful man flung backward to the floor, and an immaculate Michael Pretherston standing over him examining the knife with some interest. She met the inspector's eye and smiled, though the smile was forced, for even as he bowed, she heard the mockery of his

surprise.

‘Why, Kate! ’ he murmured, ‘I’m always meeting you.’

## CHAPTER 6

‘At 9.40 on the night of the 15th instant I was present at Sebo’s Club. The room was full of diners, and amongst them was Mr. Reginald Boltover and a girl giving the name of Miss Vera Flemming, who was in reality Kate Westhanger. At 9.52 an Italian named Emil Tolmini, employed as waiter at Sebo’s Club, attempted to stab Kate Westhanger, but was prevented and taken into custody. In the course of the struggle, in which he was disarmed, he sustained a scalp wound, and permission was given for him to be taken to the kitchen to have the wound dressed. I regret to state that he succeeded in making his escape. He is a convict on licence (record No. P.C.A./C.C.C. 85943). He is an old associate of the Crime Street gang, and was obviously attempting to avenge himself upon the girl for some injury, real or imaginary, which he had suffered.

‘I made no attempt to warn Mr. Boltover as to the character of his companion, but subsequently calling at his flat in Piccadilly on the pretence that I wished to get information about the attempted murder, I discovered that he had been introduced to the girl at a theatre where she was posing as a chorus-girl. She had evidently laid a deep plan to meet him, for what reason it is not clear. He is a very wealthy man, and it may be necessary at a later stage to warn him; but at present I have taken upon myself the responsibility of refraining from that act.’

Michael Pretherston ended off the report with his neat signature, folded it and inserted it into an official envelope, which he addressed to his chief. By good fortune he met that brilliant man coming into Scotland House as he himself was going out.

‘I think you did right,’ said T.B. after he had heard the story.

‘I wonder what her game is? I have a good mind to detail a man to take the whole case up.’

‘Let me do it,’ said Michael eagerly. T.B. Smith pursed his lips.

‘You are rather a big man for a job like that, Michael,’ he said; ‘It may turn out to be nothing more than a common or garden chorus-girl’s romance.’

‘Kate isn’t the chorus-girl type,’ said Michael; ‘if it is big enough for her to be

in it, it is quite big enough for me.'

The chief thought for a moment.

'Very well then,' he said at length, 'You can take on the job. Do it by yourself if you possibly can, for I haven't any men to spare. But keep in touch with me. Blowing a whistle won't be of any service to you if these people mean business and get after you.'

He hesitated again.

'Confound Kate!' he said. 'I suppose you have circulated a description of the ice-cream merchant?'

All Latin criminals came under this generic description with T.B.

Michael nodded.

'Well, good luck,' said the chief; 'but be careful!'

When the young man had gone, T.B. beckoned to an officer who was passing.

'You're the very man, Barr,' he said. 'Pick up Mr. Pretherston and don't lose him – you may choose your own opposite number.'

The sergeant saluted, and hurried out after his charge.

Michael went away with a light heart. It was the kind of job that he liked better than any other. He had not told the chief all his suspicions. Kate's game was a big one. High-flyer as she was, she was out for a height record – that he realized. There was some association between her month with Lord Flanborough, and the careful cultivation of Reggie Boltover's acquaintance. When he came to think of it she must have met Boltover while she was still with Flanborough. He had taken it for granted that the girl was a resident secretary, but possibly he had arrived at this conclusion in error. So it proved next morning when he called Lord Flanborough's house on the telephone, and had a private conversation with the butler. The young lady, during the time she had been at Felton House, had left every afternoon at four o'clock.

A little talk with the stage manager at the theatre showed that the girl had never attended any of the morning rehearsals and had missed one of the matinees. Michael saw this part of the scheme plainly enough. Kate, through her spies, had discovered that Boltover had an acquaintance who had a friend at the theatre. She had come to the stage with no other object than making a friend of the girl who all unwittingly was the instrument by which she was to meet Reggie.

The detective knew that this was no chance acquaintance. He followed the manoeuvres of Kate through all their devious paths. He took the opportunity in the afternoon to call upon Reggie at his office, which was something between a board-room and a boudoir.

Reggie's theoretical interests were multifarious. He was the nominal head of a dozen different corporations which his industrious father had created for his profit. In practice he knew very little about any of them and nothing about some. '

'hope your lady was not alarmed,' said Michael with spurious anxiety.

'Oh, no, the lady was not alarmed, oh, no,' said Reggie, shaking his head violently, 'oh, dear no. She was not alarmed. Of course, it would have been different if she had been alone; but being with me, naturally she – er – she – er – was not alone.'

'Naturally,' agreed Michael. 'No, she was not alarmed,' said Mr. Boltover; 'in fact, she was very cool, remarkably cool. I have never seen anybody so cool.'

'I hope when you see her again,' said Michael, 'you will tell her I asked.'

'Certainly,' said Mr. Boltover heartily, 'certainly I shall tell her you asked.' And he added after a moment, 'When I meet her again.'

'She seemed, if you will forgive the impertinence, so interested in everything,' encouraged Michael.

'You are quite right,' said Reggie eagerly, 'You are perfectly right. That just describes her. She is interested in everything.'

'It is nice to meet people who are interested in one's business,' Michael went on artlessly. 'I never mind people being interested in my business, do you?'

'Oh, dear no,' replied Mr. Boltover in alarm, as though the very thought that anybody should be discouraged from an interest in his affairs caused him acute mental unhappiness. 'Oh, dear no. Certainly not. Not at all'

'Of course,' smiled Michael, 'she could not very well understand all the complexities of your business, Mr. Boltover – it is such an enormous one.'

'Well,' hesitated the other, 'I don't know, I am not so sure. She is a very intelligent young lady. I was talking to her about my business when this dreadful affair happened, and she was so calm that she just went on talking about it, don't you know. My business, I mean. I thought it was a most remarkable instance of coolness. I was telling one of our directors today, about



it, and he thought it was a remarkable instance of coolness, Yes, even when I was taking her home she told me a lot about herself and – things. Her grandfather is a very wealthy man, a financier. I didn't know that.'

Michael might have said that he too was unaware of the fact, but he knew just the moment when a tactless interpolation might dry up the fount of Mr. Boltover's eloquence.

'Very intelligent lady indeed,' wandered Mr. Boltover; 'oh yes, I was talking about her grandfather—he is a very rich man. She thought that he might be able to take one of our properties off our hands. I was awfully surprised. Naturally, I did not think she had any money being in the chorus and all that – I hope I haven't been indiscreet,' he asked anxiously. You possibly did not know that she was on the stage.'

'Oh, yes, I did,' said Michael with a smile; 'you have betrayed nothing, Mr. Boltover.'

'I am awfully glad,' replied the other, relieved. 'What was I saying, about her grandfather, yes. I think I might sell him that property. I hate parting with properties – we have refused quite a number of good offers – sheer sentiment, don't you know.'

'But perhaps this is not a paying property.'

'Oh, no, not at all,' said Mr. Boltover, 'by no manner of means whatever. Still we don't like parting with them. Of course, I talk a lot of rot about people wanting to buy the works, and I always tell that great joke about a lunatic – ha, ha – but really it isn't true. No, not really true, oh, no.'

Michael had never heard the great joke about the lunatic. What he was anxious to hear were details of Kate's projected purchase, but in this he was foiled. There was precious little of the business man about Mr. Reggie Boltover, but one lesson he had learnt, and learnt thoroughly, and that was the art of silence. His revered father was wont to say, 'If you never open your mouth Reggie, nobody will know what an ass you are'; and in business, at any rate, Reggie most religiously lived up to this injunction.

What was the girl's object? Michael was puzzled. Strangely enough, the obvious never occurred to him, or if it did he dismissed it without a second consideration. He did not look upon Kate as the type that would find any amusement, whatever the profit might be, in the inveigling of a young fool to the altar. Kate wanted the excitement, not the money. That was her history. He had first met her when he was in the Special Department, and it had been over a little matter of a King's messenger's despatch bag which on a cross-channel

journey had mysteriously disappeared, though it was practically handcuffed to the owner's wrist, that he had first become acquainted with the girl. He was interested in her, but only mildly so, because, at the time, he arrived at a somewhat hasty judgment. It was later, when the strong room of the Muranic was forced and twenty-five packets of diamonds vanished in mid-ocean, and when he had been in charge of the investigations which had resulted in the imprisonment of Colonel Westhanger, that he had first formed a true estimate of the girl's character – an estimate which he had had cause to modify, but never to change.

Michael lived in a big block of flats near Baker Street, where he maintained a somewhat elaborate establishment for an inspector of police. He had, however, a private income of his own which he had inherited from his maternal grandmother, and as he was a man of simple tastes and very extravagant needs, he was able to live very comfortably indeed. He reached his home a little before eight o'clock, and was astonished as he came through the lobby of the flat to meet Beston, his man-servant, clad in fine raiment and going forth.

'Hello, Beston, where are you off to?' he asked in surprise.

The man touched his hat cheerfully. 'I am going to the theatre, sir, and thank you very much for the tickets,' he said. 'Cook went ten minutes ago and I stayed behind to tidy things up.'

'Oh, Cook went ten minutes ago, did she?' said Michael. 'That's good. When did the tickets arrive?'

'About an hour ago, sir, by a district messenger. It was very kind of you to wire to us that you were sending them.'

Michael laughed softly.

'Your surprise at my consideration hurts me, Beston,' he said. 'I always do things like that. By the way, did they spell your name correctly in the telegram?'

'I think so, sir,' said the man in surprise. He fumbled in his pocket, and produced the orange slip.

'I am sending you two tickets for the theatre tonight. May not be home until tomorrow.– Pretherston.'

The wire had been handed in at the Strand Office. Beston sensed some difficulty.

'I hope it's all right, sir?' he asked anxiously.

‘Quite all right,’ replied Michael with a cheerful nod. ‘Don’t wait for me now; I shall not be in very long.’ He mounted the carpeted stairs, opened the door of his flat and closed it carefully behind him. He went straight to his study, pulled down the blinds and drew the thick curtains across the windows, then he turned on the light, took up the telephone, and gave a Treasury number.

‘Is that Sergeant Pears?’ he asked. ‘Is there a telegram waiting at the Yard for me?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the sergeant’s voice.

Michael winked at the wall.

‘Do you mind opening and reading it?’

There was a little pause and then the sergeant repeated into the receiver: –

‘To Inspector Michael Pretherston, Scotland House. Come up by the earliest train. Am staying at Adelphi.– T.B.’

‘Handed in at Manchester, I suppose?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the sergeant, ‘at three-fifteen.’

‘Is the chief in Manchester?’

‘Yes, sir, he went by the morning train.’

‘Excellent,’ said Michael. ‘Thank you very much, sergeant.’ He hung up the receiver.

This was Kate’s work – the beautiful detail of it, the knowledge she possessed of T. B. Smith’s movements. She had probably sent a man up on the same train with the chief, and had given him the telegram in advance, with exact instructions as to the minute it was to be handed in. Yes, it was Kate. Yet he became uncomfortable at the thought it was not like her to leave things to chance. How came she to miss him at the Yard? He returned to the telephone and again called up his assistant.

‘What time did the telegram arrive?’ he asked.

The sergeant was apologetic.

‘I am very sorry, sir, I am afraid it arrived while you were here, this afternoon. It was given to a messenger to take in to you, and in some extraordinary way the constable forgot it. I have reprimanded him.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Michael, relieved. His relief, curiously founded, he might have found it difficult to explain. It was the relief which the matador feels when he sees the bull which steps so proudly into the ring, will put up a good fight. It was the relief of the huntsman when a strong fox breaks from covert. He wanted Kate and that extraordinary organization which he had set himself to conquer, to be at its best that his victory might be the more satisfactory.

He looked at his watch. It was five minutes past eight. He knew that his visitor would give the servants an hour, and he must employ that hour profitably. He began to write rapidly on a pad of scribbling paper, tearing of the sheets as fast as he had filled them. He had been working for an hour when he heard a bell tinkle. Someone was at the front door. He switched out the light, walked into the passage (he had already removed his shoes) and listened. Whoever was coming had sent an agent in advance to discover whether the flat was empty. Again the bell rang. Michael made no sign. It rang a third and last time. The detective made his way stealthily to the window, and slipped behind the curtains. He had left the study door open, so that he could hear every sound. He had a few seconds to wait before the faint click of the lock told him that the door had been opened. He knew that the visitor would come to the study last, and he proved to be right. One minute passed – as near as he could judge – before he caught the flash of a lamp which was directed cautiously to the curtained window. The light passed slowly along the floor until it reached the skirting, travelled round until it found the lower edge of the drawn curtain. Through the slit he had cut in the heavy velvet hangings Michael witnessed the search. Presently the light went out focusing itself upon the electric switch. There was a click and the room was illuminated.

The girl who stood by the desk was soberly dressed, and was apparently in no hurry. She pulled her gloves off slowly, whilst she allowed her eyes to rove over the littered table. Half a dozen sheets of writing attracted her attention, and when her gloves removed she picked the papers up, pulled the big writing chair to the table, and sat down to read. She read the notes through carefully and once she smiled. When she had finished she put them down, leant back in the chair and looked around the room, then –

‘Come out, Mike,’ she said.

Michael stepped forth without embarrassment.

‘I was nearly deceived,’ she said, ‘with your precious account of the happening at Sebo’s, and then I realized that this could not have been written more than a few minutes before. You forgot to blot the last sheet and the ink is

still damp.'

She rubbed her fingers over to prove the fact. 'Why aren't you in Manchester?' she asked.

The staggering question nearly took his breath away.

'Well, if you aren't the real Kate!' he said admiringly.

'I'm in your chair, I'm afraid,' she said.

'Not a bit.' He dropped into a deep settee. 'Now tell me all the news. But before we go any farther,' he said with mock concern, 'wouldn't you like a chaperon?'

'Don't worry,' she replied, 'I have a chaperon.'

'Not in my flat, I hope,' he said in a tone of alarm. 'You, I can trust, Kate; but the idea of your low thieving friends being up against all my movable goods gives me a little pain.'

She fished in her bag, and produced a little gold case. She opened it and took out a cigarette.

'You won't have one, of course?'

'Not one of yours, Kate,' he said reproachfully. 'No, I'll have one of my own if you don't mind.'

'I think you are very rude,' she said, with a lift of her brows.

'It's better to be rudely awake than politely asleep,' he said meaningly. 'When one has to deal with clever criminals, one to take all sorts of precautions.'

She laughed and looked at him curiously.

'I wonder what made you a policeman?'

'Nature,' he said promptly.

She was puzzled. 'I don't quite get your humour,' she said.

'Nature provides all things with some form of protection. It gives the oyster its shell and the tiger its stripes. It gives the squid his ink-sac, and the shark his teeth. Nature always produces antidotes. When criminals are stupid, they have stupid policemen to deal with them. When criminals are extraordinarily clever, nature provides the police force with an officer of unusual intelligence. I came

to the police in blind obedience to the laws of nature.’

She laughed softly in his face.

‘It’s so nice to be able to discuss things with a man of sensibility,’ she said. ‘Of course, some of my friends are awfully clever, and my uncle is very philosophical; but then they all take a very one-sided view of things, and I think it’s so much better to hear the other side of every question. You can get two views on all subjects except crime,’ she went on. ‘If you believe in Darwin’s theory, you can meet hosts of clever people who bitterly oppose it. If you are a Christian scientist, you can meet hosts of theosophists. Even if you are a firm believer in monogamy, you can generally hire a Mormon to argue on the other side. It is only when we come down to crime that you meet the truly insular view, held by people who know nothing whatever about its finesse, or the genius necessary to break the laws without leaving a big hole to show where you went in and another to show where you came out. That is why I like you, Mike,’ she said frankly.

‘Any appreciation is very gratifying to me,’ said Michael, ‘but that which is so enthusiastic that it leads my admirer to break into my flat to ravish my secret thoughts, is a little overwhelming.’

‘I wanted to know what you were saying about me,’ she said, ‘though I ought to have known that you would not leave things about for me to read – still,’ she justified herself, ‘to do myself justice, I did not expect to find your confidential reports on your desk.’

There was a big safe in one corner of the room. ‘I was going to open that.’ She nodded towards the strong-box. Then she turned the conversation suddenly.

‘You saw me the other night.’

‘At Sebo’s – yes,’ he said. ‘I saw you.’

‘What did you think?’ she asked quietly.

‘I thought you were with the loquacious Mr. Boltover for a special reason of your own,’ he said slowly.

‘He is an orator, isn’t he?’ she agreed, ‘but he’s quite a nice boy, really. God didn’t give him brains, and it’s not fair to make fun of a man’s deficiencies.’

‘What did you want from Reggie?’ asked Michael.

‘I just wanted to know all about him,’ she said. ‘Those kind of people are always interesting to me.’

‘What did you want from Reggie?’ he asked again.

‘How insistent you are!’ she laughed, She got up and began strolling about the room, taking down books from the big bookshelf, and examining their titles.

‘What catholic tastes you have, Mike – and Tennyson, too. How depraved!’

‘You will find a Browning somewhere,’ he said carelessly.

‘That’s more encouraging,’ she smiled. ‘It’s an awfully comfortable room. Quite like the room I thought you would have.’

She looked at a book-plate on the cover of one volume. ‘You were at Winchester, I see. So was uncle.’

‘The poison and the antidote!’

‘You are not fair with uncle. He’s a mental degenerate, too. Crime is a disease with him.’

‘And with you?’ said Michael quickly.

‘It’s a hobby. It’s a tremendous excitement.’

She put the book down, and turned to him.

‘You don’t know what it’s like. To work things out and make them happen, to cover a couple of sheets of paper with writing and then see all sorts of things move in obedience to those instructions, to see thousands and tens of thousands of pounds change hands, to know that men are going long journeys, that special trains are being run, that telegraph wires are humming all over the Continent, that a dozen brilliant thief-catchers are working and worrying in a vain attempt to undo all that twenty or thirty lines of writing have done.’

‘This will be used in evidence against you,’ warned Michael flippantly. The girl was not posing. Of that he was convinced. Her big grey eyes were brighter, her whole face was alight with the excitement of the thought, her voice had a new thrill. She was exalted, transfigured at the thought of the power which her shrewd brain gave to her.

‘What do you want from Reggie?’ he asked again.

The light faded out of her eyes and she was her normal self again.

‘Oh, I wanted to pick his pocket,’ she said mockingly, ‘or, no, I know something better – I wanted to marry him. He’s worth two million.’

‘I don’t think you will ever marry for money,’ said Michael.

‘What makes you say that?’ she asked quickly.

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘That is the estimate I have formed of you. I may be wrong.’

‘I shall never marry,’ she said with decision. ‘I’m not of the marrying kind. I hate men in some ways. I hate them so much, that it gives me a real joy to take away the one thing in the world that they really love. You know the Claude Duval tradition – I mean the idealized Claude Duval of tradition, not the sneak-thief valet of actuality – of robbing the rich and never robbing the poor – well, I rob men, and I never rob women.’

‘In fact, you rob the people who have the money,’ said Michael. ‘That isn’t clever.’

‘No, but it sounds awfully good. I’m thinking of including it in the great speech I shall deliver one of these days at the Old Bailey.’

‘What did you want from Reggie?’ he asked.

‘You are almost monotonous,’ she laughed. ‘Well, I wanted information.’

She turned, and again he saw that bright light in her eye, and that eager look in her face.

‘I will tell you, Michael Pretherston,’ she said, pointing a white finger toward him. ‘We will play fair. I am going to do a big thing. I am going to make the most wonderful steal that the world has ever known. That is why I found Reggie. That is why I made a martyr of myself, and endured the boredom of Lord Flanborough’s society.’

She clapped her hands like a child.

‘It’s a big thing, Michael, but it’s full of complications, wonderfully full of strategy, and I am going to do it all with your assistance.’

He jumped up, and flung out his hand.

‘Put it there, Kate,’ he said. ‘This is going to be the big thing for both of us, and I am going to be the victor. If I win, I have whatever I am after. If you win, you have me,’ she said with a little laugh.

He looked at her in silence.



‘I can almost see you gripping my arm, and pushing me into the steel pen,’ she said. ‘I can see you sitting in court in a brown – no, a blue – overcoat, with your hat nicely balanced on your knees, looking up at me in the dock, and wondering how I am going to take it.’

A cloud passed over his face.

‘You’re a pessimistic little devil,’ he growled. ‘No, I wasn’t thinking about that.’

‘What were you thinking about?’ she asked, her eyes wide open in surprise.

‘I was thinking I’d marry you,’ he said.

She looked at him in amusement.

‘You’re mad, aren’t you?’

Yes,’ he said. ‘Didn’t you know?’

‘Marry you?’ she said scornfully. ‘Great Heavens!’

‘You might do worse,’ he said with his cheerful smile.

‘Can you name anything I could do that would be more hopelessly degrading than marry a policeman?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you might be an old maid and keep cats. You take it for granted, of course,’ he went on, ‘that I am letting you go now.’

‘Naturally,’ she replied, ‘I have given you something to live for.’

‘You may be right,’ he said quietly, and opened the door for her. They walked down the felt-covered passage to the front door.

‘I owe you something,’ she said as they stood in the doorway. The young man from the South nearly put an end to my promising career.’

‘A little thing like that is hardly worth mentioning. Good night, Kate. Are you sure it is safe for you to be out alone so late?’

She made a little face at him, and went tripping down the stairs. She turned into the street, but had not gone two paces when a hand caught her arm.

‘Excuse me,’ said a voice. By the light of a street lamp she recognized her captor as a detective sergeant from Scotland Yard.

Before she could protest a voice spoke from the darkness of the balcony

above, and it was the voice of Michael.

‘All right, sergeant,’ he said. She shook herself free of the man and looked wrathfully up at the dim figure.

‘I forgot you’d have your nurse handy, Michael,’ she jeered.

‘Good night, dear,’ said the voice from the balcony, and to her intense annoyance she felt an extraordinary sensation wholly new to her, but which with her quick woman’s wit she correctly diagnosed, as she hurried angrily along the street.

For Kate Westhanger had blushed for the first time in her life.

## CHAPTER 7

LORD FLANBOROUGH gave a dinner-party. He was a methodical man, and invariably made his arrangements a long time in advance, and he was not unnaturally annoyed when, at the eleventh hour, his daughter suggested a change in the plans.

‘My dear Moya.’ he said testily, ‘don’t be absurd. Surely after what has passed – after his extraordinary attitude – ’

‘Oh, Daddy, what nonsense! ’ said the girl. ‘Michael is really a good sort, and he will be amusing. I really cannot sit out a dinner with all those boring people, and if you don’t invite him, I shall have a headache.’

‘But, my dear,’ protested her father, ‘Sir Ralph will be quite entertainment enough, surely? ’

‘Sir Ralph is the biggest bore of all,’ she said calmly. ‘Please let me have my way.’

So, to his surprise and amusement, Michael received an invitation to dinner, couched in such gracious terms that he formed the wholly incorrect impression that some other guest had failed Moya and that he was being called in to relieve her of the responsibility for thirteen people sitting at table.

It was even a more dreary dinner-party than Moya had imagined. Sir Ralph Sapson was amusing in his own way, but his own way was not Moya’s way. He was a stout, handsome, young man on the right side of thirty, immensely wealthy, and according to her father, immensely capable. Though there had been no definite arrangement, it was understood, mainly by Lord Flanborough,

that Sir Ralph desired a closer association with the Flanborough family than his directorships gave him.

The remainder of the guests were even less entertaining than Sir Ralph. There were three other members of the peerage: Old Lord Katstock, who was a political lord who had once occupied a position as Under-Secretary in some forgotten administration; the Marquis of Cheddar, who was a sporting lord and had theories on the Bruce Low system of breeding; Lord Dumburton, who was a soldier lord, very poor and very wicked, unless rumour lied; and an assortment of directors which included Mr. Reginald Boltover, who recognized Michael with a guilty start, and took no interest whatever in his dinner, but waited with bated breath for Michael to reveal his guilty secret.

There were two or three ladies, who gave Michael the impression that they had been dipped in diamonds by their herculean maids, and there was a thin, dowdily dressed lady with a hooked nose.

‘Has the Duchess borrowed anything, Moya?’ said Michael under his breath.

‘Not from me,’ said the girl significantly, ‘but father is always susceptible. She’s an awfully good sort really, but I do wish she wouldn’t take snuff.’

Michael knew, or was known to, them all.

‘It’s a rum idea of yours, going into the police, Pretherston,’ said Sir Ralph with that air of patronage which he reserved for people poorer than himself.

‘It’s just as rum an idea as your going into trade and keeping shops,’ said Michael.

Sir Ralph smiled indulgently.

‘We have to do something to make an honest living,’ he said. ‘I suppose the reference to the shops is my association with the Colonial Retail Stores. That makes a hundred thousand a year, Pretherston.’

‘Then you have a hundred thousand reasons for selling bad jam,’ said Michael. ‘I’ve given up buying things at your shops.’

‘That is a tragedy,’ said Ralph with heavy humour. ‘Try us again and we will endeavour to merit your patronage.’

‘I have another bone to pick with you,’ said Michael. He did not like Sir Ralph Sapson. ‘I came up the other day from Seahampton; the railway carriage was beastly, hadn’t been cleaned for a month, and the train was fifty minutes late. The London and Seahampton is another of your profitable ventures, isn’t it?’

‘I am told that I have an interest in it,’ said Sir Ralph, with a smile at the girl; ‘but, really, my dear Pretherston, when you find a railway so badly conducted you ought to complain to the police.’

This amused him so much that he laughed without restraint, and was, as a result, compelled to explain his joke to fourteen people who were anxious to share it.

Michael had to leave early. ‘I should dearly love to stay and play bridge with you,’ he said.

‘Michael, you are a little horrid, aren’t you?’ asked the girl.

‘Horrid!’ he asked, puzzled.

‘You are so practical; you weren’t always like that.’

‘And you weren’t always unpractical,’ he laughed.

She had hoped – she did not know exactly what she had hoped, but the new Michael was so unlike the old that she could almost have cried with vexation. Gone was the old recklessness, the old extravagance (save in directions annoying to her guests) and the old adoration which shone in his eyes. There was an unpleasant feeling that he was laughing at her all the time, and that did not add to her happiness.

‘I don’t think you’re nice, anyway,’ she said. ‘Won’t you come more often to see us?’

‘When you lose a pearl necklace, or find the hired lady surreptitiously carrying off your provisions, drop a line to Inspector Michael Pretherston, Room 26, Scotland House, and I will be with you in a jiffy.’

‘By which I understand you don’t want to see us at all,’ she said petulantly.

‘I am sorry I asked you tonight.’

‘I, for my part, am very glad,’ he said.

Later, when Michael had left, Sir Ralph was to find her a very unamusing companion, though why she should be annoyed with her sometime suitor, only a woman can understand. She did not love him. In some ways she rather disliked him, and possibly the underlying reason for her inviting him at all, was in order to confirm and seal her indifference. If Michael had been in the least way attentive, had shown the slightest desire to recover the lost ground and to resume the old romance, she would have found an intense satisfaction

in checking him, and would have gone to bed that night happy in the knowledge that she had permanently attached to her, one for whom she had not the slightest tenderness. This is the way of women who when offered a dish, a dress, a colour, a material or a man, invariably say, 'I would like to see something else.'

Her abstraction was so marked that Sir Ralph thought she was ill, which instantly produced the headache which it is every woman's privilege to adopt at a moment's notice.

'You ought to take care of Moya, Flanborough,' he said to his host at parting; 'she's not at all well.'

'I have noticed it,' said the dutiful parent, who had noticed nothing of the kind, and had inwardly remarked that Moya was sulking about something. 'You have an extraordinary eye for things of that kind, Sir Ralph.'

'I understand human beings,' admitted Sir Ralph; 'it has been my one engrossing study in life. It is almost a vice with me. When a man comes into my office, I can generally sum up his character, his business and his capabilities before he has opened his mouth.'

'It's a great gift,' said Lord Flanborough solemnly.

Sir Ralph Sapson was in a particularly cheerful mood that night. In the brief interview which he had had with his future father-in-law, he had not only secured a tacit agreement of his right to be admitted to the family and an expression of Lord Flanborough's approval, but he had clinched a very excellent business arrangement which had been hanging fire for twelve months – an arrangement which may be briefly summarized – Lord Flanborough was the chairman of the Austral-African Steamship Company which carried merchandise and passengers between Cape Town and Plymouth. Sir Ralph was the chairman of the London and Seahampton Railway and was also chairman and a large shareholder in the Seahampton Dock Improvement Company. The docks had improved much more rapidly than had the trade which could justify their existence, and the deal which was really a side-line to the more romantic business of a matrimonial alliance, was that the ships of the A.-A. line should shamelessly abandon Plymouth and Liverpool, and should have their headquarters at Seahampton, an arrangement which offered advantages on both sides, since Lord Flanborough was not without interest in the Seahampton docks.

The night was chilly, a full moon rode serenely in the skies; there was a touch of frost in the air, and more than a suspicion of frost on the sidewalk. Sir Ralph Sapson's car was waiting, but he ordered the chauffeur to drive home,

saying that he would prefer to walk. Sir Ralph lived in Park Lane, so that he had nearly a mile to cover, but he was in that mood which made light of so unusual an exercise. He reached the door of his imposing residence, and his hand was on the bell when he heard his name called. He had noticed, as he walked up to his door, that a little distance along the road was a big motor-car, its head lamps gleaming, and a chauffeur busy tinkering with the engine.

‘I am afraid you don’t know me,’ said a sweet voice.

Sir Ralph raised his hat. The girl who stood on the sidewalk was obviously a lady. She was as obviously beautifully dressed, and Sir Ralph, who had an appraising eye, valued the ermine cloak she wore at something not far short of a thousand pounds. A single broad collar of diamonds about her slender throat was all the jewellery she wore.

‘I am afraid I don’t,’ he said.

‘I only met you once,’ said the girl timidly, ‘in Paris. You were introduced to me in the foyer of – ’

‘Oh, yes, at the Opera, of course,’ said Sir Ralph, who, amongst other things, was a patron of the Arts. She nodded and seemed pleased that he had remembered her, a compliment which Sir Ralph did not fail to observe.

‘My car has broken down,’ she said, ‘and I was wondering if I could beg your hospitality. It is so horribly shivery here.’ She drew her cloak tighter around her.

‘With all the pleasure in life,’ said Sir Ralph heartily; ‘but I have only a bachelor’s establishment, you know,’ he laughed.

He rang the bell and the door was opened instantly.

‘Put some lights in the drawing-room,’ he said to the servant. ‘Is there a fire there?’

‘Yes, Sir Ralph,’ said the man. ‘Can I get you some coffee or a little wine?’

She had pulled a big chair up before the blaze, and was resting her little white slippers upon the silver fender. Her shapely hands were outspread to the fire, and Sir Ralph noted that though many jewels glittered on her fingers there was no sign of the plain gold circle of bondage.

‘You will think it awfully rude of me, but I cannot recall your name,’ he said, when the servant had gone.

‘I don’t suppose you do; my name is rather a barbarous one,’ she laughed. ‘I am the Princess Bacheffski.’

‘Why, of course!’ said Sir Ralph heartily, ‘I remember distinctly now.’

To do him justice, Russian princesses are not unusual phenomena in Paris, and he had a very bad memory for foreign names.

‘I suppose I am being very unconventional,’ she said with a little grimace, and for the first time he noticed that she spoke with the slightest accent; ‘but needs must when the devil drives, and I had either to sit in that cold car, or grasp the good fortune which fate threw in my way. And you, Sir Ralph, are looking just the same as when I saw you last. You are one of the big business men of London, aren’t you?’

‘I have a few interests,’ admitted Sir Ralph modestly. They talked of Paris, which Sir Ralph knew, and of Russia through which he had travelled on one occasion, and of London, and then the coffee came and, a few minutes later, her chauffeur, to tell her that the repairs had been effected.

‘Before I go I want to ask you one favour, Sir Ralph,’ she said.

She was a little embarrassed and nervously twisted a ring on her finger. Sir Ralph saw this and wondered.

‘You have only to ask anything, Princess, and it is granted,’ he said gallantly.

She hesitated a moment and bit her lip in thought. ‘I am going to take you into my confidence, and I know as a man of honour’ – Sir Ralph bowed – ‘you will not betray me. I am in London, but I am not supposed to be in London.’

She looked at him anxiously as she made this confession.

‘I understand,’ said Sir Ralph, which was not true.

‘You have probably noticed – you were so quick at seeing those things – that I am not wearing my wedding ring. Well’ – she hesitated – ‘Dimitri and I have quarrelled, and I do not want him to find me. I haven’t been to the Embassy, or to call on any of my old friends.’

‘You may be sure,’ said Sir Ralph, ‘that your secret is safe. I may say,’ he added, ‘that this is not the first time I have been entrusted with a confidence as delicate.’

‘I know I can trust you,’ she said, warmly gripping his hand. ‘I am staying in a little furnished flat which I have taken in Half Moon Street. I have a duenna

with me for the sake of the proprieties – Dimitri is so funny about those things – so if a busy man can spare the time, I am always in between four and five – ’

‘It will give me the greatest happiness to renew the acquaintance,’ said Sir Ralph and raised her hand to his lips. Sir Ralph retired to rest more pleased with himself than ever,

## CHAPTER 8

NO MAN has ever understood a woman, for the simple reason that woman is unintelligible even to her own kind. If she were not, and if she were susceptible to explanation by her own sisters, be sure that her own sisters would lose no time in telling the first man she met all about her.

Lady Moya Felton possessed that rare combination of talents, beauty and acumen. She dressed well, she spoke well, and she looked well. She was a product of Newnham, an institution which, more often than not, gives the world a being which is something less than a woman and something more than a babu. This being is crammed with erudition and for many years fights life with a textbook. Sometimes she continues to the end, very self-assured, very confident of the facts she has culled from the printed page, and very determined that she will never surrender her mechanical facts or her machine-made values. Sometimes she succumbs to the humanizing influences which daily contact with the verities of life bring to her and develops into a useful and charming member of society.

Moya had absorbed just as much of life as she thought was necessary to her comfort. She stopped short of the supreme lesson which finds expression in cheerful sacrifice, but she was an eminently pleasing person, and never discussed biological justice or gave forth as her own the shoddy philosophies she had acquired in hall. Therefore, she was bearable. Moreover, by realizing – here her instinct served her – that Newnham had turned her out fit for nothing better than a church-going school- ma’am, she conveyed an impression of her education rather than declaimed the fact.

Practical as she was, she had a guilty secret, not only a very dear one, to be hugged tight to her heart, but one which evoked the unusual emotion of profound disapproval in the more ordered compartments of her mind. Moya was a dreamer, a cold-blooded romanticist who had wonderful adventures with wonderful people whenever she walked or rode abroad. In the privacy of her big limousine, she would be absorbed in events of her own creation, wholly monopolized by men and women who bore no likeness to, and had no relation with, any person in her somewhat extensive list of acquaintances. She would



often find herself in situations so absurdly impossible that even the penny novelette reader would have rejected them with the scorn which their crudity deserved. She did not dream of living people, the mere mental suggestion – for the roving mind has a trick of taking charge at times – that any of her visionary heroes had his prototype in flesh and blood, ensured the ejection of the offending dream-man and the substitution of another, more wildly improbably, but at the same time more unlikely to challenge relationship with anybody in the material world.

She could dream and yet accept the cold practicality of a Ralph Sapson, and calmly consider a marriage so hopelessly prosaic.

That was inexplicable.

For an engaged lover Ralph had been singularly remiss. He had called once since his unemotional declaration of love. To do him justice he had skipped the tender demonstrations which usually accompany even the most formal engagements, and had got down to the question of settlement in the shortest space of time. This was as Moya could wish, for she also was embarrassed at the thought that a human being might possibly approach – suffering in comparison – the extravagance, wordless and intangible as it was, of her shadowy friends.

It is a remarkable circumstance that romance in concrete form did not come to Moya, until the very week she engaged herself to marry Sir Ralph Sapson. It came in a curious way. She had driven to Leicester Square to see an exhibition of pictures. It was one of those collections which dawn upon London, bringing in its wake a name which has never been heard before, save in a very select circle and is never heard again outside of that circle; an orbit which swings beyond the ken of ordinary mortals.

She went into the gallery and found it a veritable desert. Save for a young man and a small pinched and preoccupied girl, wearing a large pendant in which was inserted the photograph of her uninteresting fiancé, the place was empty. The girl with the pendant carried her excuse in her hand, in the shape of a bunch of catalogues. There was less excuse for the young man for he was healthy in appearance, and it was not raining.

Moya began a conscientious inspection of the pictures, chiefly remarkable for their colouring and for the atmosphere which the artist had managed to secure. Indeed, the pictures were all atmosphere. The girl made a slow progress along the wall, comparing each framed atrocity with her catalogue and striving to sense, dimly, something of the artist's honourable intentions.

She looked round once to discover what effect the pictures had upon her

fellow sightseer. He was standing before a long panel representing, if the catalogue had been rightly compiled, 'A Blue Wind on a Green Hill.' His face bore an expression of the deepest gloom, his hat was tilted to the back of his head and his hands were thrust deeply into his trousers pockets. The longer he looked at the 'Blue Wind on the Green Hill' the more morose and unhappy did he appear.

This then was the attitude which the new colourist school demanded, one of fierce but approving antagonism if the paradox be permitted. She moved up till she was almost by his side, never thinking that in the presence of the girl with the programmes and the photographic miniature, he would dare address her. Yet he did.

'What do you think of that one?' he asked without turning his head.

She was taken aback and was prepared to be chilly and non-committal. She looked at his face, and the nearer view was a pleasing one. He was very fair, very good-looking, and had the bluest eyes she had ever seen in a man. He was also unshaven, and his collar was not clean, but he was well-dressed enough, and his tone was wholly Oxford – and Balliol at that.

'I think it is rather weird,' she said.

'So do I,' he nodded vigorously, 'I think it is – "weird" is the word. As a work of art how does it strike you?'

She hesitated. She had a full range of studio jargon which she had acquired in the course of her after-education, and could speak glibly on atmosphere, tone and light. She knew that it was possible to refer to a still-life study of a bunch of bananas as being 'full of movement,' without being guilty of an absurdity. In fact, she knew enough about art to have occupied a position on any average newspaper as a critic.

'As a work of art,' she said, 'it is original and a little eccentric.'

'Frankly?' he demanded fiercely.

All the time he spoke he was glaring at the picture, and had not turned his head toward her.

'Frankly,' she replied, 'I think these are monstrosities.'

He nodded again.

'I agree with you,' he said, 'and I know better than anybody else how monstrous they are – I painted 'em!'

Moya gasped.

‘I am awfully sorry,’ she began.

‘I am sorry too – that I painted them,’ he replied. ‘I am not sorry that I exhibited them, because all my friends told me that they were wonderful, and naturally I get some satisfaction from proving that my friends are mentally deficient.’

He turned round and looked at her, and was in turn surprised.

‘Hello,’ he said, staring at her with his blue eyes wide open, ‘I thought you were much older.’

She laughed.

‘The fact is I didn’t look at you,’ he confessed. ‘How can anybody look at anything with these beastly things staring one in the face? Hi! Emma!’

Fortunately the programme girl was looking his way, and realized that he was speaking to her. ‘Your name is Emma, I suppose?’

‘No, sir,’ said the girl impressively; ‘my name is Evangeline.’

He turned to the girl.

‘Here is an Evangeline whom I thought was an Emma; and here are my Emmas that I thought were Evangelines,’ he said despairingly. ‘What made you come to this exhibition?’

‘I saw a criticism of the pictures in yesterday’s papers.’

‘In the Megaphone,’ he said accusingly.

‘Yes – it was a very flattering criticism, I thought,’ said Moya.

He nodded.

‘I wrote it myself,’ he said without shame.

He turned to the programme girl. ‘Tell your master to shut up the gallery, have the pictures packed away and sent home.’

‘But,’ said Moya in alarm, ‘I hope my stupid views won’t influence you.’

‘It isn’t your stupid view,’ he said; ‘it is my original stupid view. You see, I can’t paint really. I know not the slightest thing about art. I have never had an

artistic education or served under any master. I am a genius. These works are works of a genius. The frames cost a lot of money, and the amount of paint I have used is prodigious. There is everything there' – he waved his hand to the covered walls – 'except the know-how.'

She murmured a conventional expression of sympathy, but he did not invite sympathy, he invited condemnation, and seemed to find a comfort in his own misfortune, and was obviously all the happier that he had reached a decision on his own merits.

They walked out of the gallery together, and Moya wondered at herself. That she had in so brief a space of time entered into the aspirations and disappointments of a perfect stranger, and now felt something of his chagrin, was truly amazing.

'I know you,' he said, breaking off in the midst of a sardonic dissertation on art; 'you are Lady Moya Melton of Pelton.'

'Felton,' she suggested, amused.

'Oh, yes, Felton,' he nodded; 'I saw your portrait in the academy, a very bad portrait too.'

'People thought it was rather good,' she demurred.

'Idealized, but lord, what do I know about art? This char-a-banc de luxe is yours, I presume.' He pointed to the big limousine.

'It does happen to be mine,' she said. 'My father gave it to me on my twenty-first birthday.'

He inspected it critically.

'I wonder if I know as much about motor-cars as I know about painting,' he said. 'I used to think I knew something about both; but here, at any rate, is something real, it is a very nice car.' He opened the door for her, and she offered her hand.

'I am so sorry about the pictures,' she said.

'Don't worry,' he replied cheerfully.

She thought for a moment.

'Can I drop you anywhere?'

He fingered his unshaven chin.

‘If you know of a nice deep pond where a man may drown himself without interference, I shall be obliged if you will take me there,’ he said gravely; then, seeing the look of alarm in her eyes, he laughed.

‘You probably don’t know my name,’ he said.

As a matter of fact, she did not, and had been trying throughout the interview to take a surreptitious look at the catalogue. She knew it was something like Brixel.

‘Fonso Blaxton,’ he said shortly. ‘“Fonso” stands for Alphonso – a perfectly rotten name, isn’t it? It would be quite all right for an artist. If there’s any need to send flowers, my address is Oxford Chambers.’ He shook hands abruptly, handed her into the car, and closed the door. He waited only the briefest spell, and had lifted his hat and vanished before the car had started.

Moya drove back with so much to occupy her thoughts that she forgot to dream. So preoccupied was she, that she passed Sir Ralph Sapson and his chic companion turning into the park before she was aware that he was bowing to her, or had time to note anything more about the lady than that she was very beautifully gowned and that her sunshade was tilted at such an angle that it was impossible to see her face.

‘Who is your friend?’

Sir Ralph turned with a smirk.

‘That, Princess,’ he said, ‘is Lady Moya Felton.’

‘Oh, your fiancée,’ said the girl. ‘Isn’t it a bore being in London incognito? I should so much like to have met her.’

‘Perhaps some day,’ said Ralph.

‘I should dearly love to,’ murmured the girl; ‘but please go on, you interest me so much. I am beginning to realize why you English are so successful. You seem to know every detail of your business.’

‘Oh, dear no,’ protested Sir Ralph good-humouredly. ‘I am rather a dunce if the truth be told, but one must know something of the details.’

‘Something!’ said the girl, raising her eyebrows. ‘I think you are very modest. Why, you seem to know the workings of your railway system from beginning to end.’

Sir Ralph stroked his moustache thoughtfully.

‘One has to go into things,’ he said vaguely, ‘and of course one takes a lot of credit for things which one is not entitled to take credit for. But the gold train was my idea altogether.’

‘I never thought there was so much romance in business,’ said the Princess; then suddenly, ‘Do you mind telling the driver to turn about? I am tired of the park now.’

He leant forward and instructed the chauffeur and the big car circled round.

‘I am glad you suggested that,’ he said.

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘Did you notice a man in a grey felt hat talking to a lady in a victoria?’

She shook her head.

‘He’s a weird bird,’ said Sir Ralph; ‘he is a policeman, Michael Pretherston, Lord Pretherston’s brother. I don’t want to meet him, apart from the fact that he might recognize you, even through that veil of yours which would deny him so much happiness,’ he added gallantly.

‘Tell me some more about the gold train,’ she said.

Nothing loath, Sir Ralph explained. He told the story of the Seahampton Docks, and the big liners which would be coming in, and the new services he had inaugurated to meet the increased traffic.

‘We shall carry practically the whole of the gold which comes from the Rand mines,’ he said impressively. ‘Naturally we have to be very careful, although there is not much danger in England. The gold train is really two big safes on wheels. To outward appearance, they are just like ordinary closed railway trucks. In reality they are steel boxes, burglar-proof and fire-proof. Of course, nothing can go wrong, and even if we had a smash the cars would be uninjured. But I have the best men on the system to run the train.’

‘How very fascinating!’ she said, intensely interested. ‘I suppose you have a most elaborate timetable?’

‘I have worked out every detail myself,’ he said. He took out a notebook from his pocket. ‘I will show you, Princess,’ he said impressively.

He turned the gilt-edged leaves until he came to two pages covered with his fine writing.

'You will get some idea of the work involved in the running of a special train,' he said. 'Here are the times. There is the driver's name, the fireman's name, the assistant fireman's name, the names of the two guards.'

She looked at the book. 'I cannot read your writing very well,' she laughed. 'You must not forget that my family was very old-fashioned, and my dear father never allowed us to learn the Roman alphabet until we were quite grown up. But I can see what a very difficult business it is.'

She handed the book back to him with a little sigh.

'I am afraid I am very stupid,' she said. 'Figures always bother me, and I can see that you revel in them. I hate writing, but by the way your book is filled, it seems that you revel in it! I cannot understand people who like to write. It is always an agony for me to compose an ordinary letter. My thoughts come so much faster than my poor hand can move.'

She took a pad and a pencil from the silver-mounted stationary case in front of her. 'I will show you something,' she said. She wrote rapidly, resting the pad on her knee, and he watched her in astonishment as she proceeded to fill the sheet.

'There,' she said triumphantly, 'that is what I can do best.'

'It looks like shorthand,' he said.

'It is something like Russian shorthand,' said the girl, 'and I am such a lazy person that I always use it whenever I want to write a note. My secretary, who is the only person in the world who understands it, transcribes it. I do it because I hate writing.'

'So you are clever, after all, Princess.'

She reached out her little hand, and patted his arm.

'You don't know how clever I am,' she said, and they both laughed together.

## **CHAPTER 9**

COLONEL WESTHANGER looked at his watch.

'She's twenty minutes late already,' he said.

Gregori rolled another cigarette, and looked inquiringly at Dr. Philip Garon, who was fingering his trim beard and talking with some animation to the

middle- aged pallid man, who was known to the world as Mr. Cunningham, and to the police as an expert safe breaker.

All Crime Street, with the exception of the admirable Mr. Millet, was present. The Bishop with his large placid face was playing bezique with Francis Stockmar. Colling Jacques, who had the appearance of a prosperous butler who had settled down to the management of his own private hotel was reading the newspaper. Mr. Mulberry, that respectable man with his grey side-whiskers and his sad dog-like eyes, was discussing Renaissance architecture with the other Stockmar; and the Colonel, pacing the room impatiently, stopped now and again to fling a word to one or the other.

Presently there was a slight sound in the hall below, and the Colonel went to the door of the room.

‘She is here,’ he said, and passed out to the landing to meet Kate. She was wearing a dark coat-dress and a big black fox wrap which she loosened and flung off as she came into the room. It was notable that the Colonel, who had every right to complain of her unpunctuality, did not attempt to criticize her for her late arrival, other than to make a mild reference to the fact that he had expected her earlier.

She looked round the room.

‘Where is Millet?’ she asked.

‘Millet is working on the telegrams,’ he said, and she nodded, satisfied.

‘Everything is ready now,’ she said.

‘Did you see Boltover, Mr. Mulberry?’

He rose and came toward her with that noiseless step of his.

‘A most amiable young man,’ he said in his unctuous sing-song voice, ‘such a pleasant young man! We had a very long talk together.’

‘And?’

‘We arranged everything.’

He took a long envelope from his pocket, pulled out a stiff parchment, and handed it to her with the gravity and deference of an ambassador delivering a treaty to his sovereign lady. She ran her eyes quickly over the document, turned its crinkling page and read rapidly to the last flourishing signatures.

‘That’s all right,’ she said, and returned the document. The long table had been



placed in the middle of the room, and to this, without instructions, the whole of the company had drawn. Colonel Westhanger sat at one end and Kate at the other. From her bag she took a thick roll of manuscript, cut the strings that fastened it, and smoothed the sheets out before her. One by one she called their names, at the same time handing them, in some cases one, in other cases two or three sheets covered with writing.

‘You have a week to master all this,’ she said, ‘and in a week’s time we will meet again and I will see that everybody understands.’

She caught Jacques’ eye.

‘About men?’ she said. ‘How many have you arranged for?’

‘Sixty,’ he said. ‘I have been bringing them into England for the past month.’

‘Will sixty be enough?’ she asked dubiously. ‘How many did we use for the Bank of Edinburgh?’

‘That was a different job,’ said Jacques. ‘We had to cut through thirty feet of concrete. I used two hundred and twenty in relays of thirty.’

‘Sixty will be quite enough,’ she said after a moment’s thought. ‘You will see that I have allowed only for fifty, but if they are the right kind of people –’

‘They are all good men, most of them from Italy, a few of them from France, and one Portuguese. They are the pick of my men, and represent years of organization.’

‘You have full details there, Cunningham,’ she said, turning to that dour man. ‘I took a shorthand note about the gold train, the driver and the officials who will be on the train, and I have all their addresses except one. You will find a cross against that; I think the address is Berne Street, Seahampton, but I had to time to verify it.’

‘This will be easy,’ said Cunningham, reading his instructions. ‘These times won’t be altered, I suppose?’

‘If they are, I shall know all about it,’ said the girl. ‘Every one must make a note of those instructions in his own code, and must do it pretty quickly.’

‘What’s the hurry?’ asked Westhanger, who alone of the men about the table had received no paper.

‘I want to see every sheet burnt before we leave the room,’ she said. The Colonel frowned.

‘But – ’ he began.

‘I want all the papers burnt before we leave the room,’ she said again emphatically.

Her uncle growled, but the others knew her well enough to realize that she had an excellent reason.

Each man in his own way, some in notebooks, some on the back of loose sheets of paper, faithfully transcribed the instructions, using his own pet abbreviations, his own particular symbols; and one by one, as fast as they completed their copies, the girl collected the papers, heard the instructions read over, corrected one, amended another, and finally, gathering all the sheets in her hand, walked to the fireplace, deposited them in the grate, and set a lighted match to them. She watched them burn until they were black ash, and put her foot upon them, crushing the embers to dust.

‘Are you nervous?’ asked the Colonel sarcastically.

‘Are you?’ she asked coolly.

‘Well, it does seem a little – ’

From the corner of the room came a soft but insistent purr. The men jumped to their feet.

‘Put away the tables quickly,’ said the girl under her breath.

They separated the tables into three parts. With an agility remarkable in one of his years, the Colonel flung a cloth over each, lifted a pot of flowers on to one, arranged a photograph on another, and left the third to the bezique players. The girl seated herself at the piano, opened it and began a soft movement from Rigoletto.

‘Sing,’ she said under her breath. The obedient Mr. Mulberry shuffled up to her side. He had a pleasing voice and the girl picked up the strain ...

‘I am sorry to disturb the harmony,’ said Michael Pretherston from the doorway.

‘May I ask what is the meaning of this intrusion?’ demanded Colonel Westhanger haughtily, as half a dozen Scotland Yard men crowded into the room behind their chief.

‘It is what is vulgarly known as a raid,’ said Michael. ‘Everybody will remain where he is while I run a foot rule over him. Parsons, you will take these

gentlemen one by one into an adjoining room and search them most thoroughly. Mrs. Gray' – he called to the door and a stout middle-aged woman with a pleasant face appeared – 'you will perform the same kind office for Miss Westhanger.'

'Why not "Kate"?' asked the girl scornfully. 'You are getting polite in your old age, Mike.'

'Miss Westhanger,' he repeated suavely.

'Suppose I refuse to be searched?'

'Then I shall convey you to a vulgar police station,' said Michael, 'and the process of search will be carried out in uncongenial surroundings.'

'I take it that you have a warrant?' demanded Colonel Westhanger.

'My dear Colonel!' said Michael, 'do you imagine I should come without having gone through that little formality?'

He produced the document.

'Signed by two stipendiary magistrates to be absolutely sure,' he said flippantly. 'Impound all documents you find, Parsons.'

'Yes, sir,' said the man, and led away the first of his victims, which happened to be the docile Mr. Mulberry.

'It is an unpleasant business,' sighed Michael, as he watched the girl pass from the room, followed by her searcher; 'but then, you will understand, Colonel, that our profession is full of heartrending moments. You are still on ticket of leave, I understand?'

'Expired,' growled Colonel Westhanger.

'Pardon me,' said Michael, 'I have been misinformed. I would like a word with you.'

He led the other to the corner of the room out of earshot, and the good humour died out of his voice as he confronted the older man.

'Westhanger,' he said, 'who was the tutor of this girl?'

'I don't quite get you?' said the other insolently.

'Who taught Kate to be a thief – is that plain enough for you?'

‘If she is a thief, it is a matter of aptitude. I deny that she is a thief or that she is a party to any illegal act of which my unfortunate friends may have been guilty – nobody taught her.’

‘You are a queer fellow,’ said Michael. ‘I suppose you are just unmoral.’

‘My personal character – ’ began the other.

‘By unmoral I mean you have no sense of meum and tuum. In other words, you are a born thief. You forgive me, but subtlety seems to be wasted on you. I ask you again, who educated Kate?’

The Colonel smiled.

‘Kate has much to thank me for,’ he said smugly. ‘I have been a father, and more than a father, to that child, and I assure you, Mr. Pretherston, that you are altogether wrong when you think that she is a thief. Why do you ask?’ he demanded, suddenly breaking off.

‘Because,’ said Michael, looking him steadily in the eye, ‘I believe that you have deliberately set yourself to exploit the genius of a clever child for your own profit. I believe that you, and you only, have so distorted her viewpoint that you have destroyed her soul. I am not sure yet,’ he admitted, ‘but when I am – ’

‘When you are,’ sneered the Colonel.

‘On one charge or another, I shall put you into prison,’ said Michael simply, ‘and I shall keep you in prison until you are dead. I will set myself the agreeable task of ensuring your end in a prison infirmary – which, I understand, is not a very cheerful place.’

The Colonel shuddered. There was something fateful, there was something malignant, a scarcely suppressed expression of hate in the police officer’s tone. For a second the older man wilted and shrunk back beneath the fierce intensity in Michael’s voice, and then, like the weakling that he was, he burst into a torrent of abuse which was founded in fear and energized by rage.

‘Hang you,’ he hissed, ‘threaten me...! I will have your coat off your back, you rotten policeman... ! You sneaking slop.... ! Kate is what she is. She will beat you and all your flat-footed pals! If she’s bad, you can’t make her anything else. I made her; yes, I made her! She is going to beat you, do you hear, and you will never catch her or me. I made her! You can’t scare me!’

His shrill voice trembled with anger; he was shaking from head to foot, and the bony fist which shivered in Michael’s face was so tightly clenched that the

knuckles stood out whitely.

‘She is not the kind you can cure with psalms, Mr. Policeman! You can’t pray over her because she has nothing to pray to, do you hear that? You caught me. You sent me to that hell at Wandsworth, and I am going to get back on you, you and all people like you. Kate’s the biggest thing you have handled, and she is going to break you, break you!’

‘Uncle!’ He turned round to meet the white face of the girl.

‘Are you mad?’ she asked quietly.

He dropped his eyes before hers. ‘He got me rattled,’ he muttered.

Michael looked at the searcher, and the woman shook her head. With a nod he dismissed her.

‘Not guilty!’ he said flippantly.

He looked at the trembling man in front of him with a calm intensity. ‘I shall remember a lot of what you said, Westhanger, and you will hear from me one of these days.’

He walked over to the fireplace, for out of the tail of his eye he had seen the burnt paper. He thrust a finger gently through the ash.

‘Still warm,’ he said. ‘I gather we were a little late.’

He scooped out a handful of the ash, and carried it to the light. A word or two of the burnt instructions was still faintly visible, but there was nothing to assist him. Nevertheless he had the whole of the ashes carefully deposited in a box and carried away – he himself being the last of the police to leave.

He stood in the centre of the room, carefully smoothing the nap of his felt hat, and Crime Street waited for the inevitable warning. In this they were disappointed, for Michael addressed himself solely to Kate.

‘I will give you a chance, Miss Westhanger,’ he said and they wondered why he did not employ the more familiar style of address. ‘You are about to commit a crime which will render every one of you liable to long terms of penal servitude. What that crime is, I don’t know, but I am certain it is what Stockmar would call “kolossal.” It would not matter to me if you all rotted in prison for the rest of your lives.’

‘Tank you,’ said Mr. Stockmar, ‘dat is fery goot of you!’

‘When I say all,’ said Michael, ‘I exclude Kate. She is a young girl, and if

there is one of you who has any pretensions to manhood, you will get her out of this gang before you go any farther. If there is one of you who has a mother or a sister or any woman in the world for whom he has the slightest respect, he will try to save that child from herself. That is all.'

The meek Mr. Mulberry stood by the piano, his plump fingers ranged across the keys producing a melancholy symphony.

'We will now sing Hymn 847,' he said, in his melancholy oily voice, and it was in the burst of laughter that this sally provoked that Michael Pretherston took his leave, followed at a respectful distance down the stairs by Colonel Westhanger, who did not breathe freely until the front door had clanged behind his unwelcome visitor, and until the oiled bolts shot home in their sockets.

'Where's Kate?'

'Such nonsense,' growled the elder Stockmar, 'she has to the high-room gone to make scare mit Predderston.'

Michael, at the far end of Crime Street, was taking leave of his assistants when there cut into the quiet night a sound almost terrifying in its unexpectedness. It could only be described as a hollow shriek which rose and fell from a wailing scream to a throaty sob. It lasted no more than ten seconds and stopped as unexpectedly as it began.

'What's that?' asked his startled sergeant. Michael scratched his chin.

'The Colonel in hysterics,' he suggested callously.

Nevertheless, the noise puzzled him.

## CHAPTER 10

MICHAEL took the card from the uniformed constable, and raised his eyebrows in surprise.

'Sir Ralph Sapson,' he said, 'what the dickens does he want?'

The constable made no reply, for he was neither thought-reader nor inquisitive.

'Show him in,' said Michael.

Sir Ralph Sapson had never before called at Scotland House, or showed the slightest desire to improve his acquaintance with Michael, and the visit was

therefore a little puzzling. Ralph bustled in, less important than usual, and probably somewhat over-awed by the difficulty he had experienced in reaching his objective.

‘I daresay you wonder why I have called,’ he said.

‘As long as it isn’t to take me out to lunch, I don’t care,’ said Michael with a laugh. ‘Sit down, Ralph, and tell me all your troubles. By the way,’ he said, as the thought occurred to him, ‘I suppose you are not in any kind of trouble, are you?’

‘That’s just it, Michael,’ said the other, depositing his silk hat carefully on the ground. ‘I am really worried over two matters, and knowing what a good chap you are, and how very nice you have been to me— ’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Michael kindly. ‘I have not been nice to you and I am not a good chap. Have you lost something?’

‘I want to see you on two matters,’ said Sir Ralph, who was given to preambles; ‘they are altogether different, and one, of course, is not a police matter at all—I merely want your advice as a friend. Do you know the Princess Bacheffski?’

‘I don’t know Her Royal Highness, Her Serene Highness, or Her Nibs, as the case may be.’

‘She is neither,’ said the other; ‘she is the wife of Prince Dimitri Bacheffski, who is a large landowner in Poland.’

Michael shook his head. ‘The world is filled with the wives of princes who are large landowners in Poland,’ he said.

‘I met her in Paris,’ exclaimed Sir Ralph.

‘When I said the world,’ said Michael, ‘I meant Paris. What has she done? Stolen your watch?’

‘Please don’t be an ass,’ said the other testily. ‘I tell you she is a princess and enormously wealthy. She had a row with her husband, came to London, and I have seen a great deal of her. Yesterday, when I called to take her driving, I found that she had gone away, left without a word, paid her bill at the furnished flat she had taken and vanished— ’

‘Gone back to her husband, I suppose,’ said Michael. ‘I have heard of such things happening. You will not hear from her until a suit is filed for divorce, and then the newspapers will be filled with grisly details, about your

directorships, your early life and your hobbies; also the Sunday papers will publish your portrait.'

Sir Ralph wagged his head in despair. 'If I thought you would have taken this kind of view, I would not have come,' he said severely. 'There is nothing of that kind in this business. She is just a lady whom I had helped very slightly, and who had been kind enough to give me her confidence.'

'Do you want me to find her?' said the other in surprise.

'No, that isn't it,' said Sir Ralph. 'The story has a curious sequel. This morning I was in the city, and I met a friend who asked me to lunch with him. I had a lot of business to get through, and it was not until ten to one that I was able to get away. My car was not in the city, but I thought I should have no difficulty in getting a taxi. When I got into the street, however, it was pouring with rain, and not a taxi could be had for love or money. It was only a few steps to the Bank station, and I decided to go by tube.'

'Sensation!' said the admiring Michael.

'Well, to cut a long story short,' said Sir Ralph, 'I travelled to Oxford Circus and changed into a train which took me to the Thames Embankment. Here comes the extraordinary part of the story,' he said impressively: 'As I came up the escalator on the one side, the Princess passed down on the other.'

'Yes?' said Michael, unimpressed.

'She was plainly, even poorly dressed,' said Ralph. 'I raised my hat to her, but she stared at me as though she had never seen me before in her life.'

'You made a mistake probably,' said the other.

'I will swear it was she,' said Sir Ralph emphatically. 'There was no mistaking her. She has a very tiny mole just below the right ear, which I had seen—'

'Eh?' Michael was all attention now. 'A tiny mole beneath the right ear, dark grey eyes, large, well-marked eyebrows, very delicate mouth and rounded chin?' he said.

'That is she. Good Lord!' cried Sir Ralph in amazement, 'do you know her?'

'Oh, yes, I know her,' said Michael grimly.

'Now let me hear the story of this Princess all over again. How did you come to meet her?'

'I met her in Paris. She was introduced to me after the opera,' said Sir Ralph



patiently. 'As a matter of fact, I forgot all about it until she reminded me of the fact.'

'Ah, this is where the story begins,' said Michael. 'When did she remind you of the fact?'

Sir Ralph detailed briefly the unconventional character of the meeting.

'I see,' said Michael, 'her car had broken down providentially just outside your house. Beautiful and most gorgeously arrayed, how could you resist her pathetic appeal? And so that is how you met her, is it? Oh, Kate, Kate!' He shook his head.

'Kate?' asked the bewildered magnate— 'What on earth are you talking about?'

Michael took no notice of the question. 'I must ask you to give me a more detailed account of your meetings. Of course, you met her afterwards.'

'Yes, I met her. And she was very charming,' said Sir Ralph. 'And particularly interested in business?'

'No, she did not know much about business. There you are wrong. You are trying to prove that she is an adventuress. She knew nothing whatever about business,' said Sir Ralph triumphantly; 'in fact, I had to explain things over and over again.'

Michael leant over and patted his arm, as he might have done to a distraught child. 'What things did you explain, little man?' he asked.

Here, however, he lost the trail, either because Sir Ralph could not or would not remember. He became very vague at this point.

Michael sat at his desk, his head between his hands, thinking rapidly. First Flanborough, then Boltover, and now Ralph Sapson, what was the association?

'Have you any business dealings with Flanborough?' he said.

'What do you mean?' asked Ralph cautiously. 'Is there any connection between your companies?'

'My dear chap, what a question to ask,' said Sir Ralph. 'You know, as well as I, that all business people who operate on a big scale are associated in some way or other. I run railways and quarries and things, and Flanborough runs ships and gold mines. I am interested in his things, and he has shares in mine.'

Being a business man he did not tell Michael of the arrangement which he had

entered into for the benefit of the unthriving port of Seahampton, because it is the way of business men to be mysterious and uninforming about the commonplaces of commercial intercourse.

‘Well, that’s that,’ said Michael, after waiting in vain for some illuminating observation from his friend. ‘And what is the other matter?’

Here Sir Ralph found it more difficult to make a beginning.

‘It is rather a delicate subject, Michael,’ he said, ‘for it touches my personal honour.’

‘Dear, dear,’ said Michael sympathetically, and, if the truth be told, a little mechanically, because his mind was occupied elsewhere with a greater and more important problem than with the personal honour of the Sapsons.

‘And not only that, but the honour of somebody we both admire,’ said Sir Ralph awkwardly. ‘The fact is, Michael, I am engaged to Moya. It isn’t generally known, but it is so, and naturally I haven’t seen as much of her as I could have wished in the past week. Also I have been a very busy man.’

‘Naturally,’ said Michael sympathetically. ‘You have already told me about the Princess, you remember.’

‘Well, you are a man of the world,’ said Sir Ralph, going very red, ‘and you will understand. Anyway, I haven’t seen as much of Moya as I could have wished. The fact is,’ he blurted out, ‘Moya is carrying on!’

‘Carrying on,’ said the puzzled Michael; ‘carrying on what, or whom?’

‘She meets him every day in the park, and they go sketching together in the country,’ said Sir Ralph rapidly. ‘I haven’t spoken to Flanborough about it, but it is all rather rotten.’

‘If by “carrying on” you mean that Moya is indulging in a flirtation, it is not only very rotten, but it must have been very awkward for you,’ said Michael. ‘Unless you could be perfectly certain of your fiancée’s movements, you and your Princess were liable at any moment to run against her. It was very inconsiderate of Moya. Who is her friend?’

‘A beastly artist,’ said Ralph savagely, ‘a man who had an exhibition of simply rotten pictures. I don’t think he has a bob in the world, and he’s a most untidy looking person. I have seen them together with my own eyes and he treats Moya outrageously. And Moya seems to like it.’

‘Does he beat her or anything?’ asked Michael wearily. He was growing tired

of the interview, and wanted to be alone to work out the new combinations which had been presented to him.

‘He compromises her,’ said Ralph with vehemence, ‘holds her hand and calls her “child” in public. It is simply disgraceful! ’

‘You can trust Moya,’ said Michael; ‘she will do nothing which jeopardizes her prospects.’

‘She has plenty of money of her own,’ interrupted Ralph.

‘It is curious how your mind runs to money. I wasn’t thinking of that. I was thinking of her social prospects. She is a very shrewd girl. A little romance will do her no harm, Ralph.’

‘But, hang it, she’s got me!’ said Ralph wrathfully.

‘I said “romance”,’ said Michael with offensive emphasis. ‘You’re not ‘romance,” you’re ‘business”.’

But Sir Ralph was not satisfied.

‘Perhaps if you saw her and had a few words with her,’ he suggested, ‘she might take a little notice.’

‘I should leave her presence a mental and physical wreck,’ said Michael decidedly. ‘No, Ralph, you must manage your own love-making without calling in the—er—police.’ (Sir Ralph winced.) ‘I don’t know Moya well enough to give her advice on so delicate a matter—I only proposed to her once, and that has given me no right to urge your suit. One question I should like to ask you before you go,’ he said, as Sir Ralph gathered up his hat and gloves; ‘did the Princess question you about any bank with which you are associated?’

‘I can answer you definitely, that she did not,’ replied Sir Ralph. ‘You have an altogether wrong impression of that lady—in my judgment.’

‘Your judgment!’ said Michael scornfully, as he ushered him out of the room.

## CHAPTER 11

THERE WAS a greater reason for Sir Ralph’s perturbation than either he knew or Michael guessed. Both might have been enlightened, had they stood on Cannon Street Station one Sunday morning and seen the distress of Mr. Alphonso Blaxton as the big minute hand of the station clock grew nearer to

nine. The guard was closing the doors of the carriages and the collector was preparing to shut the gate, when Moya came flying breathlessly through the barrier.

‘Oh, I am so sorry!’ she gasped, ‘my watch stopped.’

Mr. Alphonso Blaxton bundled her into an empty first-class carriage, and jumped in himself as the train moved.

‘There’s not another train for three hours,’ he said severely.

‘We could have gone to church.’

‘What a mind!’ said the young man in admiration. ‘I never thought of church!’

‘Anyway, I didn’t lose the train,’ she said tartly. ‘Have you brought everything?’

She looked round for the collapsible easel, the paint boxes and the paraphernalia which usually accompanied their sketching tours.

‘I have brought nothing,’ he said frankly.

‘But how can you sketch?’ ‘I am not going to sketch,’ he said. ‘I decided that it was too nice a day to waste.’

She looked up at him, and laughed.

‘You will never be an artist,’ she said, suddenly severe. ‘To what part of the country are we going?’ ‘I thought we would go to Maidmore. There are some lovely drives from there. I’ve hired a motor-car to meet us at the station, and I thought we would go through Sussex and lunch at Seahampton.’

‘Not Seahampton,’ she said quickly. ‘My father is at Seahampton today.’ She might have added that Sir Ralph was also at Seahampton, but, for reasons of her own, she kept that information to herself, because Sir Ralph was not a subject which she had found it necessary to discuss. She looked at her companion approvingly.

‘You are ever so much more presentable than I have ever seen you before,’ she said, ‘and you have actually shaved! You are getting less and less like an artist every day.’

He had a peculiarly sweet smile, and a laugh which was all bubbling youth and happiness. He laughed like a girl, indeed it nearly approached a giggle. He laughed now as the train sped through the suburban stations, stretched out his

feet on the cushions opposite, and searched for a cigarette. She watched him with glee as he produced, not the ornate case in which the men of her acquaintances carried the expensive products of Egypt and Syria, but a gaudy yellow carton containing fifty of the cheapest cigarettes that ever brought credit to the fair State of Virginia.

‘Do you like those things?’ she asked.

‘These “yellow perils”? Rather!’

‘Your taste is awfully uncultivated, isn’t it?’ she bantered. ‘Why don’t you – ’ She abruptly attempted to change the subject by an incoherent reference to a cow which was grazing in a field by the side of the line.

‘Why don’t I smoke gold-laced Machinopolos through an amber and diamond cigarette holder?’ he suggested. ‘Because, little Moya, I am a poor hard-working artist who has been saving up all the week for this bust.’

‘I am so sorry,’ she said. ‘I am awfully thoughtless. Won’t you forgive me?’

‘I won’t forgive you,’ he said, ‘unless you keep in your mind the big fact that I am as immensely poor as you are immensely rich.’

‘Why should I keep that in my mind?’ she asked.

‘Because,’ he said slowly, ‘until you are immensely poor or I am immensely rich we shall meet very occasionally and indulge in very infrequent busts.’

‘But what difference does money make?’ she faltered. She found it difficult to speak plainly or even clearly. There was a lump in her throat which made her voice sound unnaturally hoarse. She had a strange sinking feeling within her, and to her amazement she found the hand that she put up to brush back a stray curl trembling. She had never experienced any such sensation before. Her heart was thumping quickly; she was breathless, hot and cold by turns.

He did not answer. She was seated by his side, and she could only see his face out of the corner of her eyes; then she felt his arm slipping about her, and before she knew what had happened, his lips were pressed to hers. This happened in a first-class railway carriage on a non-stop train. It had happened before to quite common people (as Moya had heard), but she never thought it would possibly happen to her, or that so vulgar a proceeding could be so wonderfully sweet.

SIR RALPH and Lord Flanborough had met the local authorities. There had been a lunch and speeches in which Sir Ralph had distinguished himself by likening the forthcoming arrival of the Austral-African mail ship to the return

of Ulysses and the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers. A wireless message from the ship stated that she did not expect to make harbour until nine o'clock in the evening, and this explained the earlier festivities. That they were of a sober and restricted nature was explained by the fact that the day was Sunday. Later, it was intended that the sailings of the Austral-African line from Cape Town should be timed to bring the ships to port on the Saturday; but there had been no time to alter the arrangements, for the Charter Queen had sailed before Lord Flanborough and Sir Ralph had definitely decided the date on which the new service should be inaugurated.

A few pressmen who had come down from London for the purpose, with certain directors and their wives, were shown over the docks; the new trains were admired, and particularly two brand-new trucks, the peculiar character of which was exhibited by Sir Ralph to a select few of his fellow-directors. A safe on wheels was an excellent description for one of these. Specially strengthened under-carriages, each truck supported by two bogies, they were designed to carry a tremendous weight.

'I am sure Lord Flanborough doesn't mind my telling you,' said Sir Ralph to the little party, 'that this will carry twenty tons of bar gold tonight.'

'What will be the value of that?' asked one of the interested audience.

'£2,867,200,' said Sir Ralph impressively, 'representing six months' output of the whole of Lord Flanborough's gold properties.'

The directors made appropriate noises to signify their astonishment.

There were visitors to Seahampton interested in this great transportation who were not invited to participate in the function. One of these, a dark, foreign-looking man, went no nearer to the docks than a little public house in the ancient High Street. He was visited by a man who was pallid of face and laconic of speech.

'It's all up!' he said under his breath.

'What is wrong?' said the other in the same tone.

'It is quite impossible to get the driver or the fireman. They are two old servants of the company, both have money saved, and would no more think of accepting a bribe than Flanborough himself.'

'You didn't press the matter, I hope?' asked the other quickly.

The pallid man shook his head.

‘I went as far as I dared with the driver,’ he said. ‘I found out he had a son in the army in India, and I told him that I had met the boy, and got quite friendly with the old chap; but he is a sea-green incorruptible, Gregori.’

‘I will get on the ’phone to Kate,’ said the other. ‘I suppose we shall have to hold up the train somewhere – I don’t want to do any shooting if it can be avoided. Are the drivers armed?’

‘It is funny you should ask that,’ said the pallid man, sipping his beer. ‘The old man is armed for the first time in his life. He was full of it, and quite proud of his ability to loose off a gun.’

Gregori looked very serious.

‘Kate must be prepared with the alternative scheme,’ he said; ‘anyway, you will join me here with Cunningham at eight o’clock. I am perfectly prepared for almost all contingencies. Millet has given me a dozen authorities to meet almost any developments. Did you see the train?’

‘I couldn’t get near it,’ said the other. ‘I left just before Sapson brought his party to make their inspection.’

Sir Ralph had carried his guests from the siding to the engine shed and shown them the brand-new Atlantic locomotive which was to draw the train to London.

‘They don’t seem to have finished it yet,’ said one of the guests, and pointed to a workman busily drilling a hole in the front plate.

Ralph laughed.

‘They omitted to put a bracket for the lamp. You see, I wanted three green lights in a line for the gold train – it is very necessary that it should be very accurately and easily distinguished and signalled. By some chance only two of the brackets were in place when the engine came from the works. It is all the more annoying, because I had already given definite instructions upon that point; but we shall not go wrong for a lamp,’ he said humorously.

It is agreed that the three hours between two and five on a Sunday afternoon are the three dullest in the hundred and sixty-eight which constitute a week. After the guests had left for London, Sir Ralph and Lord Flanborough remained at the little station hotel – Ralph had already projected a more palatial establishment to meet the increased traffic – for it had been arranged that they should greet the Charter Queen on her arrival.

At three o’clock that afternoon Ralph burst unceremoniously into Lord

Flanborough's sitting-room where his lordship sat dozing.

'Have you had a wire?' he said. He held a pink form in his own hand.

'A wire! What about?' asked Lord Flanborough, startled.

'Read this.'

The telegram was signed 'Michael' and ran –

'Simultaneous attempt made to burgle your strong room at Austral-African office and Flanborough's safe at headquarters of mining corporation. Both unsuccessful. Both doors blown out by nitro-gelatine. Will confirm by 'phone.'

Lord Flanborough looked at the other open-mouthed.

'This is very serious,' he said. 'I have ordered a special to take us to town. We will wait till we get the 'phone message through.'

Ten minutes after they were in communication with Michael.

'Both doors have been blown out,' he repeated, 'and there are one or two very puzzling features about the burglaries. Nobody could have been present in either office when the explosions occurred. There was no fire, and, so far as I can see, nothing has been taken away. You had better come up and examine them for yourself.'

'It is rather awkward,' said Sir Ralph thoughtfully, as he hung up the receiver. 'My "special" driver is also the driver of the gold special.'

'It doesn't require any great genius to drive a gold special,' snapped Flanborough. 'Put another man on to work tonight's train and let us get up to town as soon as we can.'

The special was waiting in the station by the time they had reached the platform. Sir Ralph stayed long enough to give a few instructions to the superintendent, and then boarded the train and was soon flying northward.

That Sunday morning had been an interesting one for Michael.

He had been aroused by telephone at five o'clock only to learn from an apologetic operator that the wrong number had been called. Although it was two hours before he usually rose, he had his bath and dressed and without waking his servants made himself some coffee.

It was a bright morning, such as so often precedes a day of rain, when he



turned into the deserted street. He had no particular aim or destination, but he was in that mood which invites exercise. He walked along the Marylebone Road and through Portland Place without meeting anybody save an occasional policeman, and so came to Piccadilly Circus, where he bought a Sunday newspaper from an early vendor and passed down through Waterloo Place to the Park.

The gates had only just been opened, and beyond the park-keepers and a slouching tramp he met nobody. He sat on one of the garden seats by the side of the lake, pulled his overcoat about his legs, for the morning was chilly, and began to scan the headlines in the newspaper. There was nothing startling here, but he read the columns conscientiously.

There was nothing in life which did not interest Michael Pretherston. He, also, might have taken for his motto, home sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto. It was a saying of T.B. Smith's that Michael could even write a readable volume on the psychology of dog-fights. Every little larceny however sordid, every tiny embezzlement however paltry, every swindle whether it was carried out by the great confidence men who 'worked London', or by the smaller fry in the half-crown line of business, gave him food for reflection and some little scrap of information which he stored away for future use.

He was in the midst of a long account of an East End arson charge, when he heard his name called softly and looked up. He jumped to his feet.

'Why, Kate,' he said, 'haven't you got any home?'

The girl was standing a few feet from him with an odd look on her face.

'I think it must be fate that brought me out this morning,' she said. 'Sit down, Mike, and tell me all the news.'

She showed no sign of resentment of his uncavalier treatment.

'Did you follow me here, or did I follow you?'

'I tell you it was fate,' she said. 'I could not sleep and I drove my Mercedes down.'

'And how is the Princess Bacheffski?' he asked, as she seated herself by his side.

'The Princess – ?'

'Bacheffski – poor old Ralph! What a thing to put over him!'

She leant forward, her chin on her palm, her elbow on her crossed knee.

‘You frighten me sometimes,’ she said. ‘I have not been able to make up my mind whether you are clever, or whether you are lucky.’

‘I am both lucky and clever,’ he said. ‘Tell me something about your property in the Ural Mountains,’ he said.

‘In Poland,’ she corrected him.

‘Mines, I suppose?’

‘There are no mines on my property,’ she said calmly. ‘Would you be greatly surprised if I told you I had an estate in Poland?’

‘Nothing you said would surprise me, unless you told me you were going to be a good girl and respect the law relating to property.’ He folded his paper and dropped it into a wire receptacle provided for that purpose, and she followed the operations with amusement.

‘What a tidy soul you are,’ she said. ‘Fancy doing things you are told, and obeying even by-laws.’

‘We all obey by-laws. You are not so original as you think. for instance, I observe that your dress is very short. You are not wearing a Roman toga or a Grecian gown. Why? Because it is against the by-laws. It is absurd to disobey one set and slavishly obey another.’

‘You are quaint!’ was the only answer she gave.

‘Will you tell me, Princess—?’

‘Don’t call me “Princess,” if you please,’ she said quietly.

‘Well, will you tell me, my landowner, what was the game with Ralph? He described you with the greatest enthusiasm by the way. The night you met him you were all dolled up to kill. Did you bring down your birds?’

‘I got him,’ she admitted.

She was not as bright as usual, he thought, and said as much. ‘You are overdoing it; you are trying yourself too highly. Your doctor would probably tell you that you ought not to commit more than one burglary a month.’

She laughed softly.

‘You are very quaint,’ she said again.

‘You don’t feel like making a full and frank confession, I suppose?’ he suggested. ‘You would not like to burst into tears and sob out your young heart on my shoulder?’

‘That sob stuff never did agree with me.’

He raised a disapproving hand.

‘Kate,’ he said, ‘I have noticed a disposition in you to adopt the slang which is employed exclusively by American Newspaper reporters, vaudeville artistes, and other members of the criminal classes.’

‘I will tell you this,’ she said, sitting upright and looking him fully in the face; ‘we are going to do a big thing. The most colossal, the most daring that has ever been done, and we are going to do it today. You want to know why I went to Flanborough’s, why I made up to that unspeakable person, Ralph Sapson? Those are my two victims. I will tell you more than this,’ she said after a moment’s thought; ‘in order to ensure the success of my scheme, I have arranged for those two gentlemen to be out of London on this bright Sabbath day. I can’t tell you any more, Mike.’

‘You are like a serial story; you finish at the most interesting place,’ he grumbled.

His keen grey eyes searched hers, and she met them fairly.

‘I wish you weren’t,’ he said.

‘Weren’t what?’ she asked.

‘In this business,’ he nodded. ‘I wish you weren’t.’

‘Perhaps I will be good one of these days,’ she said, ‘and then you can recommend me for a job at two-ten-per. I’d make an ideal secretary for you, Mike; I know all the underworld by name. You could cut out your finger-print department, and leave it to Kate. What would happen, do you think?’ she went on, ‘if I went to a Salvation Army officer and said, “I have been very wicked, but now I am going to be good. Will you please assist me? I have no money, but I’ve a good heart –” Mike, he would put me to chopping wood for a week, and then he would find me a place as under-secretary to a housemaid in a strictly religious family which gave me two evenings and one Sunday a month. You see, Mike, even at goodness one has to start at the bottom of the ladder; you can’t break in on the roof. I hate good people.’

Michael nodded.

‘I hate good people, too,’ he said, ‘if they advertise their goodness; but goodness is not hardness or sourness, it is just – goodness. For example,’ he went on, ‘I am good.’

‘And I am wicked,’ she said, and appealed with outstretched hands to a startled duck which had waddled to the railings, ‘choose between us! ’

He laughed, but was instantly serious again. ‘Your confession puts me in a dilemma. As you are a lady, I cannot believe you are lying; as you are a criminal, I dare not take your word. I am sufficiently acquainted with your methods to know that your presence is not essential to the commission of a crime, so I can gain nothing by pulling you in.’

‘Poor Mike,’ she said mockingly.

‘Poor Kate,’ he said, but the girl detected the note of sincerity in his voice. ‘Kate, you can’t get away with it,’ he said; ‘you have got to fall sooner or later. Think what it means. Think of that horrible drab life in Aylesbury, where every minute is an hour and every hour an eternity. Think of the menial things they will set you to do – scrubbing floors, washing shirts and sewing sacks. Think how you will be marshalled to church every Sunday, and think how you will be stared at and jeered at by friends of the Home Secretary who come to visit the gaol.’

‘When that happens I shall be dead,’ she said. ‘I believe you mean kindly, Michael Pretherston, and I will tell you this, that neither you nor any other human being can make me think or feel any different to what I think and feel. There is no power on earth that can tear out the foundations on which my life is built. I have read everything, all the philosophies, Christian and pagan, and all the arguments from the feeble evangelism of the tract writer to the blatant nonsense of the professional atheist; and I am just where I began. You can’t touch me by reason or by devotion, by faith or by prayers. I am all stone – here.’

She laid her white hand upon her bosom and he saw the mocking laughter in her eyes.

‘Poor Michael! ’ she said; ‘why, if devotion could change me, think of the chances I have had! I could have taken Ralph Sapsen, and made of him a snake ring for my little finger. I nearly had Flanborough on the point of proposing to me. He is rather sentimental, did you know that?’

‘All people with indigestion are sentimental between paroxysms,’ said Michael sagely. He gave his hand to the girl, though it was unnecessary, and

helped her to her feet, and they walked out of the park together. Her little Mercedes was unattended, and he cranked it up for her.

‘Good-bye, Michael,’ she said, ‘Au revoir,’ said Michael, ‘we shall meet at the sessions.’

AT TWO o’clock that afternoon a constable on duty in Moorgate Street heard the first of the two explosions which agitated police circles that day. Michael was on the spot half an hour later, and his brief examination led to the view which he afterwards communicated to Ralph. It was then he discovered that what the girl had told him was true, and that both Lord Flanborough and Sir Ralph Sapsen were out of town. Curiously enough, though he had been impressed at the time, he had dismissed the girl’s statement as a piece of bravado on a par with the badinage in which she usually indulged. He had cursed his folly in ignoring the warning all the way from Baker Street to the city, and it was a great relief to discover what was evident, that no attempt had been made to rifle either the safe in Bartholomew Close or the strong room in Moorgate Street. The outrages were similar in character; in both cases the steel doors had been burst open by the application of an infernal machine. In neither case had the thieves benefited by their crime. The constable who heard the first explosion said he had been admitted by the caretaker of the building within three minutes, but in that time he managed to send another policeman who came up, to guard the back of the premises. Nobody had either entered or left the building in that period.

The explosion in Bartholomew Close had blown a skylight into the street. The safe was in a concrete cellar in which a light had been burning day and night, and although this had been extinguished by the force of the explosion, it was possible for the constable who was outside to see the safe and secure a fairly comprehensive view of the chamber. He, too, had asserted that nobody had entered the room or left the building after the explosion.

‘It is very curious,’ said Michael.

T.B. Smith had come at his urgent request, and the chief was as puzzled as his subordinate. ‘Did Flanborough say he would come up?’

‘He is on his way now,’ replied Michael.

‘Do you know what I think?’ said T.B. after a moment’s thought, ‘I think that this is a blind. That there was never any intention of rifling either the strong room or the safe. There is a big move on somewhere; Mike, call in all the reserves.’

This was an order which Michael heard with pleasure, for he had already

anticipated these instructions, and detectives were at that moment flocking to Scotland Yard from every point of the compass.

## CHAPTER 12

WHATEVER distress animated the bosoms of humanity on that fateful Sunday afternoon and evening, there were two people riotously and supremely happy, though the car which Alphonso Blaxton drove was an old one and badly sprung, and though every hill it met reduced the two young adventurers to breathless apprehension, for the car had a trick of stopping with its goal in sight, and refusing to budge any farther.

They were happy, though no word of love had been spoken between them from the moment she had drawn from his arms. And their happiness was such that even a faulty cylinder and a choked carburettor were matters of little moment.

They had eaten a very bad luncheon in Maidmore without noticing the fact. They had encountered perils innumerable (the steering gear had gone wrong, and temporary repairs had to be effected without the aid of a tool chest), and were yet cheerful. They had been bumped and shaken and jarred, but they had had compensation. They had seen the uprising ridges of the Kentish Rag, green and white, and starred with flowers. They had looked through a golden haze across mysterious valleys. They had heard the songs of birds, and had tasted the joys which come only to those who love youth and young things.

If the clouds were banking up in the west and an occasional puff of cold wind came to remind them of May's treachery, they, for their part, saw no cloud in their sky, felt no chill winds in their rosy world.

They reached the top of a particularly trying hill, and Alphonso stopped the car and got down. Before them the road dipped straightly down to a level crossing. A mile beyond the railway there was a little hill which promised no distress of mind.

'Wouldn't this be a lovely place to paint?' said the girl.

'Don't let's talk about art,' he begged with a wry face. 'Let us talk of beautiful things – such as tea and shrimps.' She shrieked with merriment at his feeble jest.

'I wonder what is going to happen,' said the girl, becoming grave.

'Happen, how, where?' he asked in surprise.

‘About us,’ she said.

He took her two hands in his. ‘I am going to be tremendously rich.’

‘Did I tell you I was engaged?’ she asked timidly after a long silence. It was nothing less than an act of heroism for her to ask this question.

‘I have a dim idea you said something about it a long time ago,’ he said.

‘Did I really?’ she asked, relieved. ‘I had a feeling—’

‘You didn’t tell me, I saw your ring,’ he said, and she went red because she had removed that ring after their second meeting, and had never worn it again.

‘I think I told you that I had £300 a year,’ he went on. ‘Now that we are confessing our handicaps, I might as well own up to mine.’

‘You told me you were absolutely penniless,’ she said severely; ‘£300 a year is a fortune.’

‘£300 a year is only a fortune to the immensely rich, to the poor it is worse than poverty.’

‘You can do a lot with £300 a year,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘and what shall I do with my money? I can’t throw it away.’

‘You will do nothing with it,’ he said firmly. ‘When my £300 a year has become £10,000 a year, we can do things.’ She laughed happily, twisting his watch-guard round her finger.

‘I cannot understand myself,’ she said. ‘I have been such a selfish mercenary pig. I didn’t know there was any happiness in the world.’

For the second time that day he slipped his arm around her, raised her face to his and kissed her.

‘Tea,’ he said practically, started the engine and climbed into the driver’s seat, stretching out his hand to assist her to his side. The car started with a jerk, but ran smoothly down the hill.

‘It is rather lucky that gate is open,’ he said, as the machine gathered speed; ‘it would be rather comic if we couldn’t stop the car.’

A piercing shriek of an engine brought his head round.

‘That must be another line,’ he said uneasily and put his hand on the brake;

‘anyway, the gate is open,’ he said, relieved.

Again came the frenzied scream of the engine and he heard the thunder of its wheels. He was fifty yards from the crossing when he saw the gates begin to move. He pressed on the footbrake without any diminution of speed, gripped the handbrake, pulled it back until he felt the snap of the rotten handle as it broke. There was nothing for it but to take a risk. He pushed over the accelerator and the car leapt forward ...

Car and gate and train seemed to reach the spot simultaneously.

The girl found herself flung headlong into a ditch, fortunately landing in the soft mud at the bottom. Alphonso’s fall was broken by the quick-set hedge, which ripped his clothes to ribbons and scarred his face and hands. He picked himself up and went in search of the girl and found her as she was climbing unsteadily on to the permanent way.

The train had pulled up with a jerk amidst a chaos of smashed gate and mangled motor-car. Fortunately, it was slowing at the closed gate at the time the collision occurred, otherwise these two young people presenting a fantastic appearance might have ended their promising careers.

‘Are you hurt?’ were the first words she asked. His face was scratched and his clothes were torn, but though he had by far the worst experience, his was not the woebegone appearance which the girl presented. She was caked with mud, a dab of mud was on her cheek, her hat was gone, and her long brown hair was flying in all directions.

The passengers of the ‘special’ were perhaps more perturbed than its victims.

‘It is an accident. We have run into a motor-car,’ reported the conductor.

‘Is anybody killed?’ asked Sir Ralph in alarm.

‘No, sir, a young man and a young woman who are more frightened than hurt.’

‘Let us go and look at them,’ said Lord Flanborough, and stepped down to the permanent way. It is a truism that there is no such thing as a paternal instinct, and he would have indeed been a wise father who recognized his child in such disarray. He was speechless for a moment.

‘Moya!’ he gasped hollowly, ‘Moya! Great heavens! What were you doing here?’

He stared round at the scarecrow by her side, and at sight of the young man, Sir Ralph, who had been struck dumb by the apparition, found his voice.



‘I see, I see,’ he said bitterly.

‘You have the advantage of me,’ said the young man, ‘for I have got a little piece of Hampshire in my eye.’

The girl swung round to him, fumbling for her handkerchief.

‘It is nothing, dear,’ said the young man, blissfully unconscious of the identity of the well-fed gentleman who was regarding him so sternly.

‘But, darling, you might be blinded,’ pleaded the girl. ‘Please let me.’

‘Moya,’ said Lord Flanborough in a pained tone, ‘may I ask what is the meaning of this?’

‘Oh, I want you to meet Mr. Blaxton,’ said the girl, going red and white. ‘Fonso, this is papa.’

‘I should be glad to see you,’ said Fonso, groping wildly on the blind side of him.”

“‘Fonso’?” repeated the enraged Flanborough; ‘and who, may I ask, is Fonso?’

She fastened back her unruly hair and rubbed her mud stained cheek with her handkerchief before she replied. ‘I suppose it will come as a shock to you and a greater shock to Sir Ralph, but Fonso and I are going to be married,’ she said.

Alphonso Baxton blinked at her.

‘I haven’t asked you yet,’ he said.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ she replied calmly. ‘You do want me, don’t you?’ and before her horrified father and her promised husband, Alphonso took her in his arms and hugged her.

It was an awkward journey back to town. Sir Ralph sat by himself and rejected all Lord Flanborough’s attempts to discuss the matter. He was hurt in his pride, and if the truth be told, hurt in his pocket, because an alliance with the family meant a considerable addition to his fortune. It is a mistake to believe that rich people do not care for money, or that a man with two millions is wholly indifferent as to whether he has two or three. Indeed, the reverse is the case. The man who thinks in thousands is indifferent to a figure or two, the man who counts his fortune in shillings seldom knows the number of shillings he has.

Only your two-millionaire reaches the full value of money. The thrift of the millionaire might well serve as an example to the improvident poor.

‘I shall speak to Moya when we get home,’ said Lord Flanborough. ‘I have never been so distressed at anything so much in my life. It is disgraceful, Ralph.’

But Ralph did not encourage sympathy. As a matter of fact, his lordship spoke to the girl before the special ran into the terminus. It required some courage on his part, for it meant intruding upon the couple in the little state-room which ordinarily served as a sleeping apartment when Sir Ralph’s private coach carried him on night journeys.

He found them a picture of decorum, sitting rigidly bolt up-right, one on either side of the carriage, looking out of the window with fine unconcern; but this attitude was probably due to the fact that the door of the compartment made a very loud rattling noise when the handle was turned.

‘I want to speak to you alone, Moya.’

‘Run away, Fonso,’ said the girl with a gaiety out of harmony with her rigidity of attitude.

Alphonso stepped out of the saloon and closed the sliding door behind him.

‘Now, Moya,’ said his lordship with a badly simulated air of friendliness, ‘perhaps you will explain?’

‘Why I am going to marry Fonso?’ she asked. ‘Because I love him. Why do you think that I should be marrying him?’

‘This sounds very much like Michael. It is the way he would talk,’ said Lord Flanborough bitterly. ‘This shows the danger of letting your children associate with irregular people. You know very well that you are engaged to Sir Ralph.’

‘I know he gave me a ring and we agreed to get married,’ she said, ‘but I have changed my mind.’

‘But you can’t change your mind,’ stormed her father; ‘it is impossible that my daughter should marry a wretched artist.’

‘He’s not wretched, and he is not an artist,’ said the girl. ‘We have both agreed that he is not an artist, and he is going to find something useful to do.’

‘If you marry this man’—he pointed a trembling finger at her— ‘I will not receive you as my daughter.’

‘I don’t want to be received at all. You married whom you wanted to marry, didn’t you?’

‘I married,’ said Lord Flanborough virtuously, ‘in accordance with the wishes of my parents.’

‘Do you mean to say,’ said the girl incredulously, ‘that you had no voice in it? I cannot imagine it. My dear Daddy, it is preposterous to suggest that a person of your strong character accepted the wife that somebody else found for him!’

‘Well, I admit,’ said her father, somewhat mollified, ‘that I had a say in the matter, but I had the sense to choose the right person.’

‘That is just what I am doing,’ she cried in triumph, ‘choosing the right person! And, Daddy, if you are rude to Fonso, I shall be very rude to Ralph.’

‘The man of course is a fortune hunter,’ said Lord Flanborough savagely. ‘He knows that you have money in your own right, and that I cannot save you from the consequence of your folly.’

‘What is Ralph getting with me?’ she said tartly.

‘Sir Ralph is a very rich man,’ said her father with emphasis.

‘What does he get?’ she asked again.

This was a question which Lord Flanborough did not find it convenient to answer. He knew that marriage with his daughter would bring to Sir Ralph a much greater fortune than she possessed in her own right.

‘Go and ask your disinterested friend if he will take me without a dot, and if I were to give my own income to found a hospital for women.’

‘I am sure Sir Ralph would answer in the affirmative,’ replied Lord Flanborough.

‘Ask him,’ she challenged.

He passed out of the compartment scowling at the offending Fonso and made his way to Sir Ralph. He had not intended putting the question, but some chance remark of the baronet’s just before the train reached London gave him an opportunity of introducing the subject.

‘Would you care to marry Moya without the settlement we agreed, Ralph?’

‘What on earth do you mean?’ asked Sir Ralph, astonished out of his sulks. Money was a subject which invariably aroused him from the deepest lethargy.

‘I mean,’ said his future father-in-law, ‘suppose I say, “You love Moya and all that sort of thing. You are a very rich man, you can afford to keep her, take her without a settlement,” what would you answer?’

‘Certainly not!’ said Sir Ralph furiously, ‘certainly not! I don’t understand this business at all, Flanborough; I really don’t understand it. We made an arrangement, and now, it seems, you want to back out of it. What is the objection to the settlement?’

‘I have no objection at all,’ admitted Lord Flanborough uncomfortably, ‘but Moya thinks that money is a big factor in your choice of her.’

‘Of course it is,’ said Sir Ralph, with brutal directness. ‘I was very fond of Moya, but the settlement was a big consideration.’

‘I see,’ said Lord Flanborough incoherently. ‘Moya’s idea, of course ...’

Michael met them at the station and noticed the constraint of the party. He understood the reason when a bedraggled Moya and a young man whose face was criss-crossed with scratches and whose clothes were in shreds made their appearance. There was no explanation possible, and Michael wisely asked for none. He handed over Lord Flanborough and his friend to the care of the city detective officer in charge of the case, and when they had gone he turned to Moya.

‘Have you two people been fighting?’ he asked.

‘Father’s horribly angry with me,’ she said, ‘because I am going to marry Fonso.’

He stared at her in amazement. ‘Do you mean to tell me that you are not going to marry Ralph?’

‘I am not,’ she said resolutely.

‘And this is Fonso?’ The girl nodded. Michael threw back his head and filled the station with laughter.

‘You don’t know Fonso, do you?’ she said. ‘He’s horribly poor. Aren’t you dear?’

‘Horribly,’ admitted the young man, but did not seem unhappy. ‘And you are going to marry him,’ said Michael.

‘Of course I am going to marry him,’ said the girl wrathfully. ‘I didn’t expect that you would disapprove.’ ‘Disapprove?’ he chuckled, and catching her up in

his strong arms he kissed her.

‘We will all go along and have some grub,’ he said. ‘Dash home and make yourself respectable, Moya. I see your father has left his car for you. Meet me at Sebo’s in an hour’s time.’

## CHAPTER 13

IT is necessary to tell the story of what was undoubtedly one of the strangest and most audacious crimes recorded in the annals of crime with greater detail and at greater length than is ordinarily necessary.

Le Flavier of the French police, who is surely the greatest living authority on the subject of modern crime, has likened Kate Westhanger’s masterpiece (he does not refer to her, by the way) to the first of the Napoleonic campaigns against Italy, and has published an elaborate treatise showing the points of resemblance which are not so far-fetched as some of the critics in their hasty review of his work are justified in saying. Kirschner, a little-quoted authority, but nevertheless a brilliant and talented philocriminologist, has said that it would be humanly impossible to reduplicate such a crime, and that at any rate it would be wholly impossible to excel the ingenuity which planned the strategies of the issue.

At 8.30 on the night of May 14th the Charter Queen, eight thousand tons, commander T. Brown, came to her moorings in E basin, No. 3 Quay of the Seahampton Docks. She carried a hundred and twenty third-class, seventy-four second-class and fifty-nine first-class passengers, a general cargo, and in her strong room £44,800 of bar gold. They were made up of four hundred and forty-eight £100 ingots, bearing the stamp of the Central Rand Gold Extraction Company.

The passengers were landed and dispatched by special train to Landon, preceded by another train carrying the mails. The mail train left at 9.27, the passenger at 9.42. By 10.17 the gold ingots had been landed, checked and conveyed to a waiting train, where they were checked again under the superintendence of Inspector K. Morris of the Dock police. At 10.22 the engine backed into the train and was coupled up, and the superintendent of the line being unavoidably absent (he was discovered locked in an empty house the next morning), the driver received his ‘right away’ from Assistant-Inspector Thomas Massey, who had arrived that day from London, and who spoke to the driver and fireman before the train pulled out.

‘You know this road, I suppose?’ he said.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the driver, ‘I have been down here several times.’

The inspector was not wholly satisfied. In the first place, he resented seeing ‘foreign drivers’ on his road, but the two men had arrived from London bearing a letter from Sir Ralph to the superintendent of the road, a letter which afterwards proved to be a forgery. The letter instructed the superintendent to give the men charge of the engine, offering, as a reason, their reliability and the fact that they were two of the best drivers on the North Central, which railway was also under the control of Sir Ralph Sapson.

The train pulled out, and from this onward its adventures began.

From the moment it left Seahampton Town station, the train was never out of sight for longer than ten minutes. Every signal box along the line had received special instructions particularly to note its passing, and in addition to the conventional record which is kept of every train, specially to notify not only to the next box, but to London the hour of its dispatch. The road may be briefly described.

From Seahampton it ran straight to the market town of Sevilley, and then over the S-shape road across to Tolbridge. It may be remarked, in passing, that between Sevilley and Tolbridge was the level crossing at which Moya had met with her accident. Between Tolbridge and Pinham the road pushed straight through uneven ground, passing successively under Tolbridge Hill, Beckham Beacon and Pinham Heights, under each of which it passed through tunnels, the tunnels being connected nearly all the way by deep cuttings.

It was a rainy night, for the drizzle which set in at six in the evening had continued until there was a veritable deluge. Sevilley (East) signal box reported the gold train as having passed at 11.7, and this fact was supported by the times given by six signalmen between Tolbridge and Sevilley. The train slowed at Tolbridge and entered Tolbridge tunnel. Between Beckham tunnel and Tolbridge tunnel is a signal box which reported the special at 11.32. The signal box was situated close to the line and rather near the ground and the signalman states that he not only saw the train pass him in the pelting rain, but that he saw the tail-lights disappear into Beckham tunnel, which is built on a curve.

The times are interesting. At 11.32 the train entered Beckham tunnel. At 11.42 the signalman on the northern side of Pinham tunnel reported the train as having passed. It was raining, but owing to the unusual character of this new service and his natural curiosity to see a £3,000,000 ‘special,’ he had his window open and saw the three green lights flash past and the red tail-lights

disappearing in the distance. Between Beckham signal box and Pinham signal box the distance is five miles, but the theory is that at this point the train slowed to thirty miles an hour, which accounted for the unusual length of time it took to traverse this short distance.

At Maidmore, Stanborn, Quexley Paddocks and Catford Bridge, on the outskirts of London, the train was reported and timed. The next station to Catford Bridge is Balham Hill, and the signaller at Balham Hill stated at the subsequent inquiry that he was given and accepted the gold special at 11.53 and lowered the 'distant off' and the 'home' signals, at the same time warning the next northern station, which was Kennington Junction, that he had accepted the '.46 up,' which was the official designation of the special.

He waited for ten minutes and saw no sign of the train, whereupon he called Quexley Paddocks and asked if there had not been a mistake, since the run was not more than seven minutes. Quexley Paddocks replied that the train had passed through going at fifty miles an hour at the moment she had been signalled. No further news was received, and the Catford Bridge signaller, becoming alarmed, reported to the stationmaster on duty, who sent two platelayers along the line. They walked as far as Quexley Paddocks, but saw no sign of a train. Tube gold special had disappeared as though the earth had opened and received it.

All these times had been verified. Every signaller and station-master was interrogated, without in any way shaking the veracity of the witnesses. When the platelayers reached Quexley Paddocks and reported the disappearance of the train, London was informed. Between Quexley Paddocks and Catford Bridge the line runs through market gardens, and what is very unusual so close to London, it passes over a level crossing, the gates of which are electrically controlled from Quexley Paddocks signal box.

And here is the most remarkable of the statements that were made. The signaller, Henry George Wallis, states that after the gold special had passed and he had brought his signals back to danger, he had noticed a strange disturbance on the dial of the electrical apparatus by which the gates were opened or closed, and it was discovered the next morning, when he endeavoured to open the gates to allow an army traction-engine to pass, that the gates refused to work. That happening, however, was very thoroughly investigated on the following day.

Michael had dined and supped with Moya and Fonso Blaxton, and they had had a riotous and wholly joyous evening. He had returned to his flat at half-past eleven, calling en route at the Yard, for he was still very uneasy about Kate's threat, and he was anxious also to find out if there had been any

discovery made in connection with the outrage of the morning. The case was not in his hands, since the crime had been committed within the jurisdiction of the city police, and the City Criminal Investigation Department had control of the investigations.

T.B. was at the office, and had no news to give. Michael went home and to bed. He was aroused at half-past twelve by telephone. It was the voice of T.B. Smith.

‘They’ve done it, Mike. Come down at once.’

‘What have they done?’ asked Michael with a sinking heart.

‘They’ve pinched the blooming train!’ said T. B. vulgarly.

A special train had been made up for the police, and Michael was on the platform of Catford Bridge station by half-past one, and was reading the reports which had been transmitted by the various signalmen. To add to the mystery, a mineral train from Seahampton which had followed the gold special at half an hour’s interval, but at a slower pace, had come straight through without noticing anything unusual. It had crossed the down empty at Tolbridge, and that was the only other train that was met until it reached the suburbs of London, where the night traffic was more general. Sir Ralph was one of the party that went down to Catford Bridge, and a very distressed and worried man he was.

‘I asked that fellow Flanborough to come,’ he wailed, ‘and what do you think the selfish beast said? He said it was my responsibility. Can you imagine anything more brutal?’

‘Is the gold insured?’

Sir Ralph shook his head.

‘Not wholly: it was fully insured as far as Seahampton,’ he said grimly. ‘After that the responsibility is partly mine, and partly Flanborough’s, and partly the underwriters’. Isn’t it too awful for words?’

T. B. came into the waiting-room at that moment, clad in oilskins and sou’wester.

‘You had better take complete charge of this case, Mike,’ he said. ‘Sir Ralph will give you any assistance, I’m sure.’

‘Can I have a break-down train?’



‘I can bring one down here in twenty minutes,’ said Sir Ralph.

‘Is it equipped with searchlights?’

Sir Ralph consulted an official.

‘We’ve naphtha flares. Will they do?’

‘They will do,’ said Michael. ‘Put a truck in front of the engine and arrange the flares so that they light up the line.’

He spent the night in an open truck, slowly passing down the line searching for some clue which would afford a solution to the mystery. Particularly thorough was his search of the three tunnels, but they yielded nothing, and he reached Seahampton as the dawn was breaking without having made any discovery which would help him.

He went back to town by the break-down train, sleeping in the guard’s caboose and reached Quexley in time to receive from the retiring signalman the story of his eccentric gates. Michael was interested, and with the man for a guide, he followed the course of the controlling wire which passed through a length of iron piping from the signal box to the gate.

‘The electrician tells me that the wire has been cut somewhere,’ said the man. ‘He has tried his instrument on it.’

‘The wire cannot be cut if it is inside the iron casing,’ said Michael.

‘It is either cut or fused,’ said the man.

The detective walked very slowly, pausing now and again to examine the black painted pipe. Presently he stopped. He had detected something and stopped to examine the pipe more closely. It was clear that it had been freshly painted. He passed his hand round it slowly, and suddenly he felt an unexpected softness. ‘This isn’t iron,’ he said.

He took out his pocket-knife and scraped. A little hole had been burnt into the steel by a portable blow-pipe, and the wires inside had been fused together by the heat.

‘That explains it,’ said Michael. ‘What effect would this have on the gates?’ he asked.

‘Well, you couldn’t open them from the box,’ said the man. ‘Could you open them by hand?’

‘Yes, sir. We’ve got a chap on duty now who does nothing but open and shut

them,' said the man. 'While the current is on, they are locked. They work like ordinary gates, except that you have to be very careful when you lock them.'

Michael waited until a train had passed and then experimented. The gates opened and closed easily enough.

'What do you mean when you tell me that you have to be careful with the catch?'

'Well, ordinarily, when you use it without the current,' said the man, 'the catch falls, and cannot be lifted except by electric control.'

Michael made an inspection of the 'catch.' It was a steel block working on a pivot and obviously operated magnetically.

'It doesn't go up or down, now,' said Michael after testing it.

'It looks to me,' said the man, 'as though it has been forced up.'

There was no doubt that what he said was true, for the detective saw the unmistakable mark of a jemmy on the wooden casing about the lock. But why on earth did they want to open the gate? If the train had been found rifled on this stretch of line the need for an open gate would have been easy to explain. The train would have been stopped here and, supposing they could force the locks of the safe, the thieves could have loaded their gold and got away – but no train had been found.

Michael passed through the turnstile and examined the road for something to guide him to a solution. It had been raining throughout the night, and more than one traction engine had passed, as was evident from the wheel marks. He explored the road for a hundred yards and found nothing. Then he tried the other gate and found that there the catch had also been forced. The first twenty yards of the road was soft and the wheel tracks were indistinguishable. At the end of this patch, however, the going was harder, the crown of the road had drained off the rain and even the traction engine had left no great impression.

Michael walked a pace or two, then stopped and whistled and well might he whistle, for there plain to be seen, and not to be confused with any other track, was the deep and narrow furrow and the broad impression which could have only been made by railway wheels. He followed the track for another hundred yards where it struck the main road and a tram line, and from there every track disappeared.

Very weary and dishevelled, he presented himself to T.B. Smith and made his report.

‘You don’t seriously suggest that they took a railway train off the line and put it on the road, do you?’ asked T.B. in wonder. ‘It’s impossible! ’

‘Of course it’s impossible,’ said Michael irritably, ‘the whole thing is impossible. You can’t steal a railway train – but they’ve done it!’

He found with the assistant commissioner Sir Ralph whose agitation was pathetic.

‘It’s pretty rough on me, old man,’ said the baronet, with that friendliness which the superior person invariably adopts in a moment of his misfortune. ‘I have lost a wife and a railway train in twenty-four hours. What the dickens are you laughing at?’

‘Nothing,’ said Michael, recovering his gravity. ‘It was almost worth everything to see your face!’

## CHAPTER 14

BY six o’clock that evening Michael Pretherston was back again at his work, passing down from station to station on a pilot engine, questioning and cross-examining the officials concerned.

T.B. Smith picked him up at Maidmore, going down by the ordinary train.

‘Have you found anything?’

‘I have a theory,’ said Michael. ‘I’d like you to listen to what the station-master here has to say.’

‘Have you questioned him?’

‘Not yet,’ said Michael, ‘but I have an idea he will say exactly what the man at Stanborn said.’

The inspector, who had been on night duty at the time the train passed, proved to be a very intelligent and observant man. He told the same story, that the rain was falling very heavily and that he had seen the distant lights of the gold special, which had flown through the dark station at an incredible pace.

‘is it not a fact,’ said Michael, ‘that it passed you before you realized it was gone?’

The man was surprised.

‘That is so, sir. It seemed as though I had hardly seen the head-lights come into the station before I saw the tail-lights going out.’

‘Did it whistle as it passed through?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the man, ‘a deafening whistle. I remarked to my porter at the time that it must be trying a new kind of “shrieker.” It made the most fiendish row, and you could hear nothing else.’

‘It whistled through all the stations where there was somebody on duty,’ said Michael, turning to T.B. Smith. ‘It is a curious fact that at Stanborn halt and Merchley, which are closed for the night, they made no noise at all. Was the station in darkness?’ he said, turning to the inspector.

‘Practically so, sir,’ said the man. ‘There was one light on the down platform where I was standing, but it was a very dark night and it was impossible to distinguish anything on the other platform. All that we saw was the flash of lights, and the train had passed before one had realized that it had gone.’

The inspector at Pinham Heights station had a similar story to tell. But the Tolbridge Junction signalman and the Tolbridge assistant station-master did not report any whistle or any unusual happening.

T.B. and Michael spent the night at Tolbridge, and resumed their journey at daybreak. It was a slow and laborious business. Once between Pinham and Beckham Beacon, Michael had stopped the train and switched it on to a sidetrack.

‘Why is there a sidetrack here?’ he asked.

The railway official who accompanied him, and who by this time was very weary of the whole business, explained vaguely that it was partly to provide a very necessary relief for any congestion on this section, and partly to connect up a ‘chalk pit or something’ which now, however, was no longer used.

Michael walked along the rusted rails for a quarter of a mile. They led toward a low line of hills about three miles away. Rank vegetation grew between the sleepers, for it had been many years since its private owners had taken the trouble to put this little branch line in working order. The road ended abruptly with a big buffer made of sleepers, and behind this the rail drooped limply over a great hole as though there had been a subsidence of the earth.

Michael turned back and joined T.B.

‘It could not have passed over here. The rail is rusty and runs into a large-sized hole at the other end,’ said Michael in despair. ‘Well, go on, driver.’

It was a day of inquiries which led nowhere, and Michael returned that night to town, weary and sick at heart. Nevertheless, he had the dim beginnings of a theory which, however, he refused to communicate to his chief.

‘It is rather fantastic,’ he excused himself; ‘but then, the whole thing is fantastic. It is obviously impossible to steal a railway train and carry it through the streets of London without somebody being attracted by the novelty of the spectacle.’

‘Will you see Sir Ralph?’ asked T.B. ‘He has been waiting here for an hour to meet you.’

‘Hasn’t he got a home?’ asked Michael irritably. He saw the distracted baronet, but could offer him little hope.

‘It is impossible they can get away with it,’ said Sir Ralph. ‘My expert tells me that it will take them two days to break through the steel walls whatever they use.’

A thought struck Michael. ‘Have you a large scale map of your southern railway system?’ he asked.

‘I will have it sent round to you tonight,’ said the baronet. ‘What chance do you think there is?’ he asked anxiously.

‘I think a very poor chance,’ said Michael frankly. ‘You see Kate doesn’t take any risk.’

‘Kate?’ said the baronet.

‘You call her the “Princess Bacheffski.” Flanborough calls her “Miss Tenby.” As “Miss Tenby” she secured Flanborough’s code, and through some of her agents in the telegraph office learned about the shipment. As “Princess Bacheffski” she wheedled from you the whole of your wonderful scheme for bringing gold from Seahampton, and probably discovered the nature of the steel you use.’

‘Good heavens!’ Sir Ralph sank into a chair and turned pale. ‘You don’t mean to tell me—?’

‘That is what I mean to tell you. Didn’t you realize that the whole thing was a put-up job? Why should the car of the Princess break down at your front door?’

‘But she was so beautifully dressed.’

‘Why shouldn’t she be beautifully dressed?’ asked Michael mercilessly. ‘She probably carried twenty thousand pounds worth of diamonds. Wasn’t it worth it? Didn’t you give her information which she could not have bought for the money?’

‘Then you mean to say that she is a common swindler?’

‘She is a very uncommon swindler,’ said Michael. ‘There’s only one thing that puzzles me,’ he said, half to himself; ‘what did she want of Reggie?’

Mr. Reginald Boltover was interrupted in the delicate business of dressing for dinner by a peremptory demand that an officer of Scotland Yard should be admitted. He was relieved to discover that it was nothing more formidable than Michael.

‘I have come to ask you about your friend Vera.’

Mr. Boltover winced.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘don’t mention that lady’s name. It is a sore subject. Don’t mention her, dear old fellow, don’t.’

‘Don’t be an ass,’ said Michael good-humouredly. ‘You must give me an idea of the questions which she asked you. What did she talk about?’

But Mr. Boltover’s mind was a blank. It was his boast that he did not know there was such a thing as yesterday.

‘Did she ask you to give her any information about things you are interested in?’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Reggie Boltover, shaking his head, ‘if she did I have forgotten it. All I know is that she very seriously compromised me. I have not been to Sebo’s since.’

‘As you are such a perfectly hopeless person,’ said Michael, ‘will you give me a note to your secretary or your factotum or whatever human substitute for mentality you possess, instructing him to give me a full list of your properties?’

‘With the greatest pleasure in life, with every happiness,’ said Reggie earnestly, ‘with the greatest alacrity!’

Armed with this, Michael called the next morning at the office of one who was frequently referred to by journalists as a ‘merchant prince,’ and when he came out into Threadneedle Street his step was lighter and his eye was brighter than

it had been for weeks.

‘Now, Kate,’ he said between his teeth, ‘this is where you finish.’

He could have had all the men he wanted, but he preferred making his investigation without assistance. He went home and changed into a knickerbocker suit, took his oldest overcoat, a walking stick and a Browning pistol with two spare magazines. He did not ask for a special engine, but travelled to Pinham Heights station by ordinary train. He showed his authority to the station-master, who, however, recognized him.

‘I don’t want anybody to know that I am down here,’ he said, ‘and I must rely upon your discretion to see that my wishes in this respect are carried out. Am I likely to meet any platelayers or people on the line between here and Tolbridge?’

‘You will meet nobody until you come to Tolbridge box; but be very careful,’ warned the station-master, ‘the down express goes through the tunnel in ten minutes. I should advise you not to leave until that has passed.’

This advice Michael thought it expedient to accept, and not until the rocking train had shrieked through the station, and the receding red lamps were disappearing in the darkness of the tunnel, did he walk down the sloping platform into the six-foot way and pass into the smoking tunnel. He could have reached his destination by the high road which runs from Pinham round the foot of the Beacon, but for reasons of his own, he preferred to accept the discomforts of the darker way and the uneven going. He passed through the tunnel after a seemingly interminable walk and came to the switch line where his engine had been side-tracked. He followed this until he came to the buffer and the deep hole beyond.

He examined the buffer very carefully, retraced his footsteps, and examined the rail. It was as he had seen before, red with rust. Nevertheless, he went on his knees and examined the rail through a magnifying glass. Then he wetted his finger, and drew it along the red surface. He looked at his finger. It was red. But it was not the red of rust.

He walked back, carefully examining every inch of the rail until he found what he sought. At one place by the side of the actual rail was a little red spot. It was no larger than a three-penny-piece and it was to all appearance rust. But rust does not develop on a wooden sleeper, and he found the counterpart of this spot, a trifle larger, on the wood. Again he wetted his finger and was satisfied. For this was not rust, but a very common form of distemper employed by builders.

He went back to the buffer and the sagging rail, and climbed down the hole which was about six feet deep. He had noticed that a quantity of green stagnant water at the bottom of the hole advertised its age. Again he drew his hand along the water and examined his palm. It was green, but his strongest magnifying glass (and he had one of peculiarly high power) failed to reveal any sign of that fluorescence which forms on the surface of water, and gives it its peculiar vivid green. Instead, he saw a number of irregular specks, which were undoubtedly crystals.

‘Which means,’ said Michael to himself, ‘that Kate is an artist even if Fonso isn’t.’

The green scum which had deceived him at first had been artificially created. Some chemical had been dissolved and had re-crystallized on the surface. He dug into the soft earth on the other side without securing any data as to when the hole had been made, but nearer the surface and on the rim, he saw the white tendrils of growing coltsfoot which was still humid. One tentacle had been shaved away, but the plant had not yet begun to die, nor the exposed root to blacken.

‘This hole was dug on the night of the robbery,’ said Michael, ‘and the earth was artistically removed. Kate would depend upon the railway officials not having bothered to inspect this bit of line.’

As matter of fact, this was so. It was on private property, and after it left the edge of the railway land, it ceased to be their responsibility. The buffer was also newly erected. He found this when he had dug down to its foundation. The wood was still dry, and there were blades of grass and tiny fragments of plant in the earth beneath. He walked round the little pit and reached the rails on the opposite side. They were rusted as artistically as their fellows. The line twisted and curved across level country for a mile before it turned the shoulder of a hill and disappeared into a gorge, evidently excavated in the course of the working. Behind this was another chalk hole, and he gathered from an examination on the map, that along this further ridge ran a road.

The abandoned cement works had been so built that they were not in view from the railway itself. Possibly the philanthropic purchaser had pulled down the one remaining smoke stack on his occupation and the whitened buildings did not stand out against the chalky soil behind them.

He had all the evidence he wanted before he had traversed one-half of the two miles which separated him from the chalk pits. The mark of the heavy wheels was visible now. In places the weeds which grew thickly between the sleepers had been crushed by their passage. He now left the rail and began moving



round in a wide semicircle that would bring him to a low neck in the hill. His plan was to climb the hill from here, and work his way back along its crest until he overlooked the works.

He was now in the danger zone. He shifted his stick to his left hand and slipped out his pistol and pulled back the cover.

It took him an hour to gain the crest of the neck. He found it more difficult to climb than he had thought. Evidently chalk had been quarried here, and save in one or two places, he was faced by a sheer unscaleable wall. It was hard climbing all the way, and he was hot and thirsty by time he reached the top.

From the neck he could only secure a partial view of the works. He had taken the precaution to bring a pair of prismatic glasses, and with these he surveyed the ground. There was no sign of the train and for a moment his heart sank. Then he picked up the trail, and followed it yard by yard, and he could scarcely restrain himself from a yell of joy when he saw the rail led to a big shed, the gates of which were closed.

Originally, this may have been the mill house, but the new tenants had re-laid the line so that it passed into the building. He replaced his glasses and continued his climb. He was halfway between the neck and the point which would directly overlook the works when he heard the hum of a motor-car, and dropped flat.

He was within fifty yards of the road which was slightly above him, and looking up very cautiously he saw a car dash past, and disappear over the rise. There was no mistaking its occupant. It was the Spaniard, Gregori. He rose cautiously and continued his progress, keeping a sharp look-out for the sentries which he knew would be posted on the road. The path he followed was a beaten track. He realized this before he had gone much farther, and sought to find a way either to the left or the right, but without success.

He halted and debated with himself the question as to whether he should go back. It was madness to attempt to make the capture alone. Even now, he may have been detected, but if this was the case, by the time he went back and procured assistance, the whole gang would have gone, and probably the gold with them. Of the two risks he decided to take the first.

Little time was given to him to regret this decision. He had taken three paces when he heard the unmistakable whirr of a lariat. He turned to face the danger, pistol in hand, but too late, The rope settled about his neck, he felt a sharp nerve-racking jar and fell heavily to the ground.

## CHAPTER 15

T.B. SMITH walked into his outer office.

‘Any news of Mr. Pretherston?’ he asked.

‘No, sir,’ was the reply.

‘Any news of Barr?’

‘No, sir.’

T.B. clicked his lips impatiently.

‘Who’s looking after them?’

‘Detective-sergeant Grey, sir,’ was the reply. ‘You know we traced him as far as Pinham Heights. After that he seems to have been lost sight of.’

‘Have you notified the chief constables of Hampshire, Sussex and Surrey?’ asked T.B.

‘That has been done, sir,’ said the officer. ‘The local constabulary are making a search.’

T.B. bit his lips.

‘I can understand Mr. Pretherston going,’ he said, ‘but what has happened to Barr?’

His subordinate very wisely offered no solution.

There were other anxious inquirers. Moya Felton had called that morning. Sir Ralph had made two visits to headquarters, though it was doubtful whether his anxiety was in any way associated with the well-being of Michael Pretherston.

‘I think Michael will find the gang,’ said T.B., ‘though he may be too late to get the gold.’

‘What do I want the gang for?’ demanded Sir Ralph wrathfully. ‘Will the Government give me K2,800,000 for them? The gang can go to the devil, so far as I am concerned. I want the gold.’

‘You may get neither,’ said T.B. ‘At any rate it ought to be very pleasing to you, Sir Ralph, that Michael Pretherston is risking his life to recover your property.’

'Isn't he paid to do it?' demanded Sir Ralph; 'isn't that the job of a policeman? By Gad! commissioner, one would imagine that Pretherston was doing something out of the common! I take risks every day of my life.'

'If you could see my mind,' said T.B. Smith suavely, 'you would realize that you are taking the biggest risk you have taken today. I advise you to go home and get into a calmer frame of mind.'

'When shall I hear anything?' asked the truculent baronet. 'Whenever you are within earshot,' snapped the commissioner.

'Show Sir Ralph out, constable.'

Lord Flanborough did not obtrude his inquiries. He was so far reconciled to Moya that he could discuss the matter dispassionately, without reference to the mesalliance which threatened his family.

'I think on the whole, Moya,' he said, 'I had better not see Ralph. After all, business is business and friends are friends; but I disclaim ail responsibility for that gold after it left the ship. It is Ralph's business entirely, and I simply won't accept his suggestion that I share his responsibility to the slightest degree.'

'Will he have to bear the loss?'

'Well, partially bear the loss. A portion will be borne by the underwriters. Ralph, I am afraid, is a very mean man. I hate saying anything about my friends, but Ralph is really economical to a point of meanness. I advised him to insure the gold, and to save a beggarly premium he only insured half of it. I am very sorry for him'—he shook his head mournfully as evidence of his sympathy— 'I am very, very sorry for him, but I think it is wiser that we do not meet until this business matter is completely settled. On the whole,' he added thoughtfully, 'perhaps it is better that your engagement with Ralph is broken off. He has said some very unkind things about you, Moya, which aroused my anger. I do not think you have been sensible, but I cannot allow any person to discuss you uncharitably.'

If the truth be told, Sir Ralph had said very little about the girl, and very much about his lordship, whom he had accused of deliberately evading his responsibilities.

This was at the one interview which they had had. It pleased Lord Flanborough to pose as a devoted father, but he did not deceive anybody but himself, for Moya had had a first-hand account of the interview from Ralph, who had asked her to use her influence to bring about a change in Lord

Flanborough's attitude. It was the day after the disappearance of Michael Pretherston, and Sir Ralph's nerves were a little shaky.

It was unfortunate in the circumstances that he had decided that afternoon to make a call upon the man who, a week before, he had fondly believed was to be his father-in-law. Lord Flanborough had not taken the precaution of warning his servants that he was not at home to Sir Ralph, so he had nobody to blame but himself when the door of his study was flung violently open that afternoon and Sir Ralph Sapson stalked in.

'My dear Sapson,' stammered his lordship, flabbergasted by the unexpectedness of the visit. 'Pray, do sit down.'

'I am not going to sit down. I tell you I am not going to sit down,' roared, rather than said, Ralph.

'Let me close the door,' said his lordship in alarm. 'My dear man, please remember—'

'I remember nothing except that I am on the brink of ruin. That is what it means. I am on the brink of ruin,' said Ralph, violently thumping the desk. 'It is going to cost me a million and a half, and you must bear your share, Flanborough! You are responsible. If it had not been for your infernal daughter, this would not have occurred.'

'My daughter,' said Lord Flanborough, and feeling himself on perfectly safe ground he could speak with hauteur, 'is not a matter for discussion, and if you cannot speak respectfully of her, I beg you to leave this room.'

'If it had not been for your daughter, we should have remembered to send Griggs back.'

'I am not in charge of the railway,' said his lordship with mock humility. 'I cannot order engine-drivers to return to Seahampton. Be reasonable, Sapson!'

'You have got to bear your share,' said the other doggedly. 'You are morally responsible. I wish I had never thought of bringing your infernal ships to Seahampton.' He was haggard and drawn of face. In two days he seemed to have shrunk so that his usually well-fitting clothes hung on him loosely.

'Everything can be discussed in a quiet business-like way,' said Lord Flanborough. 'I am very sorry that you have this loss. It is by no means certain that it is a loss, but business is business—you cannot expect me to shoulder your responsibilities, my dear friend.'

'It is your responsibility as well as mine,' stormed Ralph, jumping up from his

chair and advancing upon the little man who stepped cautiously backward, 'and I insist upon your accepting your share.'

'Which would amount to?' suggested his lordship.

'About £700,000,' growled the other.

'£700,000! Impossible!' said Lord Flanborough emphatically.

Ralph turned livid. 'If you don't,' he hissed, thumping his palm with his fist, 'if you don't –'

At that moment help came in the shape of Moya. She nodded coolly to Sir Ralph, and crossed the room to her father.

'There is no news of Michael,' she said.

'Dear me,' sighed his lordship.

'Michael!' sneered Ralph. 'There is no news of the money! That's the important thing, Moya!'

'We are not on "Moya" terms any more, Sir Ralph,' she said quietly.

'Rub it in,' groaned the man.

'I don't want to rub it in. We all have our troubles, but some of us bear them less courageously than others. It won't ruin you if you do lose all this money. You know you are enormously rich.'

'I am not going to lose it,' said Sir Ralph doggedly. 'Your father has to bear his share.'

'If father is responsible, he will bear his share,' said the girl; 'But it is not by any means certain that he is responsible, is it, Papa?'

'Certainly not,' said Lord Flanborough, placing a table between himself and his infuriated partner.

There was a tap at the door and Sibble came in, somewhat furtively. He looked mysteriously at Moya and she went to him.

'What is it, Sibble?' she asked.

'There's a man to see you, miss,' he said. 'I think it is something very special.'

'To see me? Who is he?'

‘I don’t know who he is, miss, but he has a very special message for you.’

She went out into the hall. A respectable-looking man stood hat in hand. By his thick coat she thought at first he was an omnibus driver. In a sense, she was right.

‘Are you Lady Moya Felton, madam?’

‘Yes,’ said the girl.

He handed her a card. She took it. It was a business card announcing that Messrs. Acton & Arkwright, contractors, were prepared to remove anything from machinery to furniture, and that they had a ‘larger number of motor lorries than any other firm doing business in the south of England.’

‘I am afraid there is a mistake,’ she said. ‘I didn’t send for you.’

‘No, miss, we’ve brought the goods.’

‘The goods?’ she said, puzzled.

He led the way to the door. Lining one side of the street and stretching from the house to the corner of Gaspard Place were ten motor lorries.

‘Here’s the name.’ He turned the card over.

‘Lord Flanborough, Felton House, Grosvenor Avenue,’ said the man, reading it over her shoulder.

‘Have you any letter?’

‘No, miss, these are all the instructions I had. I was told to bring the chemicals to his lordship, and ask for you.’

‘Chemicals?’ she said.

Her father had followed her to the door.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘This man has brought some chemicals for you.’

‘Oh, nonsense, there is some mistake,’ said Lord Flanborough. ‘I am not a chemist.’

He went down the steps with the girl to the first lorry. She looked inside and apparently it was empty.

‘What is it you have brought?’ she asked in surprise.

‘There they are, miss, on the floor.’ And then she saw a number of packages wrapped in sacking.

‘They’re pretty heavy,’ said the man, ‘considering their size.’

She reached out her hand and tried to draw one toward her. It defied her efforts. Lord Flanborough tried and succeeded in moving it. Something in its shape startled him.

‘Have you a knife?’ he asked the man. The contractor produced a big clasp-knife and opened it.

‘Be careful, my lord,’ he warned, ‘they’re dangerous’ – But Lord Flanborough had ripped the canvas package and exposed a dull yellow ingot.

He dropped the knife and stepped back. ‘How many wagons are there?’ he asked huskily.

‘Ten, sir. They’ve all got the same number of packages – we was to take them to the Docks.’

Lord Flanborough made a rapid calculation.

‘Take them into the basement and put them into the coal cellar,’ he said, and went up the steps two at a time and back into his study.

Sir Ralph was still waiting. The rudeness of his host neither increased nor decreased his irritation.

Lord Flanborough stepped up to him briskly.

‘Look here, Sapson,’ he said. ‘What responsibility do you want me to bear in the matter of this gold?’

‘I want you to bear half.’

‘I will do more than that,’ said his lordship, ‘I will assume the whole responsibility for £200,000.’

Ralph swung round.

‘You will?’ he said incredulously.

‘I will.’

‘Done,’ said Sir Ralph and pulled out his cheque book. He wrote quickly and

nervously but quite legibly enough, and handed the slip to Lord Flanborough, what time his lordship was writing with more leisure but no less excitement on the other side of the table.

‘There’s your cheque, ’ said Sir Ralph.

‘And there’s my note freeing you from responsibility,’ said his lordship.

‘I am sorry I have been so unpleasant,’ said the baronet, wiping his steaming brow, ’but you will understand.’

‘I quite understand,’ said Lord Flanborough.

‘Business is business,’ said Ralph.

‘Business is business,’ repeated his lordship, and folding cheque he slipped it into his pocket.

## CHAPTER 16

THE Main building of what had once been Boltover’s Cement Works consisted of four high walls and a slate roof. Here had stood the wash mills and the revolving knives which had reduced the clay and mud from the nearby river into slurry. Leading therefrom was the heating chamber and the kiln house. There was no trace of mill, though the kilns still stood.

All the machinery had been removed, the concrete floor strengthened, and the only engine visible was a great Atlantic locomotive which had stood with steam up day and night before the wreckage of two trucks. In each of these was a rough circular hole, and the blistered paint and the drops of metal which hung upon the edge or had trickled down its blackened side told of the terrific heat which had been employed to break through the steel walls.

Near one wall were a number of small packages neatly stitched in canvas and ready for removal, and on these sat Mr. Mulberry, the benignity of whose countenance was somewhat discounted by the fact that a loaded rifle lay across his knees. Leading from the main building was a small office approached through a steel door, and in this was seated the seven guiding spirits of the great raid. Francis Stockmar, Gregori, Colonel Westhanger, Colling Jacques, Thomas Stockmar, Mr. Cunningham and Kate.

Gregori was talking. He leant across the table, his hands lightly clasped, his head on one side turned to the girl who sat opposite to him and a little to his right.



‘I think, Kate, we finish here,’ he was saying. ‘Crime Street is getting a little too warm.’

‘I didn’t expect you to lose your nerve,’ she said.

‘I’m not losing my nerve,’ he said with a scowl. ‘I am afraid of losing my life, if you want to know the truth. We are watched all the time. They know you are out of town and are searching for you.’

‘They found me,’ said the girl coolly. ‘I am staying at Brighton.’

‘We have made a big haul and it will take us a year to get rid of it,’ Gregori went on; ‘but when we have got rid of it, we shall have enough to settle down.’

‘But why do you want to settle down?’ she asked.

‘My dear Kate,’ said her uncle querulously, ‘don’t ask absurd questions. You know there is no reason in the world why we should not settle down. We have enough money.’

‘Exactly what do you mean by settling down?’ she insisted. ‘I am not being sarcastic. I merely want information. You have taught me that it is the game and not the prize that is worth while. That has been my life’s teaching. Why, you told me if you were a millionaire’ – she looked at her uncle under her bent brows – ‘nothing would induce you to be “dull and honest.” These were your words.’

‘My dear child,’ said Colonel Westhanger, ‘I have told you lots of things which have to be interpreted in a liberal spirit. We have had all the fun we want, and now we will – ’ He was at a loss in his desire to avoid a tautological repetition of a certain phrase.

‘Settle down,’ she suggested; ‘be dull and honest?’

‘But, surely, Kate,’ said Gregori impatiently, ‘you don’t want to be a hunted beast all your life?’

‘Why not?’ she asked in astonishment. ‘It is just as much fun being hunted as hunting. You have said that a score of times. Does Michael Pretherston – ’

‘Oh, hang Michael Pretherston!’ said Gregori.

‘Does Michael Pretherston,’ she went on, ‘get as much fun out of chasing me, as I get out of escaping from him? Does Michael Pretherston find the same exhilaration of mind in following on my tracks as I find in keeping ahead of

him?’

‘Anyway,’ said Gregori, ‘I have had enough of it, and I want to go out of the business, and I advise you to do the same. And there is another thing, Kate –’ He looked at the Colonel for support, but Colonel Westhanger found it convenient at that moment to be staring at the skylight. ’

‘What is the other thing?’ she asked.

‘Well, you know I am fond of you,’ he said, ‘and I want to – ’ He floundered.

‘Settle down,’ she suggested innocently.

‘What is all this “settling down” that everybody loves so much? Does it mean we shall never plan mother great coup?’ She leant her elbows on the table. ‘Honestly, I am not being wilfully dense. I know money is useful, because it helps one to prepare the way for making more money; but I have not been in this’ – she waved her hand – ‘in all these things for money. I told Michael Pretherston so and he believed me.’

‘What have you been telling Michael Pretherston?’ asked Gregori suspiciously.

‘I told him that,’ she said simply.

‘But, my dear girl,’ said her uncle, ‘fun and excitement and all that sort of thing are well enough in their way; but you don’t mean to tell me, at this hour, that you have not been working for the “stuff”?’

‘I will tell you as much at this or any other hour,’ she answered immediately.

‘I see,’ said Gregori with a faint smile; ‘then really you are what I would call a criminal artist – art for art’s sake, eh?’

‘I mean that,’ she said again. ‘One must judge one’s successes by the amount of money one has made.’

‘That is how I joodge it,’ said the thick voice of Francis Stockmar, ‘so much mooney, so much sugsess, isn’t it?’

‘I tell you frankly,’ said Gregori, ‘I am in this for the money and so is your uncle. We have taken many risks, some of us have been caught and some of us,’ he said significantly, ‘have been lucky. I’ve got thirty years in front of me, with any luck, and So I am going to – ’

‘Settle down,’ suggested Kate ironically.

‘I am going to quit.’

‘Come, come, be sensible, Kate,’ said the Colonel, patting her on the shoulder. ‘You have been a very good girl, and we owe you almost everything we have. I am sure everyone agrees that you have been the brains of our – er – association. The only time when any of us have been caught is when we have gone out on a side line of our own. Now leave well alone.’

‘When hunters have caught the fox,’ she said, ‘do they leave well alone, and never hunt again? In war, when a soldier comes through a battle safely does he leave well alone, and never go into action again? Does the huntsman, who is nearly caught by a lion, leave well and lions alone?’

‘This is different,’ said her uncle doggedly.

‘But I don’t understand it. If what you say is right, then I am wrong, and have been wrong all my life. I am wrong, and the police are right.’

‘Of course they’re right,’ said Gregori. ‘What rubbish you are talking!’

‘The police are right?’ she asked in open-eyed astonishment.

‘Of course they are right. They must protect society. In five years’ time, when I am settled on my little estate in Spain, and my house is burgled, do you imagine I shall not call in the police?’

‘I know they are right in their way,’ she said, as if she were speaking her thoughts aloud, ‘but we are right, too.’

‘We cannot both be right,’ said Colonel Westhanger. ‘I asked you some time ago,’ she said, turning to him, ‘which was the better life – the dull life or ours. They cannot both be better. The elementary conditions cannot change. That life must be the best, or ours.’

‘That life is best,’ said the Colonel decisively. She looked at him steadily.

Then why have you let me live this?’ she asked. ‘You cannot change me. I cannot change. I cannot!’ she said with vehemence, and the men noted with amazement the emotion she displayed. ‘Nothing can change me!’

Gregori reached out and took her hand, but she snatched it away.

‘I will tell you what can change you, little girl,’ he said, undeterred by the rebuff. ‘Love can change you. Give me a chance.’

She looked at him, and laughed in his face. ‘Will you be good or bad, honest or dishonest? You will only be a half a man living two lives. Marry you! And

am I to go into witness-boxes to testify against your burglar? And prosecute your poachers? I am living now, what I believe to be the truth, I believe I have the right to match my wits against the world and take, by my intelligence, what the old robber barons took by brutal strength. If I pass to the other side I should be a liar, living a life in which I did not believe. I am going on.'

'Then you will go on by yourself.'

'Will I?' she asked softly.

'Go out and find somebody who thinks as you think if you can,' sneered Gregori. 'You will be obliged to live a lie, anyway. You will never meet a man who believes in stealing, who believes in fraud and who will go on so believing, until he is an old man. You will never meet a man on the other side of life who would trust you if he knew you, and he would know you unless you – went on lying.'

He laughed.

'You are in a cleft stick, my little friend, and if you take my tip you will stick to the friends who know you.' He laughed again.

'Suppose I come down into Spain and burgle your house?' – her eyes lit up – 'and I would do it. Or, suppose, when you have – settled down, and when you have all deposited your symbols of success in your banks, I planned a little coup and smashed your banks? I could do it easily, and I would do it,' she said.

'What would you do?' Their faces were a study. The Colonel was stroking his white moustache. Francis Stockmar was scowling horribly. Mr. Cunningham was staring blankly at the opposite wall.

'Naturally you would not play such a low-down trick upon your old friends,' said the Colonel soothingly. 'Nobody believes you would, Kate, I mean, it would be tragic for some of us, after spending years of our lives accumulating a little nest-egg, to find we had become beggars in a night. Of course, speaking personally, I should consider myself exonerated from any responsibility I had in regard to our relationship, and I should have to tell the police –'

'You would call the police, too, would you? Would you, Stockmar?'

'Yas,' said the solid Austrian, 'of goorse. The mooney to cover, ain't it?'

'And you?'

'I don't think you would do anything so treacherous,' said Mr. Cunningham.

‘Naturally, we would not take that sort of thing lying down.’

‘Naturally,’ said Colling Jacques. ‘The whole matter is this: when we go back to the respectable world and obey the laws we, as citizens, are entitled to the protection which the laws give us.’

‘I see. You are, so to speak, Touching Wood. The Wood is the Law.’

‘That is it,’ he said. Kate got up and walked to the one window of the room and looked out upon the dreary yard with its tangle of twisted machinery, its rusted boilers, its chaos of rotting cement bags.

‘Well, you can all do as you like’ – she turned on them – ‘but I tell you this, that if you think you are going to – settle down – at my expense, and if you think I have been planning and scheming, and play-acting and lying, only in order that you might all become respected parish councillors, you have made a mistake. You talk about my friends. If you are my friends, Heaven help me! There is one man in the world who is worth the whole crowd of you.’

She was interrupted by a crash as though a heavy body had been thrown against a door. Somebody fumbled with the lock and Gregori jumped up and threw it open. They half carried, half pushed a gagged and bound man through the doorway. Behind him peered the saturnine malignant face of his captor, Dr. Garon.

‘Got him,’ he said triumphantly.

‘Who is it?’ asked Gregori, staring at the half conscious man.

The girl did not ask. She went suddenly cold, for she knew it was Michael Pretherston.

## CHAPTER 17

IT is a fact worth remarking upon, that in all her career, though she had been associated with the most desperate of criminals, and though she had been surrounded on all sides by men who would stop at nothing to gain their ends, Kate had never witnessed an act of violence. Such arrests of members of the confederation as she had seen had been very humdrum affairs. The arrival of two strangers, a consultation carried on in a low tone by a pleasant detective officer, an urgent call to somebody to ‘get my hat’ and the disappearance, very often for a long time, of the member affected. She had never seen a fellow-creature man-handled, nor did she believe that there was in her confederates the tigerish malignity which was now displayed. She looked from face to face

in amazement and horror when they crowded round the handcuffed figure, and flung him into a chair.

Michael had been choked to insensibility at the first attack. With the loosening of the rope, he had recovered consciousness and put up a fight, and had been hammered back to insensibility by the three men who had watched him from the moment he had crossed the open ground to the east of the railway, and had lain in wait for him. They had manacled him with his own handcuffs. This he realized, as he came back to consciousness, with his head throbbing and every bone in his body aching.

He leaned his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands, striving to collect his thoughts. It was the cold steel of the handcuff against his nose which was the starting point from whence he unravelled the situation. The blow which had felled him had fortunately been broken by his soft, felt hat and he raised his hand and gingerly felt the bump which Dr. Garon's loaded cane had raised.

'Now then, wake up,' said Gregori's voice roughly. 'Let's have a look at you.'

Michael raised his head, and looked at the speaker.

'Hello, Gregori,' he said dully. He looked round the room, and caught the girl's eyes and for a moment held them.

'You seem to have tumbled into it, my young friend,' said Colonel Westhanger.

Michael slowly shifted his eyes to the speaker and smiled.

'We all seem to have tumbled into it, you worse than anybody. This means a life sentence for you, Colonel.'

The old man's face went white.

'It is only bluff,' said Garon. 'He is here by himself. I have been watching him for an hour. You tried to pull off the job on your lonely!'

'Alone,' said the Colonel, and the girl, watching him, saw his face go hard. 'Alone! Are you sure?'

'Absolutely sure,' said the doctor. He sat straddle-legged on a chair, leaning on the back and puffing the cigar he had just lighted.

It would be rather a serious business if you had made a mistake, wouldn't it?' drawled Michael. He was recovering his scattered senses and something of his

good spirits.

‘You fellows had better make the best of a bad job.’

‘What is your idea of the best of a bad job?’ sneered Gregori, ‘to take the handcuffs off you and put them on me and the Colonel? If it means a “lifer” for the Colonel, what does it mean for me? You don’t suppose I am going back to Dartmoor to build walls for the moor farmers, do you?’

‘What is the alternative?’ asked Michael.

‘I’ll tell you what is the alternative,’ hissed the other, thrusting his face into the detective’s; ‘it is the only alternative that will give me any satisfaction – and it is to put you out.’

‘Dot is id,’ nodded Stockmar.

The girl’s heart almost stopped beating, and for a moment she closed her eyes and gripped tight to the edge of the table. She felt physically sick and her knees were trembling under her. Fortunately their attention was fully occupied with Michael, and nobody noticed that she had suddenly grown peaked and grey. She bit her lips, and by sheer effort of will regained control of herself. She looked at Michael: that little smile of his still played about the corners of his mouth, and the eyes that were lifted to Colling Jacques were full of good humour.

‘It is you or us, Pretherston,’ the engineer was saying. ‘You don’t suppose we have been working for this stuff and taken all the risk, only to see ourselves standing in the dock of the Old Bailey?’

‘Winchester,’ corrected the detective. ‘It is a very pretty assize court; the vaulted ceiling will appeal to you, Jacques. It is in the Gothic style.’

‘One moment,’ said the Colonel suddenly. With a nod he called the men to a corner of the room, and for five minutes there was a whispered consultation. The girl and Michael were left alone, and obeying some impulse which she could not define, she suddenly turned her back upon him and walked to the window, a proceeding which Gregori noticed out of the corner of his eye. Presently the little conference broke up, and the Colonel came back with the others.

‘Look here, Pretherston, I am going to make a proposition to you. You are not a rich man, I take it.’

‘My private affairs don’t concern you,’ said Michael calmly, ‘and I certainly am not prepared to discuss them with you.’

‘This job is worth two and a half millions, and there are ten of us in it. Help us to make a get-away, and there is not far short of a quarter of a million for you.’

The girl swung round and looked at Michael. How would he take this offer? She knew how great was the appeal which money made to men, especially money easily earned. She waited in breathless, almost painful, suspense.

‘£250,000,’ said Michael; ‘that is a lot of money. But why do you put such a proposition to me?’

‘It is a lot of money,’ repeated the Colonel significantly.

Michael laughed. ‘I suppose there was a time in your life,’ he drawled, ‘when if somebody had offered you money to do a dishonest act, you would have knocked him down? But perhaps there never was such a time,’ he said, searching the other’s face.

‘I no more want to discuss my affairs than you want to discuss yours,’ said the Colonel gruffly.

‘Here is the proposition’ – he thumped the table – ‘do you take it?’

Michael shook his head. ‘I won’t be rude to you,’ he said, ‘because you are an older man, and because you are going to end your life rather miserably in a very short time.’ He saw the man wince. ‘I am not saying that with the object of offending you,’ Michael continued. ‘I am just telling you what is the truth. Suppose you get away from here, how are you going to make your escape from England? By this time every port is closed to you.’

‘I will tell you how we are going to get out of England,’ said Gregori. ‘We are going to leave by the only route possible – by ship from London.’

‘By ship from London?’ It was the surprised voice of the girl.

‘We have done a little planning on our own, Kate,’ said Gregori with a grin. ‘This is our last job. We didn’t tell you, because we didn’t think it was worth while upsetting you. Everything was arranged last week.’

‘Without my knowledge?’ she said. He nodded.

‘What do you say, Pretherston?’ It is your last chance.’

‘It isn’t my last chance,’ said the other cheerfully.

‘What do you mean?’



‘That you will find out,’ said Michael with a sudden stern-ness. ‘I warn you that your time is very short.’

‘Your time will be shorter,’ said Gregori with a sinister smile.

‘We will give him half an hour to think over it,’ suggested Jacques. ‘Put him in the engine-room.’

The engine-room was the uncomfortable little shed which had been built on to the mixing-shop to accommodate a dynamo. It was now empty save for a truckle bed on which one of the gang had slept. Padlocked iron doors led to the mixing- room and to the outer world; but to make doubly sure, Garon volunteered to stand outside the building and keep guard.

Michael was thrust into the little room and the door slammed upon him.

‘Now,’ said Gregori when they were back again in the office, ‘we have to decide and decide quickly. If we can be sure that this fellow is alone, he has got to be killed.’

‘Killed?’ said Kate. ‘Oh, no, no.’

He turned on her with a snarl.

‘This is our job. You keep out of this, Kate,’ he said. ‘I tell you it must be done, for all our sakes.’

‘The first thing,’ said the Colonel, ‘is to get the gold away.’

‘It will be loaded on to the trucks tomorrow morning,’ said Gregori, ‘and we had better keep this fellow alive until it is gone.’

‘Are we using our own trucks?’ Gregori shook his head.

‘Oh, no,’ he said, ‘that would be too dangerous. I have hired ten, from a man in Eastbourne who is used to handling machinery. He has no idea what sort of factory this is, and I have told him it is a preparation of lead we are shipping to the docks. Young Stockmar will meet the convoy in London. Our own men are on board the ship, and will load the stuff.’

‘It is a bit risky,’ said Colling Jacques, shaking his head, ‘sending all that money through London without a guard.’

‘It would be more risky to guard it,’ said the other calmly. ‘Our only chance lies in not rousing the suspicion of the contractor, who has promised to come down himself to superintend the carriage to the docks. His people won’t be allowed to handle any of it, and I have told him especially that it is dangerous

to touch the packages. Now, Kate, you must be sensible about this business of Pretherston.'

She shrugged her shoulders and leant back against the window-sill, her hands behind her.

'I suppose it is necessary,' she said in her cool even tone, and the Colonel heaved a sigh of relief.

'Gad, that's the way to look at it, my girl,' he said admiringly. 'I knew you wouldn't fail us.'

She said nothing.

'You said there were ten shares,' she asked presently; 'do you count me – as the one who is sharing?'

'You stand in with me, my dear,' said the Colonel, patting her on the shoulder. 'Don't you be afraid. I have never denied you anything, have I?'

She shook her head.

'I have never been aware that you denied me anything,' she said absently. 'When is this – ' She could not find words to complete the sentence.

'Pretherston,' said Gregori, 'oh, we can't do anything yet. I think you will agree, Colonel. We must make absolutely sure that he is not being followed and that he has not half the Metropolitan police force within call. I shall do nothing at all till tomorrow night.'

She inclined her head. 'I see,' she said simply, and then, 'I think I will go to my room.'

They had made her comfortable quarters in what had been once the foreman's of5ce. She passed through the great sheds slowly and stopped for a moment to look at the powerful engine which stood near the closed doors, a tiny feather of steam at its safety valve, then she went into her room.

## **CHAPTER 18**

IT was ten o'clock the following morning before any of the gang saw the girl. She had spent a sleepless night revising her philosophies, and arranging the future as she saw it.

Mulberry, who had put away his rifle and was appearing in the capacity of an

urbane general-manager, greeted Kate with a nod. He was superintending the transference of the ingots to the waiting trolleys which stood on the road at the top of the chalk-pit, and was approached by a zigzag path which had been cut in the face of the bluff by the original owner of the property.

Later Mr. Mulberry climbed up the path to interview the stout contractor.

‘I will pay you in advance,’ said Mr. Mulberry, beaming benevolently and producing a wad of notes from his pocket- book.

‘You have full instructions as to where these packages are to go?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the man. ‘To the Thames Docks, and I am to hand them over to the gentleman who engaged me the day before yesterday.’

‘Mr. Stockmar,’ said Mulberry.

‘That is the name, sir. Are these things valuable?’

Mulberry shook his head.

‘Scientifically they are of the greatest value, commercially they are of no value. You have probably heard of dioxide of lead, the heaviest metal that the earth holds?’

‘I can’t say that I have, sir,’ said the contractor frankly. ‘I am not much of a scientist.’

‘It is a very useful element,’ lied Mr. Mulberry glibly, ‘in the creation of paper. It is highly inflammable but not explosive so long as it is handled by experts like my men here.’

He waved his hand to the procession of swarthy labourers who were coming up the hill, each bearing a package on his shoulder.

‘They are Italians, aren’t they, sir?’

Mr. Mulberry nodded.

‘They are the only people who can handle this chemical,’ he explained.

‘I see, sir,’ said the master carman wisely; ‘some of these foreigners are wonderful chaps with chemicals.’

He looked down into the hollow. ‘Mighty nice young lady that, sir,’ he said respectfully, not knowing whether Kate, who had just emerged from the building and was wandering aimlessly across the yard, was an employee or a

friend.

‘Oh, yes, that is my confidential secretary,’ said Mr. Mulberry.

‘Mighty nice, if I may be allowed to say so, very lady-like.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Mr. Mulberry.

He lingered long enough to see the last packages laid on the floor of the last truck, shook hands with the contractor with great affability, and strode nonchalantly down the slope, and none to see him would have imagined that he had just entrusted nearly £3,000,000 worth of gold to the tender mercies of a chance carman.

He was half-way down the first of the slopes when he met Kate coming up.

‘Kate,’ he said in a low voice, ‘if you are going up to the top, and that fellow asks you who you are, you must tell him you are my confidential secretary. I hope you don’t mind, I had to explain you.’

She nodded, and continued her slow walk until she came to the road.

The cars were now buzzing preparatory to making a start. The contractor, whom she had met before, gave her a cheery nod.

‘Have you a piece of paper?’ she asked.

‘I’ve a card, miss,’ he said.

‘That will do,’ she said. ‘Lend me your pencil.’

She wrote a few lines and handed them to the man. ‘I am the managing director’s confidential secretary,’ she said.

‘I know, miss,’ replied the man. He looked at the card with a frown.

‘You are to take the trucks first of all to this address and see the gentleman whose name I have written.’

‘But I was told to go straight to the docks.’

She smiled and nodded.

‘I know,’ she said, ‘but my chief thinks you had better first go here. His lordship will either accompany you to their destination, or he may store your chemicals for the night.’

He looked at the address.

‘The Earl of Flanborough,’ he read. ‘Suppose he isn’t there, miss?’

This was a contingency which she had overlooked.

‘Ask for Lady Moya Felton—that is his daughter,’ she said. ‘You had best see her first in any circumstances.’

‘I see, miss,’ said the man, a little impressed. ‘I know his lordship. I have often seen him at Seahampton.’

‘Now I think you had better go,’ said Kate, ‘before you receive any fresh instructions.’

The man chuckled, swung himself into the seat of the second car beside the driver, and first one and then the other of the great lorries moved slowly down the white road. She watched them until the last one had passed the crest of the hill, then she slowly descended the zigzag path.

She met Gregori in the doorway.

‘Where have you been, Kate?’ he demanded.

‘I have been to see the loot off,’ she said flippantly.

‘The less you are seen, the better,’ he grumbled. ‘I told that ass, Mulberry, not to let the man catch a glimpse of you. Don’t go in, I want to talk to you.’

He was ill at ease, and evidently found it difficult to make a beginning. ‘You know Kate, I am very fond of you,’ he said.

‘You have had every reason to be.’

‘I still have,’ he said.

‘I am not so sure of that,’ she interrupted, ‘but go on.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ he asked suspiciously.

‘Go on,’ she demanded; ‘where does your fondness lead?’

‘It leads to your marrying me,’ he said. ‘Your uncle does not object, and we will be married as soon as we reach South America.’

‘South America!’ She stared at him.

‘So that is our destination, is it?’ she said slowly, ‘and I am to marry you when we arrive, by arrangement with my uncle?’

‘That’s about the size of it,’ replied Gregori. ‘And suppose I make other arrangements?’

‘There are no other arrangements you can make,’ he said with easy confidence. ‘The fact is, Kate, that you have to drop these high-and-mighty manners of yours. We stood them very well because it paid us to stand them, I suppose. But we are all in the same boat—and shall be literally.’

He laughed aloud at the sally.

‘You hold some queer views, you know, and we can’t afford to let you run loose.’

She jerked up her head, and turned abruptly away, and would have left him, but he caught her by the arm and pulled her back.

‘When I say you must marry me,’ he said, ‘I mean just what I say.’

‘Have I a voice in this arrangement?’ she asked slowly disengaging her arm. ‘You have a voice in it if you agree. You have no voice if you cut up rough.’

‘I see,’ she said. ‘I will think about it. This is not a decision which I can arrive at in a minute.’

She went to her room and locked the door.

At five o’clock that evening her uncle came for her.

‘Have you been to sleep?’ he asked. It was curious, she thought, how the manner and even the tone of these men had changed in the past few hours.

She was so used to an attitude of deference, almost sycophantic, which they ordinarily displayed, that the change had come in the nature of a shock. And there was a change. Even her uncle had dropped his mask of good-nature, and now treated her as a child, and a child that needed to be disciplined.

‘I have been thinking,’ she said.

He grunted something and walked back with her to the office. ‘This fellow, Michael Pretherston, has to be settled with. Do you understand that?’

‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘The cars will be on the road in half an hour and you and I will be the first to leave.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked sharply. ‘I warn you, Kate, that I am not going to stand any monkey tricks from you.’

To this she made no answer, but pushed at the iron door that led to the meeting place and entered. To her surprise Michael was present. In addition to his handcuffs his arms had been bound. Gregori was sitting on the table, and made no attempt to stand up, which was another piece of evidence that the hold she thought she had over these men had gone, if it had ever existed.

‘Kate, you can use your persuasion on this fellow,’ said Gregori wearily; ‘it is his last chance. He has had a night to think it over, and he’s still obstinate.’

The girl walked up to the detective.

‘Michael,’ she said softly, ‘would anything induce you to become – one of us?’

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘Nothing that we could give you—that I could give you?’

He looked at her steadily. ‘Nothing that I would take from you at that price,’ he said quietly.

‘Don’t you love your life?’

“‘As dearly as any alive’,’ quoted Michael.

‘Don’t you love anything in the world? Isn’t there a girl?’ she asked with a little break in her voice.

He nodded.

‘There is a girl,’ he said, and looked past her.

It seemed as though an icy hand had gripped her heart, and for a while she could not frame the next question.

‘Isn’t she worth it?’ she said, recovering her balance at last.

‘She is worth many things,’ said Michael, ‘but not that.’

She looked down at the floor.

‘Poor girl,’ she said.

‘Having tried sentiment,’ sneered Gregori, ‘we will now try a little practical

argument. Pretherston, you have got about an hour to live.'

'I shall die in very bad company,' said Michael with a wry face. 'I had hoped at the least that I might die at the hands of a lawful hangman, as you will die. To be butchered by a cheap cut-throat half-breed is not a pleasant prospect.'

'Curse you,' said Gregori with passion, and struck him in the face. He would have repeated the blow, but the girl slipped between them.

'Michael, you shall die in good company,' she said in so matter-of-fact a tone that none of them realized immediately what she was saying, 'that is, if you think I am good company.'

'What do you mean?' gasped the Colonel.

'Why, I think you will kill me too,' she said with a serenity which to Michael was wonderful, 'because I have betrayed you all.'

Garon came flinging through the door.

'They haven't turned up!' he screamed. 'The wagons have gone!'

'Gone!' said Gregori huskily; 'gone where?'

'I have just been on the 'phone,' gasped the doctor; 'they went to Lord Flanborough's. He has got the stuff.'

There was a dead silence, broken by the girl.

'They went to Lord Flanborough's,' she repeated, nodding her head. 'I know that. I sent them there.'

The tension was dreadful; no man spoke; then suddenly Gregori swung round on the girl and his face was the face of a devil.

'You!' he grated, and leapt at her throat.

In that one moment all the scattered atoms of race, of pride, of kinship united in the distorted brain of Colonel Westhanger. His lean arms shot out, and Gregori fell headlong to the floor.

'Back, you dog!' roared the old man. It was the last word he uttered. There was a stinging report from the floor and Colonel Westhanger fell limply across the table with a bullet through his heart.

The girl, who was half fainting with terror, shrank back against the wall as Gregori rose, his still smoking pistol in his hand. 'You are a prophet,' he said



harshly; 'you said you would die with Michael Pretherston, and you spoke the truth. Put them together,' he said. 'I want to think things out.'

## CHAPTER 19

THE girl rose up from the chair where she had been sitting and crossed to where Michael lay on the floor where they had thrown him.

He looked up and smiled.

'Kate,' he said faintly, 'always...meeting .. you.'

She sat down at his side, and lifting his head laid it upon her lap.

'That's nice,' he murmured.

'Why is it nice?' she asked curiously. 'Because I make a softer pillow than the stone?'

'That and something more,' he answered.

'What more?' she insisted.

'Oh—because it is you, I suppose,' he said vaguely. Her lips twitched in amusement.

'But it would be just the same if it were any other person,' she said, 'wouldn't it, Mike?'

He looked up at her.

'Put your hand on my forehead,' he said.

'Like this?' She laid her soft palm against his throbbing head.

'What does that do?' she asked after a long interval of silence.

'It just makes my head better—don't ask a lot of questions.'

Her fingers stole down his face, and she gently pinched his nose.

'Oh, Kate,' he murmured sleepily, 'I was just going to sleep.'

'Then don't,' she said; 'what is the use of dozing? – you'll be dead soon and so will I.'

She said this very calmly, in the same matter-of-fact tone in which she might have announced that there would be roast chicken for dinner.

‘I hope they will kill you first,’ she said thoughtfully.

‘You’re a bloodthirsty little beggar,’ said Michael indignantly. ‘Why do you wish that?’

She shrugged her shoulders, and went on pressing back the hair from his forehead, never taking her eyes from his face.

‘I don’t know,’ she said at last, ‘only I want to make sure that you’re gone and nobody else can have you—and then I shan’t care.’

He did not move; for a second she saw his eyelids quiver, but he lay still staring past her to the dingy roof of the engine-house.

‘Say that again,’ he whispered.

‘Say what again? That I want you to be killed first?’ she asked innocently. ‘Mike,’ she said suddenly, ‘who was the girl?’

‘Which girl?’

‘You know,’ she said, ‘the girl you—care about.’

‘Why you, of course,’ he said in surprise.

Her hand slipped down from his forehead and covered his eyes.

‘Say that again,’ she mimicked.

‘You,’ he repeated, ‘you see I am more obliging than you were.’

‘And you would not come in with us, not even for me?’

‘Not even for you.’ She did not speak for some time.

‘How did you know we were here?’ she asked.

‘I knew you could be nowhere else,’ he said.

‘You are an awfully arrogant young man, aren’t you? Do you know how it was all done?’

He nodded.

‘The train ran into the tunnel where you had a long motor-car mounted with flanged wheels, and having three green lamps on the front, and two red-tail-lamps behind. That was the “train” which the signalman saw dashing through

the rain, and you had a horrible siren.’

She laughed softly.

‘It was terrible wasn’t it?’ she admitted. ‘Do you remember that day you were in Crime Street, you heard it?’

He recalled the uncanny sound which had then excited his curiosity.

‘When you got to the level crossing gates, the car was lifted off the rail and went on to the road. It followed the tram lines for some distance, where it turned into a convenient garage, which I suppose you had already arranged for?’

‘That’s right,’ she nodded.

‘The train went no farther than the tunnel. It then backed on to a side-track. Gregori had his Italian workmen ready and fixed up the buffer which had been dropped – you know the rest. The hole behind the buffer and the green scum—that was your idea, I suppose.’

‘It was cunning, wasn’t it, and did you see the rust I made?’

‘It is a fortunate thing you are dying young, Kate,’ he said; ‘you have a criminal mind.’

‘But I haven’t a criminal mind,’ she protested; ‘it is a game, a sort of highly complicated jig-saw puzzle. Do you ever read detective stories?’

‘Very seldom.’

‘But you have read them?’ she persisted.

‘I have read one or two,’ he confessed. ‘Did the men who wrote those have criminal minds? It was a game to them. It was a game to me. I know it is all wrong, horribly wrong, but I never thought I should realize that much. I thought nothing would turn me.’

‘And what has turned you?’ he asked. She hesitated.

‘I don’t know what it is,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘It is a curious feeling that I get when I meet one man in the world. A feeling that makes my heart turn to ice, and makes me tremble. That is all it is, Mike – how do you think they are going to do it?’

Her thoughts had gone back to the approaching end. ‘Heaven knows,’ said Michael. ‘I haven’t any time to think of it. I am thinking of something else.’

Why do they keep the steam up in that engine?’ he asked.

‘It was Gregori’s idea,’ she said. ‘He had the hole filled in today, and the buffer taken down. He thought it might be useful to let the engine run on to the main line and block it. That is, if we had word that they were sending a lot of police down to search this part of the country.’

‘Here they are,’ said Michael. ‘Help me to sit up.’

She raised him to a sitting position as the door opened, and a dim figure appeared silhouetted against the dusk. It struck a match and lit a candle, and Dr. Garon was revealed. He placed the candle carefully upon the floor just behind the half-closed door, and gassed slowly over to where Michael lay.

‘Well, my young sleuth,’ he said pleasantly, ‘the best of friends must part.’

‘Fortunately,’ said Michael, ‘I do not fall into the category of your friends.’

The doctor hummed a little tune as he took a small leather case from his pack.’

‘You have seen a hypodermic syringe before, I suppose.’

He held up the tiny instrument. ‘I am going to give you a slight dope, which won’t hurt you.’

‘One moment,’ said Michael. ‘do I understand that this dope is—final?’

The doctor bowed. From his heightened colour and his unsteady hand Michael guessed he had been drinking, either to give himself nerve for his task or to drown the memory of his misfortune.

‘Very good,’ said Michael. He looked up at the girl and raised his face, and Kate stooped and kissed him on the lips.

‘That is it, it is,’ said the doctor unpleasantly. ‘Gregori will be pleased.’

He caught the manacled wrists of the prisoner and pulled back his sleeve, and the girl’s heart almost ceased to beat.

It was at that moment that the light went out.

‘Who is there?’ said the doctor, releasing his grip of Michael’s arm and turning quickly. He took a groping step forward through the darkness.

‘Who’s there?’ he said again, and they heard a soft thud followed by the sound that a body might make when it struck the ground. Michael caught his breath. Suddenly a beam of light danced in the room and focused upon the prostrate

figure of Dr. Garon.

‘Got him,’ said a well-satisfied voice.

‘Barr,’ whispered Michael, ‘where did you spring from?’

‘I came through the door,’ said the voice. ‘Did you see it open? That is what knocked the candle over.’

He flashed the light on his superior.

‘They have got the bracelets on you, sir,’ he chuckled softly, took a key from his pocket and with a few deft turns released the other. His pocket-knife finished the work. Michael stretched his cramped limbs.

‘I tried to get in last night, but they had too many sentries—I couldn’t come here or get back to a telephone. I have been lying on that hillside all last night, and all today,’ said Detective-sergeant Barr. ‘I dared not move until it was dark. I tell you, sir, I had a bit of a fright. I thought they would get away.’

‘Have you a revolver?’ asked his chief. The man slipped a weapon into his hand. They made their way softly back through the room where the engine was still smoking, through the little steel door of the office. It was empty save for a shrouded figure which lay beneath the table. There was a second door in the room. Michael tried this. It was locked. He heard voices and tapped at the door.

‘Who is there?’ said Gregori.

‘Open the door,’ said Michael. ‘Who is there?’ demanded Gregori again.

‘Open, in the name of the law,’ said Michael. He heard a shuffle of feet and an oath and stood waiting, his pistol extended, but the door did not open.

A sudden silence came. ‘Is there any way out of here?’

‘There is a door leading into the shed where the engine is,’ said the girl.

She was white and trembling...that shrouded figure under the table had been the last straw.

Michael dashed out into the shed, but it was too late. As his feet crossed the foothold a bullet struck the steel door and ricocheted to the roof. In the dim light offered by an oil flare he saw Mulberry and Stockmar hoisting the inanimate figure of Dr. Garon to the cab of the engine. He fired twice, and Cunningham stumbled, but was dragged into the cab.

Then with a mighty 'schuff!' which reverberated through the building, the engine began to move toward the closed door. It gathered speed in the dozen yards or so it had to traverse, and then with a crash it struck the gate, splintering and sending it flying.

Michael flew the length of the shed and arrived at the outer gates in time to see the engine disappearing round the edge of the bluff. Barr was at his side, and the two men stood helpless, as their enemies gradually receded into the grey dusk.

'There is a telephone here,' said Michael quickly, 'but it is probably laid for their own purpose.'

'I left my motor-bike on the top of the hill somewhere, sir,' said Barr.

'Get on to it,' said Michael. He stood listening to the sound of the locomotive going faster and faster.

A hand touched his timidly.

'Did they get away?'

He slipped his arm round the girl. 'I am afraid they did,' he said.

He was turning back to the shed when the roar of an explosion set the building trembling.

'What was that?' whispered the girl.

They walked back to the end of the bluff. There was no need for him to speculate as to the direction from whence the explosion had come, for a bright red glow two miles away illuminated the whole country-side.

'Something has happened to the engine,' he said.

He did not know till an hour later that running at full speed the Atlantic had dashed into a down goods train and that blaze he witnessed was the blaze of a burning petroleum tank which the wrecked Atlantic had crushed in its death flurry.

'WE HAVE not been able to recognize any of them,' said T. B. 'Do you think Kate Westhanger was with them?'

'Kate Westhanger is no more,' said Michael gravely, and he spoke the truth, for Kate Pretherston was at that moment on her way to France, where her husband intended joining her just as soon as his resignation was accepted.

‘But why give up the work, Michael?’ said T.B.

‘I found, sir,’ said Michael, ‘that it was sapping my moral qualities.’

‘Your moral qualities?’ said his puzzled chief. ‘I didn’t know that you had any. What particular form did the sapping take?’

‘I found, sir,’ said Michael, ‘that I was developing a fondness for the criminal classes.’

***Freeditorial*** 

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