Number Six

By
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NUMBER SIX

I. — THE BEGINNING OF THE HUNT

THE most mysterious and baffling thing about Cæsar Valentine was to discover the reason for his mystery. It was a mystery which belonged to the category of elusive thought, the name that is on the tip of your tongue, the fact that is familiar, yet defies exact remembrance.

When the International Police Conference held its yearly meeting in 19— in Geneva, and after three strenuous days' diskussion which embraced matters so widely different as the circulation of forged Swedish notes and the philanderings of the Bosnian Ambassador (the conference did its best to prevent his assassination, which occurred six months later), the question of Cæsar Valentine came up for examination. It was an informal diskussion, a mere drift of conversation arising out of the Gale case.

"I don't quite know what is this man's offence," said Lecomte of the Surêté. "He is very rich and very popular and immensely good-looking—but none of

these qualities is criminal.”

“Where does he get his money?” demanded Leary of Washington. “We had him in America for five years and he did nothing but spend.”

“Neither in France nor in America is that a crime,” smiled Lecomte.

“People who have done business with him hare had an unfortunate habit of dying suddenly.”

It was Hallett of the London C.I.B. who put the matter so bluntly, and Leary nodded.

“That’s so,” he said. “Providence has been very good to Mr. Valentine. He was in a big wheat deal in Chicago in ’13 and the market went against him. The principal operator was Burgess—John Boyd Burgess. He had a grudge against Valentine and would have ruined him. One morning Burgess was discovered dead at the bottom of an elevator shaft in his hotel. He had dropped nineteen floors.”

M. Lecomte shrugged his broad shoulders.

"An accident?” he suggested.

“Listen,” said Hallett. “This man Valentine got friendly with a banker in our country—a man named George Gale. Gale financed him out of the bank funds—but that was never proved. Gale was in the habit of taking a nerve tonic. He used to bring one dose in a tiny bottle to the office. He was found one night dead in his office with the little bottle in his hand. It bore the tonic label but it had contained prussic acid. When the auditors came to examine the books of the bank they found a hundred thousand pounds had disappeared. Valentine’s account was in perfect order. Gale went to a suicide’s grave—Valentine, sent a wreath.”

“Well,” said Lecomte with another shrug, “I am not defending M. Valentine. But it might have been suicide. Valentine might have been innocent. Where is your evidence to the contrary? There was an investigation, was there not?”

Hallett nodded.

“And nothing was discovered unflattering to the monsieur! You think he is a bad man? I tell you that I will place the full strength of my department at your disposal to prove it. I will have him watched day and night, for he is in France for six months in the year, but frankly I would desire more solid foundations for your suspicions.”

“He ran away with a man’s wife——” began Hallett, and Lecomte laughed.

“Pardon!” he apologised. “That is not an offence under the Code Napoleon!”

So the conversation drifted elsewhere.

A year later Hallett of the C.I.B. sat hunched up in his chair, frowning gloomily at a typewritten report which was spread on his desk.

He sat for half an hour, thinking; then he touched a bell and somebody came in.

“My friend,” said the chief—and when he began “my friend” he was very serious indeed—“six months ago you came to me with certain theories about Mr. Cæsar Valentine. I don’t want you to interrupt me,” he said brusquely as his subordinate seemed likely to speak; “just hear me through. I like you—you know that. I trust you or I wouldn’t send you out on what looks like a hopeless search. What is more, I think your theories have some foundation. I have always thought so. That is why I’ve put you into training and accepted you for this department.”
A nod was the reply.

“Police work,” said Hallett, “is a big game of solitaire in every sense of the word. If you watch every card and keep your mind concentrated on the game and you have luck, it comes out. If you start wool-gathering in the earlier stages you’ll just miss putting up the right card, and you’ll be stuck with the deuce of hearts, that should have gone up, lying snug and useless at the bottom of the pack. Patience is everything. Burns sent a man into the mining camps with the scrap of a photograph showing only a murderer’s right eye and it was three years before this fellow of Burns nailed his man. Lecomte of the Surêté waited five years before he caught Madam Serpilot; and I myself as a young man trailed the Cully Smith gang for three years, eight months, and twelve days before I put Cully where I wanted him—and it will probably take you as long to pull down Cæsar Valentine.”

“When do I start?” asked his companion.

“At once,” replied Hallett. “Nobody must know of your movements—not even at this office. Your pay and expenses will be sent to you and you will be entered in the books as ‘on special service abroad.’”

The other smiled.

“That will be difficult, chief; my name——”

“You have no name. Henceforth you will be Number Six and there will be

nothing to identify you with—who you are. I shall give instructions that suggestions, wishes, or such S.O.S. messages as you send will be acted upon. Now get out and pull Valentine. This man may be the biggest thing of his kind—and the most dangerous man in the world. On the other hand, all the stories that come to Police Headquarters may be lies. It's a weird job you've taken on. You can't jail a man for living expensively or for running away with men's wives, and that's his known record. Naturally he isn't popular with men and hatred breeds lies. You've got to be bold and diskreet, because I have reason to believe he has the most complete espionage bureau in the world. It was discovering that he subsidised a man here in this office that opened my eyes to the possibilities of the case. A man doesn't spend thousands to plant an ear at Headquarters unless he has something to fear."

Number Six nodded again.

"Now, here's the world before you, my friend," said Hallett, "and a great reward if you succeed. Find his friends—you can have the entree to every prison in Britain and maybe that will help you."

"It's a big job," said Number Six, "but it is the one job in the world I want."

"That I know," agreed Hallett. "It will be lonely, but you'll probably find a dozen people who will help you—the men and women he has ruined and broken; the fathers of daughters and the husbands of wives he has sent to hell. They'll be pretty good allies. Now go! I've given you the finest intensive training that I can give, but maybe I haven't taught you just the thing you'll want to know."

He rose abruptly and offered his hand and Number Six winced under the crushing grip.

"Good-bye and good luck, Number Six," he smiled. "Don't forget I shall never know you again if I meet you in the street. You are a stranger to me until you step into the witness-box at the Old Bailey and give the evidence which will put Mister Valentine permanently out of the game!"

So Number Six went out, nodding to the man at the door—the grim visaged custodian of the custodians—and for some years Scotland Yard lost sight of one against whose name in the Secret and Confidential Register of the Criminal Investigation Bureau Hallett wrote in his own hand:

"On very particular service. No reference to be made to this agent in any report whatever."

A year later Hallett summoned Chief Detective Steel to his office and told him

just as much of his interview with Number Six as he deemed advisable.

“I haven’t heard from Number Six for months,” he said. “Go to Paris and keep a fatherly eye on Cæsar Valentine.”

“Tell me this about Number Six, chief,” said Detective Steel. “Is it a man or a woman?”

Hallett grinned.

“Cæsar has been six months trying to find out,” he said. “I’ve fired three clerks for enquiring—don’t tell me that I’ve got to fire you.”

II. — TRAY-BONG SMITH

WHEN in prison at Brixton, a man who has no defence and is waiting his trial on a charge of murder finds time hanging pretty heavily upon his hands. It was due to this ennui of his that “Tray-Bong” Smith, usually an extremely reticent man, condescended to furnish certain particulars which enabled the writer to fill in the gaps of this story which began for our purpose in Chi So’s tea-room, which isn’t more than a hundred metres from the Quai des Fleurs.

Chi So was that rarity, a Jap who posed as a Chinee. He ran a restaurant in Paris, which, without being fashionable, was popular. People used to come across the river to eat the weird messes he prepared, and as many as a dozen motor-cars have been seen parked at the end of the narrow street in which “The Joyous Pedlar”—that was the name of his joint—was situated.

Tray-Bong Smith had never eaten at Chi So’s, but Had been there quite a lot. The restaurant was built on a corner lot and was a fairly old house. It was probably an inn in the days of Louis, for beneath the building was one of the most spacious cellars in Paris. It was a great, vaulted room, about thirty feet from the keystone to the floor, and Chi So had turned this into what he called a “lounge” for his regular customers.

For weeks Tray-Bong Smith had turned into the “lounge” regularly at twelve o’clock every night, to bunk down with a pipe and a few busy thoughts till four o’clock in the morning.

There were lots of reasons why he shouldn’t wander about Paris at night. At this time some sort of international conference was going on, and it was impossible to stroll from the Place de la Concorde to the Italiennes without falling over a Scotland Yard man who would know him.

Whether other visitors would have recognised the gaunt unshaven man with

the shabby suit and the diskoloured shirt as the man who won the 100 yards' sprint and the long jump at the Oxford and Cambridge Sports is doubtful. Certain sections of the police, however, knew him very well indeed.

In a little cafe in Montmartre where he spent his evenings they had christened him “Tray-Bong Smith,” because of his practice of replying to all and sundry who addressed him with this cockneyfied version of “très bien.” Even when he discovered that his French was faultless and his “tray bong” an amusing mannerism, the name stuck and it came with him to Chi So’s, where he was accounted a dangerous man.

There were days when he counted his sous, days and nights when he would disappear from view and come back flush with money, changing thousand-franc notes with the nonchalance of a Monte Carlo croupier.

But when he was visible at all he was a regular attendant at Chi So’s.

If he was regular in his habits, so was Cæsar Valentine. On Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, at two o’clock to the minute, he used to make his appearance in what the habitues of Chi So’s called the private box. In one wall, about fifteen feet from the ground, there was a moon-shaped opening, in which had been built, either by Chi So or his predecessor, a sort of Swiss balcony. It was unlighted and heavily curtained and it was suspected that Chi So made quite a respectable income out of letting the box to respectable people who wanted to be thrilled by the dope horrors of Paris and peregrinating journalists who were writing up Chinatown stories.

Cæsar Valentine, as a rule, came through a private door direct into the cellar, but sometimes he would stalk through the “lounge” looking from side to side with that insolent stare of his, and go out through a small door in the wall which communicated, by means of a circular iron staircase, with the private box above. And there he would sit for exactly one hour, peering down at the smokers, his eyes ranging the whitewashed cavern, which with its big Chinese lanterns, its scarlet dado, and the brightly covered bunks was not without its picturesque qualities.

Chi So said that he was a “beautiful man,” and the description was not extravagant. He was invariably in evening dress which fitted him like a glove. About six feet in height, with such a face as the old Greek sculptors loved to reproduce, his head was covered with a mass of small brown curls, slightly—very slightly—tinged with grey. The first time Tray-Bong Smith saw him he thought he was a man of twenty-eight. The second time, when a shaft of light from a torn lantern caught him square, he guessed he was nearer fifty. He had big, brown, melancholy eyes, a straight nose, a chin a little too rounded for the

fastidious taste, and on his cheeks just a faint flush of colour.

The night this story begins, Tray-Bong Smith had turned in at Chi So's by the side door which was used by the smokers and taken off his mackintosh in the hall. Chi So was there rubbing his hands, a sly and detestable little figure, in blue silk blouse and trousers, and he helped him off with his coat.

"It's raining, Mr. Thmith?" he lisped.

"Like the devil," growled Tray-Bong. "A poisonous night, even for Paris."

Chi So grinned.

"You thmoke plenty to-night, Mr. Thmith. I have thome good thtock in from China. Plenty people here to-night."

Smith grunted a reply and went down the stone stairs and found his bunk. Chi always reserved the same bunk for regular customers and Smith's was just opposite the "private box."

O San, the pipe man, gave him his instrument of delight, made and lit a pill, and then hurried off.

There was the usual queer lot of people there that night. Society folks, a woman or two, the old camelot who sells the story of his life at the corner of the Rue Royale, and a gentleman whom Smith recognised as an official attached to one of the numerous embassies in Paris. Him he noted for future use and profit.

Old Lefèbre, the camelot, noted the complacent, self-satisfied attitude of Tray-Bong and shuffled off to the bunk of a crony.

"Smit' has had a good hunting," he wheezed. "He is lucky . . . a month ago he came from Enghien with pockets full of mille notes, and the body of Tosseau, the racing man was found in the Seine. . . . Chi So should keep this place for respectable people."

His audience cursed him vilely for interrupting his pleasant dream and the camelot went back to his own tangled visions.

Tray-Bong lay curled up in his bunk, supporting himself on his elbow, and dreamt his dreams, which were not the kind of dreams which anybody else in the lounge would indulge in.

At two o'clock precisely came Cæsar Valentine, and with him Chi So, who usually accompanied him if he came through the lounge. Chi So's attitude was

servile, his voice a wheedling whine, but Valentine said nothing. He strode down between the bunks and paused opposite that on which Tray-Bong Smith lay with wide eyes and wakeful.

Valentine looked for a moment absent-mindedly, and then, turning, walked through the door which Chi So had opened and reappeared a little later in the gallery. There he sat, his white hands on the plush ledge of the box, his chin on the back of his hands, looking down; and it seemed that the unshaven Englishman in the bunk below was the principal attraction, for his eyes always came back to him.

At half past two there was a curious stir, a faint chatter of voices from the passage-way leading down from the side entrance and the dull sound of blows. Then Chi So appeared in a panic and came twittering across the lounge to where Tray Bong Smith was lying. Smith was out of the bunk and on his feet in an instant.

“Mis’ Smit’ you go quickly; here is the polith—it is for you! Through this door!” He indicated the door leading to the gallery. “Mis’ Valentine shall not mind.”

Smith was through the door in two strides, and, closing it behind him, went noiselessly up the narrow iron stairs which led directly into the “box.”

Cæsar Valentine turned as he entered, and he spoke for the first time to the man who was destined to play so important a part in his life.

“You’re in trouble?” he said.

“At present, no. In a few moments, yes,” said Smith, and opened his shirt at the front. Cæsar saw the butt of the man’s gun behind the linen and knew why Tray-Bong invariably lay on his right side.

“Do you know the way out?” he asked. “I will show you.”

He pulled aside a curtain and revealed a rough opening in the wall. Smith stepped through and passed along a passage lit by one electric bulb and leading apparently, to a blank end.

“Straight ahead and then to your right,” said the voice of Cæsar behind him. “The door opens quite easily.”

The fugitive found the door and stepped out into a small courtyard. Cæsar Valentine brushed past him, crossed the yard without hesitation, and opening another door they found themselves in a side street. It was raining heavily and a south-westerly gale was blowing.

“Wait,” said Cæsar.

He fastened a big cloak about his shoulders.

“You are younger than I and the rain will not hurt you.”

Smith grinned in the darkness and loosened the sheath knife he carried in his hip pocket.

Valentine led the way through a labyrinth of alleys, and presently they were standing on the deserted quai. Paris was in the throes of a coal famine and the lighting had been considerably reduced, which helped, for the quai was apparently deserted.

Suddenly Valentine caught his companion by the arm.

“One moment,” he said. “You are the person who has the ridiculous nickname, are you not?”

“I cannot be answerable for the absurdity of any names which are given to me by absurd persons,” said Smith a little coldly, and Valentine laughed.

“Tray-Bong Smith?” he asked, and the other nodded.

“Yes, I thought so.” Valentine was satisfied. “Only I did not wish to make a mistake. Not that it is possible that I can make mistakes,” he added, and the man at his side thought at first that he was jesting, but he was serious enough.

Along the quai Smith could see two dim lights and guessed that these belonged to Valentine’s motor-car.

He walked on, a little ahead of the exquisite, toward the car and was less than fifty feet from safety when a man came out of the darkness, gripped him by the coat and swung him round as he flashed an electric lamp in his face.

“Hullo!” he said in French. “Tray-Bong Smith, n’est-ce pas? I want you, my ancient!”

Valentine stopped dead and shrunk back into the shadows, watching.

Only for a second did Tray-Bong Smith hesitate, then with a swift movement of his hand he knocked the lamp from the man’s hand. In another second he had gripped his assailant by the throat and had thrust him back against the grey stone parapet behind which the Seine flowed swiftly.

“You want me, eh?” he said between his teeth, and Valentine saw the quick

rise and fall of a glittering blade.

The man relaxed his grip and slid limply to the ground.

Smith looked round to left and right, then stooping, lifted the fallen man bodily in his arms and flung him across the parapet into the river.

Only one groan came from the victim, and something amused Tray-Bong Smith, for he laughed as he picked his knife from the pavement and threw it after the man into the stream.

Valentine had not moved until the knife was sent flying. Then he came forward and Smith could hear his quick breathing.

“My friend,” he said, “you are rapid.”

He said no more than this and walked rapidly toward the car and opened the door. The chauffeur could not have seen what had happened, for the quai was badly lit—but there may have been some other spectator. The car moved forward until it came almost abreast of the spot where the struggle had occurred. Smith thought he saw someone on the pavement, and dropped the rain-blurred window to look. The car was moving slowly, and the headlamps of the car had only just flashed out their fullest radiance.

In the light of the lamps was a girl. She was dressed from head to foot in black, and stood peering over the parapet into the dark river. As the car came up to her she turned her head and the man had a momentary glimpse of the saddest and most beautiful face he had ever seen.

His shoulders were out of the window and he was looking back, when he felt Valentine’s hand clutch him and pull him back.

“You fool,” he said savagely, “what are you doing? Whom were you looking at?”

“Nobody,” said Smith, and pulled up the window.

III. — THE HOUSE OF CÆSAR

CÆSAR VALENTINE had several houses and flats in or near Paris. Of this fact Tray-Bong Smith was well aware. He thought at first that he was being taken to Valentine’s beautiful apartments on the Boulevard Victor Hugo, but the car went straight across the Place de l’Étoile, and sped down the Avenue of the Grande Armée.

It was difficult on such a night to know in what direction they were going, but

after a white it was apparent to Smith, from the violent nature of the road, that they were going in the direction of Maisons Laffitte. Presently the car turned into what seemed to be a side lane with high hedges on either side. The car bumped and jolted slowly for ten minutes over what could not have been anything better than a cart track, then turned abruptly to the left and through a dilapidated gate.

It was too dark to see the house, and when the car stopped and Valentine's guest descended he had no time to make any observations. It was a fairly big chateau; how big Smith could not tell, for Cæsar opened the door with extraordinary quickness and ushered him into a large dark hall. He switched on an electric light, and the stranger had time to observe a broad flight of stairs leading out of the hall before he was hurried across the parquet floor through another door into a large saloon.

It was one of the few rooms in private houses that deserve the name of saloon. It was lofty and spacious, its walls panelled with white wood, its ceilings were beautifully carved in the Moorish fashion, and illumination came from two rich electroliers. The furniture (observed Smith) was not only magnificent, but regal.

It is queer what things impress one. Smith always remembered that saloon by its carpet—an immense expanse of purple, heavily embroidered in gold, the ornamentation consisting of fleurs-de-lis and a cipher "C." The next thing that impressed him was a beautiful coat-of-arms above the big open fireplace. Two of its four quarterings held the lily of France, one, three gold bars, and the fourth a bull upon a golden ground.

"Sit down," said Cæsar imperiously. "You would like a little wine?"

He pressed aside one of the panels of the wall and took out a tray containing bottle and glasses. These he carried to the visitor and placed on the table by his side.

"Drink," he said curtly, and Smith poured out a stiff glass of whisky.

Cæsar took off his wet cloak and flung it on the back of the chair, strolled to the fireplace, switched on an electric radiator, and stood with his back to the glow, surveying the other quizzically.

An imposing figure was Valentine in his immaculate evening dress. Smith approved the snowy white shirt-front and the three pearl studs, the thin platinum chain stretched across the white waistcoat, and guessed the reason for the little mocking smile that curled Cæsar's fine lips.

“My friend, Tray-Bong Smith,” he said slowly, “have you ever seen a man guillotined?”

“Half a dozen,” said the other promptly. “On to the board, head in the kang!* Snick! Head in basket! Vive la France!”

[* kang (sic): presumably meaning "lunette" i.e., the wooden frame used to fix the head during execution by guillotine.]

Valentine frowned as though he were annoyed at the flippancy in the tone of his guest. Then he laughed and nodded.

“I think you’re the man I want,” he said. “That is the attitude to adopt toward life. But never forget, Smith, that you must not laugh at authority. Authority is sublime, beyond ridicule, cruel, unjust, tragic, but never humorous.”

Smith was slipping off his wet coat as the other spoke.

“Put it before the fire,” said Cæsar. “Better still, throw it out through that door.” He pointed to a door to the right of the fireplace. “Madonna Beatrice will see to it.”

Smith obeyed him to the letter, wondering who might be Madonna Beatrice. Suddenly Cæsar looked at him sharply.

“Is there any blood on your hands?” he asked.

Smith shook his head.

“I aimed at the fifth intercostal space,” he said calmly. “There would be little blood.”

Cæsar nodded approvingly as his companion examined his hands.

“You have not taken much opium to-night,” he said. He stepped toward the man and peered into his eyes.

“I never take opium,” said Tray-Bong coolly. “I do not go to Chi So’s to smoke, but to watch.”

Again Cæsar laughed.

“An admirable lieutenant,” he said. “But you must not be too clever with me, Smith. I have taken a great risk for you. And let me tell you that I also came to Chi So’s to watch, and to watch you.”

Smith had guessed that already, but said nothing. “To watch you,” Cæsar

repeated. “Chi So’s business was built on my money. The place is useful to me. He tells me news that I want to hear, and when I learnt that an English criminal was hiding in Paris from the police, that he was wanted for murder in America and for forgery and divers other sordid and stupid crimes, we became interested in you.”

“We?” repeated Smith, and again Cæsar frowned and changed the trend of his observations.

“I do not approve of crime, your kind of crime. It is stupid and small and leads nowhere but to the guillotine or the gallows.”

Smith might have offered his own views on crime, but at that moment the door opened slowly and a man entered. He was a little, red-haired man, and his ruddiness extended to his face, which was flaming. Somehow he matched neither Cæsar nor the saloon, for he was showily dressed; a heavy gold watch-chain dangled from his waistcoat pocket and his attitude was defiant. Smith, a student of men, guessed that he had been drinking, and was not mistaken.

“Well, Ernest, what do you want?”

Ernest advanced unsteadily into the room and glanced from Cæsar to the watchful Smith.

“Hullo!” he said loudly. “Got a visitor, eh?” The voice was coarse and uneducated, and it came to the visitor in the nature of a shock that he should speak so familiarly to his immaculate host.

“Yes, I have a visitor,” said Cæsar softly.

For a moment the little man said nothing, then clearing his throat:

“I’m going to-morrow.”

“Oh, you’re going to-morrow, are you?” repeated Cæsar in a mild tone.

“Yes, I’m going to London. Any objection?”

Cæsar shook his head and smiled.

“None at all.”

“You know where to send my salary, I suppose?” asked the little man.

Cæsar licked his lips.

“Your salary? I thought you were leaving my employment?”

“You know where to send my salary, I suppose?” said the little man in a tone of menace. “I’m taking a ten years’ holiday.” He laughed at his own humour. “A ten years’ holiday,” he repeated. “That’s good, ain’t it?”

“And I’m to send you your salary for ten years, eh?” said Cæsar.

“You’ll be sorry if you don’t,” threatened the man. “I haven’t been here doing your dirty work for three years for nothing. Let him do it!” He nodded to Smith. “See how he likes it. I could write a book about you, Mr. Valentine.”

Cæsar laughed.

“And it would be very interesting, I’m sure. And have you waited up all the evening to tell me this?”

“Yes, I have. I’ve got a lot to tell you, and I should tell you some more if that man wasn’t here.”

“Keep it until the morning,” said Cæsar, dropping his hand good-humouredly on the other’s shoulder. “Go back to bed, my friend, and ask Madonna Beatrice to come to me.”

“Madonna Beatrice!” sneered the other. “She’s a beauty, she is!”

The visitor thought he saw Cæsar’s face go pink, but the big man laughed softly to himself, and walking slowly to the door, he very gently pushed his unruly servitor forth.

“It is a curious characteristic of servants,” he said, “that they invariably imagine they know their masters’ guilty secrets. You have probably had a similar experience.”

“I never keep servants who share my secrets,” said Smith, “and to this fact I ascribe my freedom and well-being.”

There was a gentle tap at the door and Cæsar turned quickly.

“Come in, Madonna,” he said.

The woman who entered piqued the visitor’s curiosity. Cæsar had a reputation for affairs. It was a reputation not particularly creditable to himself. Smith had expected to see a young and beautiful girl, but the woman who came in had no claim to beauty. She was an old woman, squat and fat, her face was dark and disfigured with tiny warts. Her grey-black hair was brushed back smoothly from her head and gathered in a bun behind; and to add to her grotesqueness she was dressed in a robe of bright emerald-green, cut square at the breast.

About her neck was a huge gold necklace of barbaric design, and her fat hands were covered with jewels. Yet, old as she was, and laughable as was her get-up, there was something about her poise that spoke of strength and power.

“Madonna,” said Cæsar softly, and he spoke in liquid Spanish, “our friend here is staying with us for some time. Will you see that his room is made ready for him?”

She looked at Smith with her heavy eyes and nodded. But he had discovered something which interested him more than her fantastic attire. He was looking at her foot, that observant man, and saw that she was wearing thick boots. Moreover they were wet and muddy, as though she had been wandering in the storm.

“Si, senor,” she replied.

The visitor wondered why the man called her “Madonna,” which is an Italian form of address, when he had spoken to her in Spanish. Cæsar, who was an extraordinary mind-reader, answered his unspoken query when she had gone.

“Madonna Beatrice,” he said, “is both Spanish and Italian, as I will explain to you one of these days.”

He made no further reference to the events of the night, but chatted pleasantly enough on crime in the abstract.

“The little criminal is a deplorable object,” he said. “I cite, for example, my friend Ernest. Ernest is a blackguard, a card-sharper, and a thief. I took him into my service and brought him to France at a moment when the police were searching for him and when he would certainly have gone to penal servitude for a number of years. If he had been a greater criminal, he would have had a greater mind and a greater heart. Also he would have been on his knees to me all his life, for he has lived luxuriously, he has money to spend at the races—I have even had him taught French.”

“Money doesn’t buy loyalty, anyway,” said Smith curtly.

“I agree,” nodded Cæsar. “And yet money buys most of the things that are desirable in this world. It even buys the appearance and the consequences of loyalty. Money buys allies in war, and a little more money would buy their desertion. It could buy my election to the Senate of France if I were a Frenchman—and if I did not hate the French,” he added. “With money I could sit in this house and re-shape the future of Europe. With money you can buy factions and parties and nations.”

He sighed and, turning his back on the other, looked earnestly at the coat-of-arms above the mantelpiece.

“Whose arms are those?” asked Smith unexpectedly.

“Eh?” He swung round. “Whose arms? You are not a student of heraldry? No? Some day I will tell you. Money is everything, and it is so easy to secure. Observe me! At nineteen I was penniless. I have never worked, I have never speculated, I have never gambled, yet to-day I am a rich man, because God gave me a brain.” He tapped his forehead. “Because I am attractive to women, because I am a genius without scruple—and you cannot be a genius and have scruple.”

He broke off the conversation as abruptly as before and led the way out into the hall.

“Your room is ready,” he said. “To-morrow we will diskuss your future. It would not be wise of you to stay in France, and, moreover, I need you in England.”

The room into which he showed his guest was furnished simply but expensively.

“You would like tea in the morning, of course. You are English,” he said. “You will find all the necessities of your toilet on your dressing-table, and the Madonna will have put you pyjamas—ah yes, there they are. Good night.”

IV. — THE CHAINED LADY

TRAY-BONG SMITH stood stock-still listening to Cæsar’s retiring footsteps. Then he examined the room minutely and carefully. There was no lock to the door and no bolt, but that did not greatly worry him. Cæsar would not have brought him to Maisons Laffitte to betray him, he was sure of that. He sat down in one of the two deep chairs which stood on either side of the shuttered fireplace and pulled off his boots, speculating on the plans of his new employer.

For just what reason had Cæsar taken him under his wing? Cæsar had witnessed the affair on the Quai des Fleurs and knew that by harbouring the man who had committed the act he had rendered himself guilty by the laws of France.

The project ahead must be of vast importance or Cæsar would not have run the risk. If the girl had seen—the girl in black whom Smith had seen peering into the river. She must have seen, or why would she have been standing on that

spot, leaning over the parapet?

Smith rubbed his chin and frowned. The girl might spoil everything. Suppose she went to the police and a newspaper got hold of the story of this midnight struggle? He swore to himself as he unlaced his wet boots, slipped off his wet clothes, unbuckled the canvas strap which supported the little Colt automatic he carried under his shirt, and put the pistol beneath the pillow.

The silk pyjamas which had been left for him were rather long in the leg, but he turned them up, and, switching out the light, pulled aside the heavy velvet curtains which covered the window and looked out.

The windows were of the French type which open outward, and these he swung wide. There was an easy drop from the window to a flower-bed beneath, so that there was no need to worry about a get-away. The rain had ceased and the clouds had thinned, though the wind still blew gustily. There was a full moon, faintly visible, and in the occasional gleam which lit the countryside he was able to take his immediate bearings. That glow in the sky was Paris, and if he was near Maisons Laffitte he was due south-west of the city.

By the light of the moon he looked at the watch on his wrist. It was a quarter past three. In two hours the day would break, but he was not sleepy. He went back to the window to fix in his mind the exact lay of the ground. Immediately facing the window was a broad lawn which ran into the shadows of a poplar plantation. To the left he glimpsed the yellow of the drive which led to the lane up which he had bumped, and to the main road.

He lay down on the bed and covered himself with the eiderdown, but he was not in the least tired. He lay there thinking about Cæsar and speculating upon the future, wondering just what game Cæsar was after and to what purpose he intended putting his new protege.

A distant clock chimed four, and he was beginning to doze, when he heard a sound which brought him wide awake again. It was a queer tinkling sound, like the drip-drip of a faucet, and it was some time before he located it as being outside of the window. It was the dripping of rain, of course, he told himself—a gutter overflowing on to a window-sill; but nevertheless he slipped from the bed and stole softly to the window, for Tray-Bong Smith was a suspicious man.

At first he saw nothing, though most of the clouds had disappeared and the moon was shining brightly. Then he saw a sight so eerie, so unexpected, as to bring his heart to his throat.

Walking across the broad lawn was the figure of a woman. She was dressed in grey or white—he could not be certain which—and she appeared to be carrying something in her hand. Smith could not see what that something was until she turned and walked back again with the moon on her face, and then he heard the jingle of steel plainly. He shaded his eyes from the moonbeams and cautiously put his head round the side of the window.

The woman was walking with curiously short steps, and this mincing gait at such an hour was so unreal and so grotesquely unnatural that he might have guessed the cause. Her walk brought her to within twenty yards of the window, and then Tray-Bong Smith saw and heard.

Clink, clink, clink!

Her hands were handcuffed together, and between her two ankles was a steel chain that jingled as she walked.

“Well I’m——!” whispered Smith.

As he stared at her, he heard a low voice, commanding and surly. It sounded as though it came from the shadow of the trees, and the woman turned and walked in that direction. Smith watched her until she disappeared, and then went back to his bed, a considerably puzzled man.

But the amazing happenings of the night were not completed. He had begun to doze again when he was awakened by a shriek—a shriek accompanied by a crash against the bedroom door, that brought him to his feet, gun in hand. The grey of dawn was in the sky, and there was just enough light to see the door moving slowly inward.

Then of a sudden it burst open and somebody fell into the room with a thud, gibbering and sobbing hideously. It made an attempt to rise and poised a moment totteringly on its knees, and Smith recognised him.

It was the red-haired man, the man called Ernest, but his face was no longer scarlet. It was grey and drawn and horrible.

“Cæsar, Cæsar!” he whispered, and then collapsed in a heap.

Then came a sound of hurrying feet, and Cæsar came into the room. He was in his dressing-gown and pyjamas, and had apparently just wakened.

“What is it?” he said, and looked down. “Ernest! What are you doing here?”

He shook the inanimate figure.

“I’m sorry; this man’s drunk again.”

He lifted him in his strong arms as easily as though he were a child.

“Do you mind?” he said, and laid him on the bed. “Put on the light, will you, Smith?”

Tray-Bong Smith obeyed, and Cæsar, bending over the man, looked down at his wide-opened eyes. Then he turned to the other.

“He’s dead,” he said soberly. “What a perfectly dreadful thing to have happened!”

V. — CÆSAR REVEALS HIMSELF

THIS, then, was the introduction of Tray-Bong Smith to the house of Cæsar Valentine—an unfortunate introduction if the police came to make enquiries as to this sudden death. But the man Ernest—his other name was Goldberg—was notoriously subject to fits. He was, moreover, given to alcoholic excess, and on two occasions Cæsar had had to send for the local doctor to prescribe for his retainer.

What had happened to the man in the night Smith could only guess. It is certain that he had some sort of an attack in the early hours of the morning, had dragged himself downstairs to the visitor’s room—why to his room? Cæsar explained. The room Smith had taken was one which he had usually occupied, and the man’s words “Cæsar, Cæsar!” addressed to Tray-Bong had been intended for his host.

There were the usual inquiries, and the man from Chi So’s was amazed to discover how readily the authorities accepted Cæsar’s explanation. Whilst the visiting magistrate was in the house, Smith was hidden in a little room in a small tower at one corner of the building. The silent Madonna Beatrice brought him his meals, and if there were servants in the house the visitor did not see them.

He was permitted to enter the great saloon that night, and found Cæsar smoking a long cigar and reading a book of poems. He looked up as Smith entered and motioned him to a chair.

“I’ll get you out of France in a day or two,” he said. “That matter didn’t get on to your nerves, I presume? It is very unfortunate, very unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate for all of us,” said Smith, taking a cigarette from the table and lighting it. “You saw him after I went to bed, of course?”

Cæsar raised his eyebrows.

“Why ‘of course ’?” he asked softly.

“Because he died,” replied Smith brutally. “You saw him and had a drink with him—and he died.” Valentine said nothing.

“What makes you think that?” he asked after a while, and looked the other straight in the eye.

“For three years I have been a medical student,” drawled the guest, “and in the course of that three years I made acquaintance with a drug which is used extensively by oculists. It is a deadly poison, but, unlike other deadly poisons, leaves no trace—except one, which I looked for in the unfortunate Ernest.”

Cæsar’s lips curled.

“Was it present?”

Smith nodded and Cæsar laughed. He was genuinely amused.

“You had better see Monsieur the Magistrate,” he said mockingly, “and reveal your suspicions.”

“There is a very excellent reason why I shouldn’t,” said the gunman coolly, “only I think it is right, as between you and me, that there should be no pretence. Put your cards on the table as I’ve already put mine."

“You put your card in the Seine,” said Valentine drily, “and you did not even send a wreath, as I have done for Ernest.”

He rose quickly and began to pace the room.

“You shall see all my cards in time,” he said. “I need such a man as you—a man without heart or mercy. Some day I will tell you a great secret.” Smith was looking at him with a curious expression. Shaved and clad in a suit which Cæsar had found for him, this man from the opium den, this knifer of police agents was an intellectual of twenty-seven, not ill-looking by any means.

“I will tell you your secret now,” said Smith, speaking slowly, and pointed to the coat-of-arms above the mantelpiece. “Why are those arms in this house?” he asked. “Why are this cypher and these fleurs-de-lis embroidered in your carpet, Mr. Valentine? I don’t know whether you are a madman, or whether you're sane,” Smith spoke in that slow drawl of his. “If may be just a form of megalomania, and I’ve seen pretensions almost as extravagant. But I think I’ve got you down fine.”

“What are the arms?” asked Valentine steadily. “They are the arms of Cæsar Borgia,” replied the other. “A bull on a gold ground is the family arms of the Borgias; the C in the carpet was the Borgias’ cypher.”

He had stopped his pacing and stood now, his head bent forward, his narrowed eyes fixed on Smith.

“I am neither a madman nor a vainglorious fool,” he said quietly. “It is true I am the last in the direct line of that illustrious man, Cæsar Borgia, Duke of the Valentinois.”

Smith did not speak for a long time. He had enough to think upon. In his early days at Oxford he had posed as an authority on the Renaissance, and knew the history of the Borgias backwards. In his old rooms, before things smashed to pieces and the lanes of life so violently turned, he had had a copy of a cartoon reputedly by da Vinci, inscribed “Cæsar Borgia de France, Duke of Valentinois, Count of Diois and Issaudun, Pontifical Vicar of Imola and Forli.” And now he recalled the same bold, womanish face in the man who stood looking down at him, enjoying the sensation he had caused.

“Well?” said Cæsar at last.

“It is strange,” said Smith vacantly; then, “from what branch of the family do you descend?”

“Through Giralamo,” replied Cæsar quickly. “Giralamo was Cæsar’s one son. After Cæsar’s fall he was taken to France, through France to Spain, and was educated by the Spanish Cardinals. He married, and his son went to South America and fought in Peru. The family settled in the Americas for two centuries. My grandfather came to England as a boy, and I myself was educated in England.”

“It’s amazing,” said Smith, and felt that it was a feeble thing to say.

So they stood confronting one another, the man from Chi So’s, he of the hard-counted sous and the periodical bursts of prosperity, the hired assassin and the descendant of Alexander VI—this was the situation that appealed so powerfully to Cæsar and made him thrill with the wonder of the moment.

To men and women too, before now, he had revealed himself, but they had been clods to whom the word Borgia meant nothing; conjured up no pictures of ducal magnificence or pontifical power.

Smith knew and appreciated the splendour of the revelation. He was genuinely inspired by the other’s confidence and would have pushed enquiries which in

Cæsar's then generous spirit must have been satisfied.

It was the Madonna Beatrice who snapped the tension. She came hurriedly into the saloon without knocking, and Cæsar, at the sight of her face, walked across to meet her. There was a conversation in low tones. Cæsar uttered an exclamation of surprise, and then he looked round at his companion doubtfully.

"Bring her in," he said.

Bring her in?

Smith was alert now. Was he to see that mysterious apparition about whom he intended in good time to tackle Cæsar? Or was it some inamorata of his—his question was answered almost before it was framed.

Madonna Beatrice waddled back into the room, and at her heels followed a tall, straight girl, so beautiful that she took the man's breath away.

She looked from Cæsar to him and back again to Cæsar, her head held high, something of disdain in her attitude, and then she came slowly across to where Cæsar stood and brushed his cheek with her lips.

Smith looked at Cæsar. There was a smile in his eyes which indicated amusement and annoyance. Then he turned to his new-found friend and stretched out his hand.

"Stephanie," he said, "this is Mr. Smith. Smith—I want you to meet—my daughter."

His daughter! Smith's mouth opened in an involuntary grimace of surprise, and then, recovering himself, he held out his hand, which she took. Her steady eyes fixed him for a spell, and then she turned away. "When did you come to Paris?" asked Cæsar.

"To-night," said the girl, and the man Smith could have gasped again at the lie, for she was the girl in black who had stood upon the Quai des Fleurs the night before and had seen him throw the detective into the Seine. That she had been a witness he knew when he looked into her eyes.

VI. — CÆSAR TELLS OF NUMBER SIX

TRAY-BONG SMITH was a light sleeper, but he did not hear Cæsar Valentine come into his room at four o'clock next morning. As he felt a hand grip his shoulder he twisted round and he heard Cæsar's laugh.

“You cannot turn so that you can use the pistol under your pillow, my friend,” he said. “It would be lamentable if I died as a result of that kind of accident.”

Smith sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing is wrong,” replied his host. “I’ve just brought your clothes.” He himself was in his dressing-gown. “I think they will fit you.”

He must have been in the room some time, for afterwards the visitor found new garments lying neatly folded on two chairs.

“The heavy overcoat I bought in Paris yesterday,” said Cæsar; “you will need that.”

“What is happening?” Smith demanded lazily as he slipped out of bed.

“A friend of mine is going to London—a young aviator who travels between France and England for his own pleasure. He has kindly given you a seat in his machine, and I have arranged the passport, which you will find in your coat-pocket.”

“To London—what am I to do?”

“Wait for me,” said Cæsar, “and apply yourself diligently to—”

His keen ear heard a footfall in the passage, and he went out and returned with a tray on which a breakfast was laid.

“The Madonna Beatrice,” he explained, and closed the door behind him. “What are you to do in London? I will tell you, my friend. I intended telling you last night, but the unexpected arrival of—my daughter”—he paused before the description—“made it impossible.”

“I did not know you had a daughter. You don’t look old enough to have a girl of that age.”

“Possibly not,” he said, and did not seem inclined to pursue the subject. “In London—by the way, is there any reason why you should not go to London?”

“None whatever,” replied the other. “I have a perfectly clean bill—in England.”

Cæsar dismissed the subject with a courteous gesture.

“In London you will stay at the Bilton Hotel,” he said. “You will communicate

with me at an address which you will find in a small notebook I have also put in your pocket. But you will avoid meeting me unless there is an absolute necessity. Your task ”—he spoke slowly—“is, as I said before, to find Number Six.”

“Number Six?” Smith stared at him.

“Scotland Yard is a great institution,” said Cæsar. “I have every respect for its personnel, but not a tremendous amount for its methods. For some reason”—he had seated himself on the edge of the bed and was watching his guest taking breakfast—“Scotland Yard is suspicious of me. I have spent a lot of time and a lot of money in England, and Scotland Yard does not know exactly where it comes from. In addition, there have been one or two unfortunate incidents.”

Smith did not ask what those unfortunate incidents were, nor did his employer volunteer any information.

“I am one of those men,” he went on, “who like to know the worst quickly. It worries me when I cannot see my opponent’s hand. And I spend a great deal of money in discovering just what kind of difficulties I am likely to meet with. I have had a man in the Clerks’ Department at Scotland Yard for a considerable time; and nearly a year ago this man communicated with me, informing me that the Commissioner of the Criminal Intelligence Bureau had commissioned an agent to watch me and examine my private life.” Smith clicked his lips.

“H’m!” he said. “And this watching gentleman—is he Number Six?”

Cæsar nodded.

“He or she is Number Six,” he repeated gravely. “Whether it is a man or a woman I have been unable to discover. The person is described as Number Six in the records—there is some reason for the secrecy. Scotland Yard believes that I am a sinister individual, and it is remarkable that the agent they have chosen is not an ordinary member of the police force, but some enemy of mine—or rather, some person who regards himself or herself as my enemy, for—er—private reasons. There are, of course ”—he shrugged his shoulders—“people who hate me. There is a man named Welland. You will find his address in the book. I have not met the gentleman recently, but twenty years ago I met his wife.” He paused. “I think she was happier with me than she was with him—for a while,” he added.

Smith yawned.

“If this is a love-story, spare me,” he said; but the other seemed lost in a

reverie.

“Unfortunately she died, and his child, who came with her, also died. It was unfortunate.” Cæsar leant his chin on his palms and looked at the floor, thinking deeply. “It was unfortunate,” he said, and looked up quickly. “Welland is in some form of Government service. He has told an associate that he will kill me; but that, of course, does not worry me. He may or may not be Number Six. You will be astute enough to discover.”

“Is there anybody else?” asked Smith.

“There are the relatives of a certain Mr. Gale,” said Cæsar thoughtfully. “Mr. Gale was associated with me in business. Things went wrong and Mr. Gale—committed suicide. It was unfortunate.”

Smith nodded again. He had heard of Mr. Gale.

“I remember the case, though I didn’t associate you with it. Gale was a bank manager, and after his death it was discovered that some hundred thousand pounds had disappeared from the funds of the bank.”

“It was unfortunate,” repeated Cæsar. “People knew that I had had some dealings with him, and his wife made rather a painful scene. She accused me ——” He shrugged again. “She died a little time afterwards.”

“Naturally?”

The man from Chi So’s flung the question brutally, and Cæsar smiled and dropped his hand on the questioner’s shoulder.

“You are a man after my own heart,” he said.

He went away soon after to dress, for he had to conduct his man to the private aviation field where his friend was waiting. It was doubtful whether the pilot had any stronger sense of friendship for Cæsar than the payment of handsome fee could ensure, but he was a good pilot, and Tray-Bong Smith landed at Croydon in time for a second breakfast and on the whole was glad to be back in England.

Excessive sentimentality was not to be expected from a member of Mr. Smith’s profession for all his youth and for a certain refinement of mind he had displayed, yet he left France with just the faintest hint of an ache in his heart. Perhaps “ache” is rather a strong word for an unsatisfied desire. He had hoped to see the girl again—Stephanie, of the Secret. He carried with him an impression of her no less vivid because it had been taken in a flash—an impression of grey-blue eyes, of a complexion as clear as milk, of faultless

features, and of lips so red that he had thought for a second they had been “made up.” Mr. Smith was not of the impressionable kind, but this impression had just stayed with him in his mind and in his heart, though they had not exchanged more than half a dozen words.

The daughter of Cæsar! Tray-Bong laughed. An offspring of the Borgias! More beautiful than her greatly advertised ancestor Lucrezia—that poor, simpering, colourless thing, who had achieved a place in history to which neither her talents nor her spurious iniquities entitled her.

He dismissed Stephanie from his mind with' an effort, and concentrated upon the errand which Cæsar had chosen for him. He was completely puzzled by Cæsar’s choice of hotel. The Bilton is not only fashionable, but conspicuous. If he had been sent to one of the small caravanserais in Bloomsbury, where a man falls readily into oblivion, he could have better understood; or to one of the big hotels where everybody is nobody, that would have been understandable. But Bilton’s Hotel was neither inexpensive nor obscure. It is situated near Cork Street and frequented by men and women of the leisured classes—the very place where a man was likely to run across people who had seen him in Paris or in Rome, or had known him before disgrace had fallen upon his name.

When he reached the hotel, he found that not only had his room been reserved for him, but that Cæsar had instructed the manager as to what room he should occupy.

“I shan’t be able to put your things into forty-one until the afternoon, sir,” said the manager (which was the first intimation Mr. Smith had that No. 41 had been reserved at all). “The room is still in the occupation of the gentleman who is leaving by this afternoon’s train.”

He took Tray-Bong aside and lowered his voice. “I hope you don’t mind my asking you a personal question,” he said. “You are not—er—” He seemed at loss for a word.

“Well?” asked Smith, interested.

“You’re not a noisy sleeper? Excuse my asking, sir. I mean, you don’t snore?” said the manager.

“Not that I am aware of.” Mr. Smith was secretly amused.

“I ask you because Mr. Ross is so particular, and he’s been a client of ours now for thirty years, and it happens that he sleeps in the next room to you.”

“Mr. Ross? Who’s Mr. Ross?” asked Smith.

The manager was surprised apparently there existed one benighted heathen in the City of London who did not know Mr. Ross. Mr. Ross was an American millionaire—not only a millionaire, but a millionaire several times over. He was a bachelor and eccentric, a difficult man and a not particularly generous man, Smith gathered. He spent most of his day at the Reform Club, and though he had lived in and about England for thirty years he had no friends. Moreover, he occupied the next room, No. 40.

“A millionaire who has no friends must be rather a curiosity,” said Smith, and agreed not to snore.

Cæsar had supplied him well with money, and his first call that day was upon a tailor in Bond Street. After he had been measured and had given his orders for a fairly extensive wardrobe, he strolled down to the Strand. He had not been in London for twelve months, and the sight and the smell of it were lovely to his senses.

It was at the junction of the Strand with Trafalgar Square that he met the one man in London he did not desire to meet. Smith saw him some distance away, but made no attempt to avoid him.

There was no mistaking Hallett, of the Criminal Investigation Bureau; a peak-faced man, with white, unruly hair and heavy grey moustache; it was not a face one could forget. Tray-Bong was passing him, but Hallett stood still in his path.

“Hello!” he said in that paternal way of his. “Back in London, Mr. Tray-Bong Smith?”

“Back in London, Chief,” said Smith cheerily.

“I’ve been hearing queer stories about you,” said Hallett. “Murders and robberies in galore.” There was a twinkle in his eye, and a twinkle in Hallett’s eye did not necessarily bode well for any man. “Be careful, my friend,” he said. “There may be very serious trouble for you. Don’t say I did not warn you.”

“Fine!” said Smith. “But if there is going to be any bad trouble for me, there are going to be some very serious happenings for other people. And if you don’t mind, I’d rather not be seen talking to you, Chief—it gets a fellow a bad name.”

Hallett chuckled grimly and passed on.

VII. — THE STORY OF WELLAND

SMITH went on his way to the Strand. It had struck him as being rather remarkable that Cæsar had given him the addresses with instructions to pursue enquiries which he could have had made by any private enquiry firm in London. After all, it was only necessary that they should supply him with the movements of the suspected persons, and furnish him with sufficient material to prove or disprove the truth of his theory. But there were quite a number of things Mr. Smith did not understand.

On the riverside of the Strand and running parallel with that famous thoroughfare is John Street, and it was to 104 John Street that he directed his steps. This was the address which he had found in the little book against the name of Welland.

It was an old-fashioned Adam's house, and, scrutinising it from the opposite pavement, Smith came to the conclusion that, whoever might have occupied it twenty years ago, it was now one of those genteel tenements which abound in the West End. The different pattern of curtains and blinds on each floor strengthened this conclusion, which was confirmed when he crossed the road and found a little pearl button labelled "Housekeeper."

The janitor was an old gentleman of sixty or seventy—a cheerful old soul who wore the faded ribbon of the '81 African campaign on his waistcoat.

"Welland?" he said in surprise. "Good Lord, no! Mr. Welland doesn't live here. Why, he's been gone—let me see, it must be nigh on twenty years ago. Well, that's a curious thing, your asking after Mr. Welland!"

Mr. Smith thought it was curious too, but asked:

"Why is it curious?"

The old man hesitated a moment, then said, "Come in," and led the way down to a basement kitchen.

"Did you know Mr. Welland?" asked Tray-Bong, when they reached the janitor's cosy little apartment.

"Know him?" he said contemptuously. "As well as I know my own hand. As nice a man as ever I met, Mr. Welland was. He had the three upper floors." He shook his head. "Ah! it was very sad, very sad indeed."

"I don't know the whole story," said Smith with truth.

It was true, too, that he had never taken Cæsar wholly at his word. If he was a true Borgia, he was a liar, an exploiter of his friends, treacherous to his enemies, and wholly unreliable. Cæsar was using him—well and good. He was out to use Cæsar; and he gave his employer credit for this amount of intelligence, that Cæsar was never in any doubt that his employee's end was a purely selfish one.

Mr. Cummins, the janitor, was in a communicative mood.

"You don't know the whole story, eh?" he said with some enjoyment. "Well, I can't say that I know the whole of it myself. But what I know I can tell you. Mr. Welland lived in this house, in those identical rooms, when he was a bachelor and before he met the young lady he married. He came back to this house after his honeymoon, and his little girl—poor little soul!—was born in this house. He was a very happy sort of gentleman, but I don't think his wife found the life quite up to her expectations. She was one of these complaining ladies who was always worrying about what other women have in the way of dresses and jewellery, and Mr. Welland, who was an artistic sort of man, used to worry a lot.

"About eight months after the baby was born, Mr. Welland brought a gentleman home to dinner. I know, because when he had a party, I used to wait at table, and on this occasion I got into what I call my butler's suit, and did a bit of handing round. A very nice gentleman, to all appearance, was this Mr.—now, what was his name?"

"Valentine?" suggested Smith.

"That's it, sir," said the janitor. "A nice-looking fellow, but what a rascal! What a scoundrel! A regular West-Ender, he was. Plenty of money, carriages and horses, a big house in Belgrave Square, and what not. Well, the long and the short of it is that Mr. Valentine used to call when Mr. Welland was away in the City. And sometimes he would call when Mr. Welland was home, but not often. Then Mr. Welland and his wife had an awful row—I think it was over a ring which this fellow Valentine gave her—and one afternoon when the governor came home—I always called him the governor—she had gone and taken the baby with her. Bolted, sir! Gone off to America by all accounts with Valentine, and that was the end of her! Mr. Welland took on something terrible. He was like a madman, and I remember as though it was yesterday his coming to me and saying, 'Cummins, sooner or later that man will die at my hands.'"

"What happened to Mrs. Welland?" asked Smith. There was no need to ask if he trusted Cæsar, but he did not trust Cæsar.

Cummins shook his head.

“Died, sir. I only heard of it by accident about two years ago. She and the baby died of some fever—yellow fever, I think it was. It’s curious you should come here asking about Mr. Welland,” he said, getting on to his feet and going across to a dresser. “I was turning out this drawer only this morning, and I found this picture; one he gave me on his wedding-day.”

He pulled open a drawer and took out a cabinet photograph, handing it to the visitor. It was the face of an artist, refined and delicate, yet with a strength in its lines that one might not have expected after hearing the janitor’s account of the man’s breakdown. The high forehead, the long, thin nose, the firm jaw, were features impossible to forget.

“I suppose you couldn’t let me have this photograph to make a reproduction?”

The janitor looked dubiously at Mr. Smith and then at the photograph.

“No, sir, I wouldn’t like to part with it. You see, it’s written on,” he said, pointing to an inscription. “I’ll tell you what I’ll do, though, if you like to pay for it. I’ll have a copy made.”

“That will suit me admirably,” said Smith, and passed across a pound note to seal the bargain.

He went out into John Street puzzled. What was Cæsar’s game in sending him to conduct these enquiries? He must have known that Welland was no longer in John Street. It was as certain as anything that he had employed detectives to trace the man. And yet had he? This imperious and imperial Cæsar had a lofty contempt for the small things of life; and was it not possible that Welland had faded from his mind until the next time that Scotland Yard had put some mysterious detective on his track and set his mind wondering as to the shadower’s identity.

Cæsar was not to be judged by ordinary standards, Smith concluded as he walked back to his hotel. He expected to find some sort of communication from him, for Cæsar had said that he was leaving Paris by the midday train and would arrive that evening. But there was no letter or telegram.

He went up to his room, which was now ready for him, and sat down to consider the somewhat complicated situation. Here was he, Tray-Bong Smith (how quickly the Paris underworld had caught on that nickname!), engaged by one who was probably the most dangerous man in the world, to carry out what was practically detective work on the strength of having thrown a man into the Seine!

What sort of villainies he required of him Smith was curious to know. He would dearly have loved to stay on in Paris. The mystery of the manacled woman intrigued him vastly. It was one of the most creepy experiences he had had, he the man without nerves. That she was Cæsar's prisoner, he did not doubt, and that the deep, booming voice that had called her from the shadow of the poplars was the voice of Madonna Beatrice he was certain. What had this woman done? Why did Cæsar, the last of the Borgias, who had, Smith suspected, so quick a way with his enemies, retain her in custody when he could have so readily and so easily rid himself of the necessity of keeping her locked up?

If Cæsar had come to him and said, "Slay this woman—I have not the courage," Tray-Bong would have understood. That he would have killed in cold blood is unlikely. Tray-Bong Smith did not kill women.

Acting on a sudden impulse, he went out again to the British Museum, where, in the reading-room, he revived his acquaintance with the Borgias, for it was certain that Cæsar had not only inherited their vices but was a faithful copyist of their methods.

The book he chose was a small monograph by an eminent American professor, the best he knew, and it took him an hour and a half to read it from cover to cover. Tray-Bong Smith had always held that the coincidences of life are part of life's normality. That they are not confined to plays and stories, any observer will agree; but the fact that he should be there in the British Museum reading-room studying a life of the Borgias on the very day and at the very minute another person should have been waiting impatiently to read that identical book was remarkable.

He took the book back to the clerk and thought the frock-coated attendant breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad you haven't kept it any longer, sir," he said, scribbled out a ticket, and carried the book over to an old man who was sitting bolt upright in a chair, his gnarled hands on the handle of an umbrella, his stern, lined face turned resentfully in Smith's direction.

The old man took the book with a grunt and shuffled off to a reading table.

"You wouldn't think a man worth all those millions would come in and sit here waiting for a book that he could have bought for a few shillings," said the attendant when he returned.

"Worth all those millions?" repeated Smith, looking after the bowed figure.

“That’s old Mr. Ross. You’ve heard of Ross, the millionaire?”

Mr. Smith had heard of Ross, the millionaire, curiously enough.

“Well, that’s the gentleman,” said the attendant. “They say he would rather walk ten miles than spend twopence.”

Smith laughed.

“I can tell you something more about him,” said he cryptically. “He doesn’t like people who snore.”

Cæsar’s lieutenant took another look at the old man before he went out. He was about seventy, Smith guessed, and the main feature of his face was a white beard so closely clipped that he had the appearance of being unshaven. That and his shabby clothing impressed Smith most.

He dined at the hotel and had intended going to a theatre, but when he came out into the hall the porter handed him an envelope addressed in typewritten characters to “T. B. Smith.”

He opened it. The letter inside was also typewritten. It ran:

“Watch Ross. His lawyers are Baker and Sepley, of 129 Great James Street. If he goes to them or sends for them, he must be immediately destroyed.”

In the lower right-hand corner were the words “Quai Fleurs,” which was at once a reminder and an indication of the source from whence the letter came.

So that was Cæsar’s game, and that was why he had sent the man from Chi So’s to London and had arranged Room 41 for him. He was to watch this old man, this student of the Borgias, and in certain eventualities he was to be destroyed, and Smith was to destroy him.

The watcher put the letter away in his pocket and grinned to himself.

The lordly Cæsar stepped too readily into the character of tyrant. Tray-Bong Smith was to be the hired assassin and have the police of the metropolis on his heels, or else to be exposed for something that had happened in France and for which he was not liable in England. Anyway, Cæsar was in London. That was news.

VIII. — A NOTE FROM NOWHERE

TRAY-BONG SMITH sat in the lounge of the hotel reading the evening

papers and watched Mr. Ross come from the dining-room and take the elevator to the second floor. After a while he followed, going into his own room and waiting until he heard the snap of the electric switch which told him that the old man had retired. He wasn't likely to see his lawyer between the hours of nine and twelve, thought Tray-Bong Smith, and sallied forth into the West End to find amusement.

A man watching the hotel saw him return at 11.30, signalled to the shadow who had followed Mr. Smith all that evening and compared notes. Smith may or may not have known that he was being watched. He might have guessed as much after Hallett's warning. He went upstairs to bed and to sleep, and was on the point of undressing when he heard the soft thud of a door closing, and it seemed that the sound came from the next room. He switched out his light, drew the door open gently, and listened, but there was no further sound.

No. 40, the room occupied by Mr. Ross, was, as he had learnt earlier in the evening, not so much a room as a suite. It consisted of two apartments—a bedroom with a bath, and a sitting-room which led from the bedroom, and access to which could be had direct from the passage through a door marked 40A.

Smith stepped out into the corridor, walked softly to No. 40 and listened. There was no sound. He went on to 40A and listened again, and after a while he was rewarded by the murmur of voices.

He strolled to the end of the passage to see if there were any hotel servants, but Bilton's is one of those eminently respectable hostelries patronised in the main by elderly people who retire early, and he walked back down the corridor and tried the door of 40. To his surprise it was unlocked and he stepped in, closing the door behind him. It would be a simple matter to explain how he, a stranger to the hotel, had walked into the wrong room.

A line of light along the floor showed him where the communicating door was, and he made bold to turn on the light for a second, and discovered, as he had expected, that the bed was unoccupied and the room empty. He put out the light noiselessly and tiptoed across the room, putting his ear to the door. Two people were talking; the one voice gruff and harsh, the second so soft that he could hardly hear a word that was spoken, for it was the voice of a woman. And somehow that voice was familiar.

Tray-Bong Smith crouched down and looked through the keyhole, but could see no more than the back of a chair. He listened intently, but could hear nothing intelligible. Once he heard Ross say:

"If they are on earth we will find them," and he thought he heard the old man

say, “It is remarkable—I should have been deceived . . .”

Then most unexpectedly a hand fell on the doorknob and he hurried back through the room and was out in the corridor before it could have been opened. He had no time to close the door, but pulled it to after him and was in his own room in something under two seconds.

He waited patiently behind his own closed door, listening, but there was no sound, and after five minutes had passed he ventured to open it. There he stood in the darkness for nearly half an hour before the two came out. He heard the man say “Good night, my dear. God bless you!” and thought he heard the sound of a kiss. Smith opened the door wider. The lights from the corridor were on full and there was no possibility of making a mistake.

The figure that came past the door was not, as he had expected, a woman—but Ross himself! The old man had gone out and left the woman behind. For a while Smith was too bewildered to make a move, then, seizing his hat from the bed, he raced down the corridor in pursuit of the old man. He must have gone down by the stairs, for the elevator was descending as he reached the end of the corridor and he came to the ground-floor in time to see the figure pass through the swing-doors out into the night. There was a car waiting, evidently for him, for he stepped in without giving the driver instructions and it moved off. Smith called a passing taxi.

“Follow that car,” he said.

He had no difficulty, the streets were empty of traffic, for the theatres had been closed for an hour. The chauffeur, however, was cautious and the way fortunately led through theatreland, and the taxi was on the tail of the car all the way up Regent Street into Portland Place.

At a house in Portland Place the car stopped, the old man descended and let himself into the big mansion with a key. Smith noted the number—409. He had stopped his own cab well behind the car, which, contrary to his expectations, did not move off. Mr. Smith dismissed his car, and standing in the cover of a doorway, he waited.

In half an hour the door of 409 opened and a girl came out, wearing a long black cloak.

Smith slipped from his place of concealment and walked rapidly toward her.

She moved as quickly to the car, but the street standard showed her face clearly.

It was Stephanie—Cæsar's daughter.

"Now what has happened to old man Ross?" said the puzzled Mr. Smith, and went to bed that night with the problem unsolved.

Cæsar sent for him the next morning, adopting in his typewritten note that royal-command tone of his which so suited him.

The men met in Green Park. It was a bright, sunny day and Cæsar was dressed in grey. He was something of a dandy in his attire and again the fastidious Smith approved.

Cæsar motioned his confederate to a garden chair by his side.

"I didn't intend sending for you, Smith," he said, "but one or two things have happened, and I thought it advisable to see you in order to let you know where you can get into touch with me in any emergency."

"I know exactly where I can get into touch with you, with or without an emergency," said Tray-Bong calmly. "409 Portland Place, I think?"

Cæsar looked at him sharply.

"How do you know?" he demanded. "My name is not in any of the reference books."

"I know," said Smith with a fine gesture.

"You shadowed me! I was out late last night," said he accusingly, and the other laughed.

"I give you my word that I have never shadowed you in my life," said he. "Anyway, I don't see how I can shadow Mr. Ross and you at the same time."

"But how did you know?" insisted Cæsar.

"A little bird told me," bantered Smith. "Please let me have my mystery too, Mr. Valentine."

"You shadowed me," he said, nodding, and then dismissed the subject. "What do you think of Ross?"

"A worthy old gentleman," said the other. "I like his appearance."

He made no reference to the fact that he had seen "the worthy old gentleman" letting himself into Cæsar's house with a key. That could wait.

“He is worth from ten to twenty millions,” said Cæsar. “He has no heir, he has no will, and on his death his property reverts to the State.”

Smith looked at him in astonishment.

“How do you know that?”

“I know that,” said Cæsar. “That is my mystery.” He did not speak again for a moment. He had that queer trick of breaking off a conversation and letting his fancy and thoughts roam at will; but presently he returned to the subject of the old man.

“Men and women work and sweat from morning till night,” he said musingly, “year in and year out, for just sufficient food and rest as will enable them to carry on with more work. I do not work because I have brains, and because I do not regard human life from the same angle as the commonplace person; neither do you,” he said. “Do you realise that if Mr. Ross at this moment sat down and wrote on a sheet of paper half a dozen lines, signed it, and had his signature witnessed by a chambermaid or a valet, those few lines would make us enormously wealthy men and give us all the power in the world?”

“You mean if he made a will in our favour and providentially died?” said Smith.

“You’re very direct,” Cæsar laughed softly. “But hasn’t it ever struck you how simple a matter is the transfer of property when one of the conditions of transfer is the death of one of the parties? If you or I were to burgle the Bank of England, there would be no hope for us unless we spent years of unremitting labour in organising and preparing for our coup—and then the chances are that we should fail.”

Smith nodded.

“If you and I wished to forge a little cheque, say on Mr. Ross’s account, we have to overcome the suspicions and safeguards imposed by dozens of very intelligent men, all of whom would have to be hoodwinked separately. And then in the end we might fail.”

“That I have realised,” Mr. Smith agreed with a grimace.

“Is it not a more simple matter,” mused Cæsar, “to induce Mr. Ross to sign a document of half-a-dozen lines?”

“That depends,” said Smith. “I should say that it would be a very difficult matter. It would be easier, if you will forgive the directness, to arrange his untimely demise than to induce his signature. Otherwise, if I may be bold,

there would be one of your famous wreaths on order."

His eyes twinkled. Any tribute to the inevitability of his success pleased him.

"At present my object in life is to prevent him signing those half-dozen lines for anybody," he said. "I particularly desire that Mr. Ross should die without making any provision for the disposal of his fortune."

Smith looked at him in astonishment.

"Do you really mean that?" said he. "I thought you told me that his estate would go to the Crown?"

"If he had no heirs," said Cæsar. "Always remember that, if he had no heirs."

"But has he?" demanded his companion. "He is a bachelor——"

"He is a widower," said Cæsar. "He had one child who was estranged from him and who died. In all probability, if that child was alive, he would make a will leaving his property to a dogs' home or something equally absurd."

Slowly an idea was taking shape and form in Smith's mind. Very, very slowly certain dark places were becoming clear. He was a quick thinker, and what were mysteries to most people were not mysteries to him. In some respects even Cæsar could not match his ready powers of induction. Tray-Bong Smith had been genuinely puzzled and baffled by certain experiences in the past few days, but now he began to "see."

"How old would his daughter be if she were alive?" he asked.

"Forty-seven," said Cæsar readily. "Three years younger than I."

So he was fifty. There were days when he looked it, but on this morning he would have passed easily for thirty-five.

"Forty-seven," he repeated. "She ran away from home when she was something over twenty, and married a fiddler, or something of the sort. The old man made a will leaving his property to an orphan asylum—cut her right out of it. When he heard of her death, he tore up the will, intending, I think, to make another one. You see, I am very well informed upon Mr. Ross's private life."

"Suppose she isn't dead?" drawled Smith, and the big man swung round in his chair.

"What the hell do you mean?" he asked. It was the first time Smith had seen him display any kind of perturbation.

“Suppose she isn’t dead?” he repeated.

Cæsar shrugged his shoulders.

“In that case she would inherit the fortune—if he died.”

“Would you produce her?”

Cæsar was silent.

“Would you produce her and let her go into an English court and tell of years spent in almost solitary confinement in some forgotten room on your French estate? Would you like her to tell the Judge of the High Court how you let her out for exercise in the middle of the night, manacled hand and foot?”

Cæsar’s face went white and drawn and he looked his fifty, but the man with the absurd nickname went on remorselessly, for he was determined that Cæsar Valentine should put his cards down, face uppermost.

“A woman marries a wandering fiddler, you say? I gather that’s an extravagance of yours and means no more than that she married a musician. A fairly prosperous amateur musician, unless I am mistaken, by the name of Welland.”

He winced—the second score for Smith.

“You discover her relationship with Ross, and persuade her to go abroad with you, waiting for the divorce which you think Welland will obtain but which he doesn’t. Then the woman gets restless; perhaps her child dies. She certainly remains in the land of the living.”

Cæsar was calm enough now, and a cynical smile was hovering at the corners of his mouth.

“Wonderful fellow!” he said mockingly. “You have told almost all the truth. The child died, and in the meantime Stephanie is born. It is my intention to produce Stephanie as the heiress of the Ross millions. Now you know it all, or you’ve guessed it all. You’re clever, Smith—a cleverer man than I thought. There’s a fortune in this for you if you’ll work with me; and if you don’t——”

“A quick and a painless death, eh?” smiled Smith. “But watch that my knife is not swifter than your alkaloids.”

He looked down. There was an envelope lying at his feet.

“Did you drop that?” asked Smith, and stooped and picked it up. “It has your

name on it.”

Cæsar shook his head.

“I didn’t drop it,” he said, and read the superscription: “Cæsar Valentine.”

It was gummed and sealed with wax. He tore open the flap with a frown. Smith saw his face harden and he blinked rapidly. Was there fear in his eyes as he handed the letter to his tool? Smith thought there was.

“Where did this come from?” he gasped and looked around, but nobody was in sight.

There were three lines of handwriting in what is called “pen-print”—that is to say, the letters were printed in big capitals. The note began:

“Cæsar! You are but mortal. Remember this.”

It was signed “Number Six.”

Smith read it through with a qualm, but Cæsar, snatching it from his hand, crumbled it into a ball and tossed it away with an oath.

“Welland,” he snarled, “if I find you before you find me, beware of Cæsar!”

“I think we shall find Welland first,” said Smith confidently and laughed.

It was the laugh Cæsar had heard that rainy night on the Quai des Fleurs when Tray-Bong Smith had flung a knife into the Seine.

IX. — MR. SMITH IS BURGLED

GREAT criminals, like great heroes, do not bear too close an inspection. There were chinks in the armour of Cæsar Valentine which Smith, a cool Professor of Humanity, had never suspected. The man’s vanity was colossal, but had the compensation of an immense capability. He was brilliantly clever, and in many respects Mr. Smith admitted he had the most wonderful mind he had ever rubbed against. He had the genius not so much of generalship as of diplomacy, and in this respect resembled his remarkable ancestor, if ancestor he was. The Borgia did not win his battles on the field, but in the treasury. If he carried one walled city by assault, he carried ten by bribery.

Cæsar sent for Smith that afternoon again, and this time the man went to 409 Portland Place, and was shown by a footman into the handsome library, where Cæsar was waiting with every evidence of impatience.

“Welland must be found,” he greeted the other. “I have put the matter into the hands of a private detective agency, and I have told them to go ahead, regardless of expense. I am satisfied that the man is still living, because he was seen by one of my agents in York only two years ago.”

“Then why the devil did you send me to search for him?” demanded Smith unpleasantly.

“On the off-chance of his having communicated with that address,” he said, and probably he was speaking the truth.

“There are two men who may be at the back of this Number Six folly. One is old Gale’s son——”

“Gale’s son is in the Argentine,” interrupted Smith. “He is farming on a ranch.”

“Where did you find that out?” demanded Cæsar.

“It was easy,” said the other. “The officials of the bank you robbed——”

“I robbed?” said Cæsar quickly.

“Somebody robbed,” said Smith with a wave of his hand. “It is hardly important who did it. At any rate, these officials are in touch with young Gale, who apparently has undertaken to restore all the money that the bank lost. So you can rule out Gale.”

“Then it must be Welland,” said Cæsar. It must be Welland! My information from Scotland Yard is beyond doubt. The man who calls himself Number Six ——”

“He may as well be a woman,” said Smith.

“No woman would dare,” said Cæsar. “No woman would dare! No, it is Welland. It is an amateur who got into touch with the Chief of the Intelligence Bureau and persuaded him to let him take on the job. Remember, they have nothing against me at Scotland Yard. They have no proof; they know nothing of any crime that I might have committed. They have only a suspicion, an uneasiness—nothing more.”

Smith agreed with him. There was no sense in disagreeing with him.

“Go back to Ross,” he said abruptly. “I will attend to Welland. He has had no visitors?”

“Ross? None.”

“Nobody has been to see him?”

Smith shook his head. He could lie as well as Cæsar Valentine. After all, he had certain interests of his own to look after, and did not apologise even to himself for the deception. Much more must happen in the tangled skein of Cæsar’s affairs before Smith revealed his hand. Cæsar had the satisfaction of having him under his thumb. Smith also had a thumb, and was greatly desirous of meeting his employer on level terms.

Mr. Smith loved life as dearly as any, and he knew that every ounce of weight he could bring to bear upon this singular man at the psychological moment was so much life insurance. The mystery of Mr. Ross and his inexplicable visit to 409 Portland Place in Cæsar’s absence had yet to be solved.

“What would you have done, supposing you hadn’t met me?” he asked him suddenly. “Your unhappy Ernest would have been a poor substitute in this game!”

“Ernest served his purpose,” said the other coldly. “He performed certain duties which were essential, but he had a valet’s mind. Poor Ernest!” he said softly.

He was not being hypocritical, thought Smith on his way back to the hotel. Indeed Smith was certain that the man was profoundly sorry that the necessity had arisen for removing a troublesome servant. There must have been certain coarse fibres in Cæsar’s composition which responded to this uncouth little man and his crudities.

What villainies Ernest performed Smith was never able to discover, but that was because the full range of Cæsar’s activities has never been wholly revealed. Smith came into the Borgia’s life at the climax of a great plot which had been developing for years, and Cæsar had had to get that money to live in the style he regarded as necessary for his comfort, and the unwilling contributors to his income had been drawn from all stages of society.

Watching Mr. Ross was a monotonous business and Smith pined for a more active life, and did not disguise his feelings from Cæsar when he met him the next morning.

“I’m sorry I can’t give you a throat to cut every day,” said Cæsar sardonically. “You will attend to Mr. Ross.”

“Mr. Ross spends most of his time in the Reform Club reading dull English magazines,” complained Tray-Bong with some slight exasperation. “I have

already got wet through watching those infernal premises."

"Continue," said Cæsar definitely.

That evening he telephoned through in a state of excitement.

"He's found!"

"Who?"

"Welland—I'm going to see him." It almost sounded as though Cæsar's voice was shaking. "He was picked up in Manchester—he is staying at a poor lodging in the suburbs."

"Oh," said Mr. Smith awkwardly. He did not know what else he could say. "You are seeing him?"

But Cæsar had hung up his receiver. He had abrupt habits.

Whatever Mr. Smith thought of this interview is not known. He had troubles of his own next day, as he discovered on returning to his hotel. In twelve months' sojourn in the French capital he had acquired a reputation and a nickname, which is more than some people better placed than he could boast. But he was only human, and had the strongest objection to his trunks and his private writing-case being ransacked by amateur hands. Only an amateur would cut off the lock of the new leather portfolio he had bought the day before and leave its contents to litter his dressing-table. Only an amateur would go through his clothes without replacing them upon the hooks where they rightly belonged.

Smith sent for the manager of Bilton's Hotel and showed him the chaos which the visitor had left, and the manager was duly apologetic. He did not remember any strange man or woman coming to the hotel, nor did the chambermaid. The only stranger who had put in an appearance was "the young lady who called on Mr. Ross"—and she, of course, was too young-ladylike to commit this act of vandalism.

At the mention of the young lady Mr. Smith's mind grew calmer. He had a fear that some misguided but well-meaning officer from Scotland Yard had taken it upon himself to substantiate a passing suspicion. The active and intelligent young officers who pass into the Criminal Investigation Department are prone to be zealous, and Smith would have hated to have been compelled to call upon the steely-eyed Mr. Hallett with a complaint against his promising boys.

Obviously an amateur's work, thought he, as he again inspected the evidence of the hasty search; for there was a little smear of blood on the blotting-pad.

X. — THE LADY WHO MODELLED

SMITH drove up to 409 Portland Place. Mr. Valentine was out, the pompous footman told him, and would not be back until late that evening. Was the young lady in? Yes, she was. Would he ask her to be kind enough to see him, asked Smith, and gave him a card inscribed “Lord Henry Jones”—one of those comic visiting-cards which one uses on the Continent with such effect, the French being wholly ignorant of the fact that nobody could be called “Lord Henry Jones” and live.

He was shown into the drawing-room and she came down, holding a card in her hand, and stopped dead at the door at the sight of the, to her, sinister figure. Smith was, by all records, a hardened man and not unacquainted with beautiful women, but he never saw this girl but his tongue did not cleave to the roof of his mouth, and he was not reduced from the cool, sane man of affairs to a stammering fool. It was not her beauty alone, or her spirituality; it was something worshipful in her, to which his heart responded.

“You!” she said.

“Why, yes,” Smith stammered like a schoolboy. “I came to see you on a matter of importance.” He looked at her hand. One finger was neatly bandaged, and then he laughed, incidentally recovering something of his self-possession.

“My father is out,” she said coldly. “I am afraid I cannot be of any assistance to you.”

“You can be a lot of assistance to me, Miss Valentine,” said the man coolly. “You can give me, for example, a great deal of information.”

“About what?” she asked.

“First about your finger,” said he boldly. “Have you hurt it badly?”

“What do you mean?” she asked quickly.

“When you cut open my writing-case this morning,” said Smith gently, “I fear the knife or scissors slipped. You left a little of your blue blood behind.” Her face had gone pink, and for one delicious moment she looked ridiculous. There is nothing more wonderful than to see somebody of whom you stand in awe looking a little foolish. She was wise enough not to attempt to reply.

“Won’t you ask me to sit down?” asked Smith. She waved her hand to a chair.

“What did you expect to find in my writing-case?” he rallied her. “Evidence of

my excessive criminality?”

“I have that,” she said. “You seem to forget that I was on the Quai des Fleurs that night.”

She did not say what night, but it was not necessary to ask her for an explanation. What Smith marvelled at was her extraordinary coolness. She did not tremble—she who had witnessed what must have been to her a terrible crime. She spoke as coolly of “that night” as though she had been a participant rather than a horrified spectator.

“Yes, I remember,” said Smith. “Curiously enough, I always remember things like that.”

But sarcasm was wasted on her.

“You’ll have some tea now that you’re here, Mr. Smith? I take tea very early.”

Smith nodded. He was prepared to drink tea, or something more noxious, so that it was delivered to him by her hand—into such a condition had this man fallen.

She rang a bell and then came back to her chair, and looked across at him with a little smile in her eyes.

“So you think I’m a burglar, Mr. Smith?” she said. “I—I don’t think you’re anything of the sort,” stammered Smith. “The fact is, I thought—possibly your father had told you to come——” he floundered helplessly.

“We are a queer lot of people, aren’t we?” she said unexpectedly. “My father, you, and I.”

“And Mr. Ross,” added Smith softly, and she looked at him for a moment startled.

“Of course,” she said quickly. “Mr. Ross. Mr. Valentine put you in the next room to him to watch him, didn’t he?”

She was a most diskoncerting person, and again Tray-Bong Smith was embarrassed. He had long before discovered that the best way to get out of an embarrassing situation is to return the embarrassment.

“I don’t know that it is necessary for me to watch Mr. Ross on behalf of your father,” he drawled, “especially when he can sit at home and watch him.”

“What do you mean?” she asked quickly.

“I thought Mr. Ross was a visitor to this house,” said Smith innocently.

“A visitor?”

Her eyes were fixed on his, and then suddenly he saw a light dawn, and her face went pink. For a second or two she controlled the laughter which was bubbling at her lips, and then she fell back in the chair and laughed long and musically.

“How wonderful!” she said. “Mr. Ross here! And did you see him come?”

“I did,” said Smith boldly.

“And did you see him go?

“I didn’t see him go,” admit fed the other.

“Oh, but you should have, done,” she said with mock seriousness. “You should have seen him home and tucked him into bed. Isn’t that what you’re paid for?”

Smith winced under the scarcely veiled scorn in the tone. Or was it good-humoured malice?

“So you saw Mr. Ross come here,” she said after a while. “And did you tell my father? No, of course you didn’t.”

Smith shook his head.

“I told him—nothing,” and she looked at him queerly.

At that moment a footman brought in a silver tea-tray and set the table, and further conversation was impossible. When the man had gone and the girl had filled the cups, she sat with her folded hands on her lap, looking down as though she were resolving some problem.

“Mr. Smith,” she said, “perhaps you’ll think it is dreadful of me, that I speak so lightly over the terrible scene I witnessed on the Quai des Fleurs, but I have a reason.”

“I think I know your reason,” said Smith quietly.

“I wonder if you do?” she said. “Of course, I ought to shrink away from you and shout for the police when you come near, for you’re a horrid criminal, aren’t you?”

Smith grinned uncomfortably. She alone of all the people in the world had a

trick of making him feel a fool.

“I suppose I am,” he said, “although I have——”

“A clean bill in England—I know all about that,” said the girl; and he stared at her, wondering who had used that phrase before, and was startled to remember that it was himself.

“I’m rather a queer girl because I’ve had rather a queer life,” she said. “You see, the earlier days of my life were spent in a little New Jersey town——”

“How eccentric!” murmured Smith, as he stirred his tea.

“Don’t be sarcastic,” said the girl with a smile. “I was very, very happy in America, except that I didn’t seem to have any parents around. Father only came occasionally, and he is rather—how shall I put it?—forbidding.”

All the time her eyes were fixed on his, and Smith nodded.

“I might have stayed on in New Jersey for a very long time,” she went on; “in fact, all my life, because I love the place; only, you see”—again she hesitated—“I made rather a terrific discovery.”

“How terrific?” asked Smith.

“Well, I won’t tell you that,” said the girl. “At least, not at present.”

He was curious enough now.

“Perhaps if you told me,” he said quietly, “it might help me a lot, and help you too.”

She looked at him doubtfully and shook her head.

“I wonder,” she said. “I’ll tell you this much, and I’m not going to ask you to keep my secret, because I’m sure you will—I have rather a secret of yours, you know.”

“I had a horrible fear you were going to betray me——” began Smith, but she stopped him.

“Don’t let us talk about that,” she said. “One of these days I’m going to surprise you.”

“What was it you discovered in New Jersey?” asked Smith.

“After mother—died,” said the girl slowly, “and father went to Europe, he left

a lot of things with his lawyer, Judge Cramb. The judge used to pay all my expenses and the cost of the upkeep of the house, and give me an allowance every month when I was old enough to have an allowance; and generally he acted as father's agent. Well, whilst Mr. Valentine was away in Europe, the old judge died suddenly and his practice passed into the hands of strangers. The first thing the strangers did was to send back a small black box which father had kept in the judge's office for safe keeping. I rather fancy that at the time of his death the judge was not acting for father at all, because my money used to come through the Farmers' Bank, and I suppose that the new lawyer, finding his office cluttered up with old boxes, thought he would make a clean sweep, so father's effects came back to me. I hadn't the slightest idea as to what I should do with it until Mrs. Temple, the lady who was looking after me, suggested that I should send it to him in Europe by registered post. Of course, I couldn't send a big heavy box, so I tried to find a key which would fit the lock, and after a while found one. The box was full of papers, all tied neatly into bundles, except for a few loose documents and photographs. I took them out, addressed a big envelope and sent it to father, and it was whilst I was going over the loose papers that I saw something which decided me to come to Europe. Father had often asked me to come, though I don't think he seriously meant me to leave America. But now I made up my mind."

"How long ago was this?" asked Smith quietly.

"Two years ago," replied Stephanie.

"And you came to Europe?"

She nodded.

"Your father knew?"

"Oh yes," said the girl indifferently, "he agreed; in fact, I think he was pleased."

Smith thought awhile.

"That explains a lot," he said; then asked carelessly, "What do you do with your days?"

The answer was the last he expected.

"I model in wax," said the girl. "Didn't father tell you?"

"Model?"

She nodded.

“I will show you,” she said, and led him out of the drawing- room through the big hall to a little room at the back of the house. The “room” was really a small conservatory which had been furnished with a long deal bench, a few chairs, and a cupboard.

He looked at the beautiful little figures, finished and unfinished, that decorated the bench, and was genuinely astonished.

“You’re an artist, Miss Stephanie—Miss Valentine,” he corrected himself.

“Miss Stephanie would do,” she said with a little smile. “I’m an artist, am I?”

“Of course, I don’t know much about art,” began Smith.

“But you know just what you like?” she said dryly. “Now you’ve disappointed me, Mr. Smith. I thought a man with your artistic temperament would really have said something original.”

They were exquisite little models; a shepherdess in the French style was as perfect a thing as Smith had seen.
“And do you colour them yourself?”

She nodded. She glanced round, and Smith saw a look of anxiety in her face and followed the direction of her eyes. It was at a cupboard against the wall that she was looking, and almost before he discovered the cause of her anxiety she had darted across the room, shut the cupboard door and locked it, and thrusting the key into her pocket, turned a very red face to him.

“Family skeleton?” said Smith.

She looked at him suspiciously.

“The family skeleton,” she replied steadily. “Now come back and finish your tea.”

She was perturbed, and Smith wondered what there was in that mysterious cupboard, which she was so anxious to hide. And what had amused her so when he had told her that he had been shadowing Mr. Ross? She was a strange girl. He did not understand her, and what he did not understand worried him.

“The family skeleton,” she said unexpectedly after a long silence. “There are a lot of skeletons in this family, Mr. Smith.”

“There are in most families,” said Smith lamely.

“But we”—she lingered on the word—“we—Borgias—have more than our

share, Mr. Smith."

"Borgias?" said Smith softly. "What do you mean by Borgias?"

"Didn't you know? Of course you knew!" she said derisively. She had recovered something of her spirits and her old flippancy. "Have you never heard of the illustrious house of the Borgias? Can you understand why father did not call me Lucrezia?"

"I think I can," said Smith. "Oh yes, I think I can," and he nodded wisely.

"What is your explanation?" she asked.

"My explanation is the mysterious box that you discovered in your little Jersey town," said Smith. "The box and the contents thereof."

She got up from her seat and held out her hand.

"I hope you've enjoyed your tea," she said. "I think you ought to get back." And Smith was in the street before he realised that he had been summarily dismissed.

XI. — JOHN WELLAND

ON the morning of this interview a warder opened the cell door in Strangeways Gaol, and woke John Welland from a troublous sleep. He was not known to the officials of Strangeways Gaol as John Welland, but the name he had assumed is unimportant.

"Six o'clock," said the warder briefly, and went out.

John Welland rose and dressed himself. Gaol delivery at Strangeways is at nine o'clock in the morning, but the big prison clock was booming the midday hour before the diskharged men were released to their waiting friends. It was half past twelve when John Welland came through the little black wicket door and walked down the street in the direction of the cars.

A prisoner who had been released that morning, and who had been detained outside the gaol by his numerous friends, jerked his head in the direction of the retreating figure and said something which diverted the attention of his friends from their hero and to the man. Welland boarded a street-car and drove to the far end of the city, where he changed into a car which brought him back again but by another route. He alighted and walked for a mile and a half, taking such short cuts as would suggest that he feared being watched and followed. Presently he came to a quiet street, and turned in at a little house at

one end. There was nobody to greet him, but a tiny fire burnt in the kitchen, and somebody had laid a plate and a cup and saucer. He put the kettle on and climbed a steep little flight of stairs which led to a neat bedroom, changing his clothes for others which he took from a hanging- cupboard.

The face that looked into the mirror was grey and lined, the face of a prematurely old man. For fully five minutes he stood looking at himself, as though communing with the reflection; then with a sigh he descended the stairs, made and poured his tea, and sat down before the fire, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his palm.

He heard the door unlocked, and looked round as a motherly-looking woman came in with a loaded market-basket.

“Good morning, mister,” she said in a broad Lancashire dialect. “I knew you’d be back this morning, but I didn’t think you’d be here so early. Have you made your tea?”

“That’s all right,” said Welland. He was Welland at home, at any rate.

She made no reference to his absence; probably she was used to it. As she disposed of the contents of the basket she chattered incessantly—so incessantly that he rose presently and went into the little parlour and closed the door behind him. The woman went about her work until from the parlour came the faint strains of a violin, and then she sat to listen. It was a sad refrain he was playing—something Andalusian, with a sob at its end—and the good woman shook her head.

Presently Welland came out again.

“Ay,” said his housekeeper, “I wish you’d play something cheerful, Mr. Welland. Those tunes get on my nerves.”

“They soothe mine,” said Welland with a faint smile.

“You’re a champion player,” agreed the busy lady. “And I like a tune on the fiddle. Did you ever play in public, Mr. Welland?”

Welland nodded as he took down a pipe from the mantelshelf, stuffed it from an old pouch and lit it.

“I thought you did,” said Mrs. Beck triumphantly. “I was telling my husband this morning——”

“I hope you didn’t tell your husband much about me, Mrs. Beck?” said the man quietly.

“Oh, not too much. I’m proper careful. I told a young man who came here yesterday——”

Welland took out his pipe and looked round, his grey eyebrows lowered in a frown.

“What young man came here yesterday?”

“He came to enquire if you were at home.”

“If I was at home,” said Welland. “Did he mention my name?”

“He did an’ all,” said the woman. “That’s what struck me as funny. He’s the first person that’s ever been to this house and asked for you by name.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him you might be home to-morrow and you might be home next week, but I don’t know for certain, Mr. Welland; you’re not very regular. I told him you were away for months at a time——”

Welland pressed his lips together. He knew it was useless to reproach the woman. After all, it might be some tax-collector or somebody canvassing for charity, for these poor streets yield a rich harvest to the charity-monger; or perhaps it was the vicar renewing his attempts to become acquainted—an effort on the vicar’s part which had been so uncompromisingly repulsed that he never called again in person.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Beck,” said Welland. “Only I don’t like my business spoken of, if you don’t mind.”

“I never speak of your business, Mr. Welland,” said the woman, aggrieved. “Anyway, I don’t know it,” she added huffily. “It’s nowt to me what you do with your time. For owt I know you might be a burglar or a policeman, you’re away from home so often.”

Welland made no reply. That afternoon, when the woman had finished her labours, had laid the tea and gone back to her own home, his mind went back to this young man visitor, and he put the chain on the door, determined not to answer the knock of any caller.

None came until nightfall. He was sitting in his parlour with drawn blinds, reading by the light of an oil-lamp, when he heard a tap-tap on his door. He put down the book and listened. Presently it came again—tap-tap. In this tiny house the front door was within half a dozen feet of where he sat, and he

walked out into the narrow passage. Again came the knock.

It sounded as though somebody was tapping on the door with the head of a stick.

“Who is that?” asked Welland.

“Let me in,” said a muffled voice. “I want to see you, Welland.”

“Who are you?”

“Let me in,” was the reply, and John Welland recognised the voice and his face went as white as death.

For a moment his head swam, and he had to hold on to the wall for support. Then after a while he steadied his nerves, but his hands were trembling when he flung back the catch of the chain and threw the door open wide. The night was dark, for the moon had not risen, and he could only see the tall figure standing on the flagged path outside as an indistinct mass.

“Come in,” he said.

He had secured control of his voice.

“Do you know me?” asked the visitor.

“I know you,” said John Welland, and every word was an effort. “You are Cæsar Valentine.”

He led the way into the parlour and Cæsar followed, and so they stood for a breathing-space, one on each side of a little circular table on which the oil-lamp burnt, the tall man towering above his enemy, Welland watching him with eyes that burnt.

“What do you want?”

It was Welland who spoke first.

“I want to see you on an important matter,” said Cæsar coolly.

“Where is my wife?” asked Welland, breathing heavily.

Cæsar shrugged his broad shoulders.

“Your wife is dead,” he said; “you know that.”

“Where is my child?” asked Welland.

Again Cæsar shrugged.

“Why do you raise a subject which is as painful to me as it is to you?” he asked in a tone of complaint, as though he were the injured person. Then, without invitation, he sat down. “Welland,” he said, “you must be reasonable. The past is dead. Why nurse your hatred?”

“The hatred harbours me,” said the other grimly. “It is the link which binds me to life, Valentine, and will keep me living until with these hands”—he stretched them forth and they were trembling—“until with these hands I kill you!”

“Melodrama!” he scoffed. “You will kill me? Well, here I am. Kill, my friend. Have you no gun or knife? Are you afraid? You who threatened to kill, and who have held this threat over my head all this time, now is your opportunity.”

He slipped from his pocket something which glittered, and laid it on the table before the man.

“Take this,” he said. It was a silver-plated revolver. “Shoot. I guarantee that the bullet is heavy enough to kill.”

Welland looked from the pistol to the man and shook his head.

“Not that way,” he said. “You shall die in good time, and you shall suffer even more than I have suffered.”

A silence fell again, and Welland went on:

“I am glad I have seen you,” he said, speaking half to himself. “You have not changed. You are as you were—look at me.” He flung out his arms. “You should be happy, Valentine, for all your life you have taken that which you wanted, and I have lost—oh my God! what have I lost?” He covered his face with his hands, and Cæsar watched him curiously. Then the big man picked up the revolver and put it back in his pocket.

“I shall die in good time, eh!” he sneered. “Well, here’s to that good time! You had your chance. I asked you to divorce her.”

“Divorce!” groaned the other.

“She could have married again and been happy. Now, Welland, are you going to be sensible?”

“Have you said all you wanted to say?” asked Welland steadily. “Because if you have, you can go. I say I am glad I have seen you. It has revived whatever

hopes and ambitions were fading from my heart. I have gone through hell for you, Cæsar Valentine. I have suffered beyond your understanding in order that one day—one day—>" He nodded, and despite his calm and self-possession Cæsar felt a cold chill creeping down his spine.

He was angry at the thought that any man should bring that thrill of fear to his heart.

"You've had your chance, Welland," he said. "And if you've missed it, that is your fault. Now I have come to put the matter plainly to you. I believe you're in some Government service. I have reason to believe that you have been employed to spy on me, and I tell you here and now that the man is not born who will net Cæsar Valentine."

He brought his fist down on the table and the lamp jumped.

"Like a fool I left you alone, and never once did it occur to me that I had the whole game in my hands if I acted instead of waiting for you to make your wife a free woman."

He had stepped round the table until he was side by side with the man he had wronged. Then suddenly, without warning, his two hands shot out and gripped Welland by the throat. Welland was strong, but Cæsar was superhuman in his strength. He swung the man backwards over a chair and crashed him to the floor, his hands never releasing their grip. Welland struggled desperately, but his struggles were in vain. Cæsar's knees were upon his arms, those vice-like hands of his were pressing steadily at his throat.

"To-morrow," whispered Cæsar, "they will find you hanging——"

There was a knock at the door and he looked round. Again the knock came, and the voice of a woman.

"Are you up, Mr. Welland? I can see your light. It's only Mrs. Beck."

Cæsar released his grip and crept out of the room as Welland struggled to a chair, voiceless, half-senseless, and incapable of further movement. The big man stepped back into the room and blew out the lamp; then he came back and opened the door.

"All in the dark?" said the woman's voice. "Ay, but I could have sworn I saw a light!"

He let her pass, then leapt through the door, slamming it behind him.

XII. — THE MYSTERIOUS MR. ROSS

“YOU look as if you’ve had a bad night, my friend,” said Mr. Tray-Bong Smith.

“A bad night?” said Cæsar absently. “Er—oh, yes, I didn’t get back to town until late.”

“Did you see your Mr. Welland?”

Cæsar did not reply.

“I gather you did,” said Smith, “and that the interview was one you don’t care to think about.”

Cæsar nodded.

“I am wondering just what Welland will do,” he said after a while. “With any kind of luck I should have known, but I was interrupted.”

Smith looked at him sharply.

“That sounds like an interesting story spoilt by over-modesty,” said he. “Will you be kind enough to tell me just what happened when you met this interesting Mr. Welland?”

“I ought to have sent you,” said Cæsar moodily. “There’s something weak about us Borgias, a cursed desire for the theatrical. I can imagine that you would have made no mistake,” and then he told his companion the story. Smith was grave.

“At any moment you, the artist in slaughter, are liable to be arrested for a very vulgar, common assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm, if I may employ the stilted phraseology of an indictment.”

Cæsar shook his head.

“He will not take action. I tell you the man is fanatical. He is satisfied in his mind that some day he will kill me, and nothing less than killing me will please him.”

“Better you than me,” said Smith. “You would be well advised to go careful, Mr. Cæsar Valentine. You can’t play those monkey-tricks in England and get away with ’em. If Welland is Number Six, then you’re going to have the devil’s own trouble before you’re rid of his attentions.”

“Welland is Number Six,” said Cæsar. “My agent made enquiries. He spends his time running about up and down the country. He’s away for long periods.

Moreover—and this is important—he has been visiting the gaols."

"As a boarder?" asked Smith flippantly, but Cæsar was in no mood for jests.

"I told you that I was pretty well informed as to what happened at Scotland Yard. As a matter of fact, when Hallett, the chief of the Criminal Intelligence Bureau, gave his instructions to the mysterious Number Six, there was a man of mine planted in the library, which was the next room. He had bored a hole through the wall, which was covered by the bookshelf in the chief's office and one of the bookshelves in the library. By taking out one book and pushing away another, he could hear practically all that went on."

Smith nodded.

"So that is how it was done, eh?" he said. "You must have had a pretty good man. Well, what about the prisons?"

"That was Hallett's instructions," said Cæsar. "He told this man, or this woman, that he or she had the entree to all the prisons. He was under the impression that I had friends or confederates who might be undergoing terms of imprisonment."

"Rather a stupid idea," said Smith. "You're not likely to have gaol-birds as your accomplices."

"I have you," answered Cæsar, a little tactlessly, Smith thought. But the man from Chi So's laughed.

"I have never been in prison—yet," he said. "So you think that Welland is Number Six?" he asked. "Because you have traced him to a few of His Majesty's gaols?"

"Isn't he the kind of man who'd take this job on? Didn't Hallett say that his agent was an amateur? All the evidence points to Welland."

He paced up and down his library, his hands behind him, a considerably ruffled man.

Smith had come to Portland Place before breakfast that morning rather in the hope of seeing the girl than of interviewing Cæsar.

"Where is Welland now?" asked Smith.

"In Lancashire, I suppose——" he began, and then stopped dead and looked down at his blotting pad. "I didn't see that before."

"What?" asked Smith.

Cæsar took the envelope from his writing-table. It was sealed and addressed as was the letter he had found at his feet in Green Park. He tore it open, and read the typewritten message aloud.

“Clæsar, you are but mortal. Remember! Number Six!”

He stared at the paper stupidly, then sank down heavily into his chair.

“I think,” said Smith to himself, “our Cæsar is afraid.”

Cæsar’s prediction was fulfilled. Welland took no action, though for days Mr. Smith was in such a state of apprehension that he twice mislaid the millionaire to watch whose comings and goings was his duty. In that period two things occurred which worried him. The first was the absence from town of Stephanie. Cæsar mentioned casually that she had gone up to Scotland for a couple of days, and seemed on the whole relieved by her absence. And then Mr. Ross confined himself to his room and refused to come out and be watched. That did not worry Smith greatly, except that he thought it was extraordinary.

On the evening of the second day the mystery of Mr. Ross deepened. Smith had been unaccountably sleepy through his dinner, and went upstairs to his room to lie down. He was lying on his bed, half asleep, when he heard the handle of his door turned, and presently somebody came in and after a moment’s hesitation switched on the light. In the second of time between the switching on of the light and its extinguishment he caught a glimpse of old Ross in a dressing-gown, just a momentary glimpse, and then the light was snapped out. There was a patter of feet, and the old man’s door closed with a slam, and Smith heard the key turned in the lock.

That in itself was remarkable. That the man he had been set to watch should be watching him and, taking advantage of his absence, as he had evidently thought, should have entered the room, was astounding. Smith was quite awake now, and walked down the corridor, inspecting the door, wondering in his mind what excuse he could find for knocking and interviewing his neighbour. He thought better of it, and went downstairs into the hall; and there he found waiting for him the shock of his life, for, standing near the reception-desk was Mr. Ross, wearing a heavy ulster and a cloth cap, which gave his queer old face an odd appearance.

Smith stared as the old man shuffled across to the elevator and was whisked up to his floor.

“Where did Mr. Ross come from?” he asked.

“I don’t know, sir,” said the clerk, shaking his head. “I thought he was in his room. He hasn’t been out of his room all day and I certainly didn’t see him go through the vestibule.”

“H’m!” said Smith.

He was waiting in the hall, undecided as to what he should do, when piquancy was added to the situation by the arrival of a small page-boy, who requested him to go to Mr. Ross’s room.

Tray-Bong Smith followed the diminutive messenger, and was ushered into the bedroom, where Mr. Ross was waiting in the identical dressing-gown he had worn when he had stepped into Smith’s room.

“I owe you an apology, Mr. Smith,” growled the old man. “Won’t you sit down?”

Smith obeyed.

“I am afraid I have been wandering rather restlessly about the hotel of late, and I made a mistake and stepped into your room about half an hour ago.”

“Yes,” said Smith; “and then you made a mistake and stepped into the hall, dressing yourself on route.”

The old man’s grim face relaxed in a smile. “You’re very observant, Mr. Smith,” he said. “What a wonderful detective you would have made!”

Was he being sarcastic? Smith rather thought he was. He wondered at first why the old man had sent for him, but the soft sound of footsteps on the carpet outside the door reached his ears and he wondered no longer. Of course, the old man had brought him to the bedroom whilst his double was escaping from the sitting-room.

XIII. — A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

IT is related of great criminals, and no biographer would miss recording this aspect of their lives, that there come to them moments of remorse and memory, when the shades of their victims crowd in upon them and bring them to the borders of madness.

The full extent of Cæsar Valentine’s wrongdoing has never been, and probably never will be, known; but it is certain that, were he given to sentimental reminiscences, and did he allow his mind to dwell upon the past, there would be memories enough and to spare to trouble his nights.

But the truth about him is that he had no regrets, and to those who knew him best showed no sign of remorse. Tray-Bong Smith, calling at Portland Place, discovered that Cæsar too had his hobby. When Smith was shown into the library he found Cæsar sitting at his table polishing something vigorously. There were two little marble moulds before him, and in one of these was a circular brown object, to which from time to time Cæsar applied a coat of amber-coloured varnish.

“What on earth is that?” asked Smith.

“What does it look like?” said Cæsar without looking up.

“It looks for all the world like a button.”

“And that’s just what it is,” said Cæsar Valentine cheerfully. “You never suspected me of being a button maker?”

Smith looked closer, and found that the other had spoken the truth. It was a button, a very commonplace, bone-looking button, and when Cæsar had prised it out of the mould and turned it over and over on his hand admiringly, he placed it on a sheet of paper and put the paper on the mantelshelf.

“A new process,” said Cæsar carelessly. “There might be a lot of money in this.”

“You’re a weird devil,” said Smith. “I hardly know what to make of you.”

Cæsar smiled as he collected the moulds and the other implements he had been employing, and put them in a drawer of his desk.

“I know somebody who doesn’t know what to make of you,” he said.

“Who’s that?” asked Smith quickly.

“A hard-faced gentleman named Steele. I believe he is a detective-sergeant at Scotland Yard. He has been watching you—I suppose you know that?”

“I was not aware of it,” said Smith, and Cæsar laughed at his diskomfiture.

“If you walk into the drawing-room and look through the window, you will see him standing on the opposite side of the road,” he said.

Smith went out of the room and returned presently.

“You’re right,” said he. “I suppose that’s Steele. I don’t know the gentleman.”

“Make yourself comfortable, Smith,” said Cæsar, dismissing the detective with a characteristic gesture. “I’m going to put a proposal up to you.”

“That’s interesting. Is there money in it?”

Cæsar nodded.

“A great deal of money in it,” he said, “for you and for me. I want you to marry Stephanie.”

Smith half-rose from his chair in astonishment.

“Marry Stephanie?” he said incredulously. “Your daughter?”

Cæsar nodded.

“I want you to marry Stephanie,” he said. “That is why I attached you to my entourage. You don’t suppose I wanted to hire an assassin to settle my feuds, do you?”

Smith was silent.

“I watched you for a long time in Paris,” said Cæsar. “You were the kind of man that I'd been looking for for a year. You’re educated, you were once a gentleman, you have a manner, and to my surprise I found Stephanie speaking quite approvingly of you.”

“As a possible husband?” asked Smith dryly.

The other shook his head.

“I didn’t diskuss you in that aspect,” he said.

Smith’s heart was beating rapidly. He had to exercise all his powers to keep his face expressionless. Stephanie! It was incredible and in some respects terrible.

“I suppose you’re not married already?” asked 'Cæsar, and Smith shook his head.

“That, of course, would have complicated matters,” nodded Cæsar. “As things stand now, the matter is easy.”

He pulled open a drawer and took out a paper, handing it to the other.

“This is an agreement, you will observe, as between you and me, that in the event of your wife inheriting a fortune, you will deliver to me one-half of your

share.”

It required all Smith’s self-control to keep his voice steady.

“Suppose my—wife does not agree?” he asked.

“That will be settled before your marriage,” said Cæsar. “She will sign a document undertaking to place three-quarters of her inheritance in your hands.”

Smith laughed, a helpless, irritating laugh.

“You’re taking a lot for granted,” he said.

“Stephanie will agree,” replied Cæsar, and pushed a bell on his table. A servant came in.

“Ask Miss Valentine to come to the library,” he said.

“What are you going to do?” demanded the agitated Smith when the man had left. “You’re not going to ask her now?”

“Wait,” said Cæsar.

“But——”

“Wait!” said Cæsar sharply.

The girl came in and nodded to Tray-Bong Smith, and looked enquiringly at her father.

“Stephanie, I have just designed your future,” said Valentine.

She did not reply, but her eyes never left his face.

“I have decided,” said Cæsar, leaning back in his chair and putting his finger-tips together, “that you shall marry my friend Mr. Smith.”

The girl’s mouth opened in an “oh!” of astonishment as she looked from Cæsar to the awkward young man who stood crumbling his soft hat in his hand.

Smith expected an outburst and a refusal; he might have expected tears; he certainly did not anticipate the course of the conversation which followed. The girl had gone white. She was surprised but not horrified.

“Yes, father,” she said meekly.

“I wish the wedding to take place next week,” Cæsar went on. “I can give you a generous allowance, and at my death you will inherit a considerable amount of property.”

“Yes, father,” she said again.

“I shall require of you that you will sign an agreement with your future—husband——”

Smith stood on one foot in his embarrassment.

“—that three-quarters of the money which you may inherit from me or from anybody else will be assigned to him.”

The girl looked at Smith, a long, scrutinising glance, which he could not meet.

“Is Mr. Smith willing?” she asked quietly.

“Quite willing,” replied her father. “You understand, Stephanie?”

She nodded.

“Is that all?” she asked.

“That is all,” said Cæsar, and with a gracious smile dismissed her.

Smith sat there spellbound, incapable of speech, and Cæsar looked at him curiously with a cynical little smile on his handsome face.

“Well, Smith,” he said, “you seem to be somewhat overcome.”

Smith licked his dry lips.

“Do you know what you have done?” he asked.

“I think so,” said Cæsar coolly. “I have given you a very charming wife.”

“You have engaged your daughter to a man—like me.”

There was something in his tone which led Cæsar to scrutinise him more keenly.

“What is the matter?” he asked. “Are you suffering from a conscience?”

“My conscience has never troubled me very much,” replied Smith, shaking his head, “and to ease your mind I can tell you that I do not intend turning over a new leaf. No, what puzzles me is your condition of mind.”

“I assure you it is normal,” replied Cæsar.

There was a faint click and he looked round. Near the fireplace was a small polished wooden box with two apertures. Behind one of these a little red disk had fallen.

“What is that?” asked Smith.

“That is my detector,” smiled Cæsar. “There are three telephone extensions in this house, and I had that fixed so that I might know if any of my conversations were being overheard. That shows that one of the telephones is in use and that the receiver is off.”
He pulled his own instrument towards him and gently released the hook, covering the transmitter with his hand.

“It is sometimes useful to know what one’s servants are talking about,” he said, and put the receiver to his ear.

Smith, watching him, saw his face harden. He did not utter a sound, but sat motionless until the little red disk disappeared. Then he restored his receiver to the hook and stood up. What he had heard must have been more than ordinarily unnerving. For the second time Smith saw his employer really troubled.

“Come with me,” he said suddenly, and walked from the room, Smith at his heels. He passed up the stairs to the second floor, and pausing before a door, he beckoned Smith with a gesture and walked in. It was evidently Stephanie’s own room. Smith recognised this by the furnishing and decoration long before he saw the girl, who had risen at Cæsar’s entrance as though she had some premonition of its import.

Cæsar’s face was set and ugly.

“Do you want me, father?” said the girl.

“To whom were you telephoning?” he asked harshly.

“Telephoning?” The other man surprised a look of alarm. “To a friend—to a girl friend.”

“That’s a lie,” said Cæsar harshly. “You were telephoning to Ross. When did you meet Ross?”

The girl was silent.

“You were telling him of my plan to make you marry Smith, and you were

arranging to meet him this afternoon."

The girl said nothing.

"When did you meet Ross? Under what circumstances? Answer me." He strode across the room and caught her by her shoulders, and Smith followed, him. "Answer me!" shouted Cæsar, and shook her.

Then Smith caught his arm and pulled him gently backward.

"Damn you! Don't interfere!" snapped Cæsar. "I am going to get the truth out of this girl. What have you told Ross? By heaven! I'll kill you if you don't answer me!"

The girl's pleading eyes looked past her father to Tray-Bong Smith, and that unworthy man tightened his grip on Cæsar's arm.

"You're not going to do any good by bullying her," he said.

"Let me go!" cried Cæsar savagely, but the grip on his arm was surprisingly firm, and he released the girl. But he was not done with her.

"Come this way," he said. "Upstairs!"

She obeyed, and the two men followed. On the top floor was a room looking out from the back of the house, and into this the big man thrust the girl.

"You'll stay there until you learn to speak," he said, and he slammed the door upon her, and, turning the key in the lock, put it into his pocket.

"Smith, you'll wait here until I come back. I'm going to settle with this young lady."

"I'm no warder," said Smith sulkily, and the other stormed at him.

"You fool! You madman! Don't you realise that you're placing your life in this girl's hands? If she is in communication with Ross, if she has told him things such as she might have told him—if she knows My God! I wonder if she knows!"

He stood biting his fingers and scowling at the closed door.

"Wait here on the landing," he said, "I will be back in half an hour."

He was gone less than that time, and came back white with rage, coming up the stairs of the house two at a time. Smith was waiting on the landing, a lank cigarette drooping from his mouth, his hands thrust into his pockets.

“I told you so. This girl has betrayed me to Ross. She knows—damn her! She knows!” said Cæsar breathlessly.

“Knows what?” asked Smith.

“She knows that she is Welland’s daughter. You fool, didn’t you guess that all along?”

Smith said nothing.

“Welland’s daughter! The heiress to Ross’s millions. It isn’t essential that this girl should live—not essential to me, you understand, Smith? If the little fool had kept her mouth shut! How she discovered the fact that she was Welland’s daughter is a mystery to me—we could have been rich men, and we may be rich men still. You’re in the swim as deeply as I am. It’s our lives that are at stake.”

The two men exchanged glances.

“Well?” said Smith with a return to his drawl. “What is the commission? Do I cut her throat? Because if you tell me to do that, I reply ‘Nothing doing.’”

Cæsar swallowed his rage.

“You need do nothing,” he said in a quieter tone, “but you’ve got to help me—after.” He took a key from his pocket and pushed it in the lock, then took a little silver box from his waistcoat pocket. “Wait here,” he said.

“What are you going to do?” asked Smith, and a slow smile dawned on Cæsar’s face. He opened the door and stepped in, and there was a momentary silence. Then a curse came from the room.

“She’s gone!”

“Gone?” said Smith in a tone of amazement. “Gone?”

He walked into the room, but it was empty. The windows were closed; there was no other door, but the girl had vanished.

“Look, look, look!”

Smith could have sworn he heard Cæsar’s teeth chatter as he pointed with shaking fingers to one of the walls. There was an envelope suspended by its gummed edge. In pencil were the five words:

“Cæsar, you are but mortal,” and in the corner, the cipher “Six.”

The next day Cæsar had disappeared from London, leaving a hurried note for his confederate. It contained peremptory instructions for Smith that he should take up his quarters in Portland Place pending Cæsar's return; and this was an invitation which Mr. Smith accepted without hesitation; for his consuming vice was curiosity. So to Portland Place he came, occupying Cæsar's own room.

It somewhat interfered with his comfort that before leaving Cæsar had summarily dismissed the modest staff of servants that ran the house. Mr. Smith sympathised with an indignant butler, and left a protesting footman with the impression that in Smith he had a friend for life.

"It was only the young lady that kept me in this job," said the butler. "Mr. Valentine is not the kind of gentleman that I like to be in service with. He's here to-day and gone to-morrow, so to speak, and for months there's nobody in this house except all sorts of queer people—begging your pardon——"

"Go ahead," said Smith. "I admit I'm queer."

"The young lady was a perfect hangel," said the butler solemnly. "A real lady if ever there was one. And a wonderful maker of images."

"Oh yes," nodded Smith.

"She worked in wax. She made a model of me, sir, that was so lifelike that my wife said she wouldn't know me and the statue apart," said the butler impressively. "She had only to look at a person once or twice and she could make a sort of statue of him—what do you call it, head and shoulders——"

"Bust?" suggested Smith.

"That's the word. I never knew whether it was bust or burst—bust seems a bit vulgar to me."

Smith got rid of the loquacious old gentleman, for he was impatient to explore the conservatory workroom and particularly to examine the contents of the mystery cupboard. He had formed his own ideas as to what he would discover; and when, with his skeleton key, he turned the lock and flung back the door, he sat down and admired the artistry of this girl.

Facing him was a most lifelike Mr. Ross. It was not Mr. Ross really, but a hard wax mask that hung on a peg; and next to Mr. Ross was Cæsar himself—unmistakably Cæsar, with the fine nose, the full lips and the womanly chin. Next to these exhibits—and Smith went red and hot—was a life-size mask of

Smith himself. He took it down, fixed it to his face, and looked at himself in a small round mirror that hung on the wall. The eye-spaces had been so cut and thinned that it was almost impossible to detect where the real man and the counterfeit began and ended.

The mask did not fit him well. It was made for a smaller face—the face of Miss Stephanie Welland. He passed his delicate fingers over the interior with a loving touch, and laid the thing upon the bench. Then he sat down to consider the situation. It was Stephanie who had impersonated old Mr. Ross at the hotel, Stephanie who had come in to search his room, believing he was away, and Stephanie who had made her escape by the kitchen entrance of the hotel. He had guessed all that, but he had not believed it possible that her disguise could be so perfect.

So old Mr. Ross knew that she was his granddaughter, and had gone away—where? He had been absent two days whilst Stephanie was impersonating him ii his rooms (Smith remembered that Cæsar had told him that she had gone to Scotland). There would be little difficulty in imposing upon the servants of the hotel. Mr. Ross was a tetchy man and the servant never went to his rooms unless they were sent for. That was one part of the mystery cleared up, at any rate.

The box which Stephanie had received from the American lawyers, and which she had opened, had obviously contained particulars of her own birth. When Cæsar said that Mrs. Welland's girl had died he had lied as surely as when he had spoken of the unfortunate wife of John Welland as being dead; for that she was the woman of the manacles, the tragic figure that crossed the midnight lawn at Maison Laffitte, Smith was certain.

He sat for an hour regarding these examples of Stephanie Welland's artistic training, then he gathered the masks together, wrapped them in paper and carried them to his rooms. Somehow he knew instinctively that the days of Cæsar Valentine were numbered, and incidentally the days of Tray-Bong Smith. He shrugged his shoulders at the thought.

XIV. — THE LAST COUP

THERE is a little hotel overlooking the beauties of Babbacombe Bay in Devonshire. Its lawn stretches to the edge of the cliff; its gardens are secluded from public view by high hedges of rambler roses. Under a big garden umbrella sat an old man and a girl. A table was spread for breakfast, and Mr. Ross was reading the morning newspaper whilst Stephanie was looking out over the sea.

“My dear,” he said, putting down the paper and looking over his glasses with a puzzled frown, “this is the third day, and we have heard no news from M. Lecomte.”

The girl patted his hand.

“I don’t think we’re likely to get news for a little while,” she said. “I’m sure M. Lecomte is doing his best. He searched Cæsar’s chateau from end to end, and he is perfectly confident that my mother is alive.”

“But she was not there,” persisted the old man, shaking his head. “That is bad. This man Cæsar is a devil, I tell you——”

“She had been there a few days before,” said the girl. “This woman—what is her name, Madonna Beatrice?—admitted it when they arrested her.”

“Has Cæsar heard of her arrest?” asked the other quickly.

The girl made a little grimace.

“We can’t really worry as to whether Cæsar has heard or not. I am confident that he brought mother to England.”

The old man muttered something uncomplimentary to the French police.

“If they’d only searched the chateau when I was in Paris,” he said, “but there were all sorts of formalities to be overcome. Apparently Cæsar is regarded as an American subject, and they had to consult the Consulate; and then the infernal Consulate had to consult somebody else to discover whether he was American or English. Who was this Madonna person?”

“An old servant of the Valentines, I believe,” said the girl.

“We shall have him yet,” muttered the old man, and took up his paper again.

It was at that moment that Tray-Bong Smith made his appearance, a passable figure in grey flannels, who strolled nonchalantly across the lawn toward the group. At sight of him the girl rose.

“Why—why——” she stammered.

“Who is this?” demanded Mr. Ross sharply. “Mr. Smith?”

“I’m awfully sorry,” said Tray-Bong Smith. “I have not the slightest intention of joining your party, but I have very specific instructions from my worthy friend Mr. Valentine to present myself here at nine o’clock, and here I am.”

The old man scowled up at him.

“And you can go as quickly as you came,” he said gruffly. “We want no people of your calibre here, my friend.”

A car had stopped on the public road opposite the entrance to the hotel garden. The girl heard it and Smith heard it, but neither attached any significance to so commonplace an event. Perhaps, had they seen the man and woman who alighted, or been witnesses of the menacing gesture of the man and the shrinking submission of the woman, even the venom in the old man’s tone would have been unheeded.

“You can go back to your employer,” he snapped, “and tell him that I am afraid neither of him nor of his hired cut-throats. Such men as you, enjoying all the advantages of education and birth, who descend to the level you have reached, are more contemptible in the eyes of decent men and women than the poor wretched creatures who fill our gaols.”

Smith smiled a little crookedly.

“Your views upon my character,” he drawled, “are particularly interesting. Your granddaughter will probably tell you——” and here came the grand interruption.

Smith alone of the three understood just what it meant and drew a long, sighing breath as a faded woman walked haltingly towards them.

“My God!” he whispered.

The girl was watching the intruder wonderingly. The old man still held to his scowl. The newcomer was a frail lady with an old colourless face, and the hands she put before her as she groped like a blind woman across the lawn were blue-veined and almost transparent. Then the girl screamed and flew towards her, and at her approach the woman halted and shrank back.

“Mother—mother, don’t you know me?” sobbed Stephanie, and caught the faded creature in her arms. . . .

A waiter staggering under a laden tray came down a narrow path that led from the kitchen through the rosary into the lawn. He was surprised to see a tall man sitting on one of the garden seats that abound in these shady walks—more surprised when the stranger beckoned to him.

“Waiter,” he said, “could you get me a glass of water?”

“Certainly sir,” said the waiter. “I am just taking coffee down to a gentleman

on the lawn—”

“It won’t take you a minute,” said the man faintly and took out a handful of silver. “I have heart trouble. My life may depend upon your help.”

The waiter put down the tray and hurried back to the kitchen and returned in something under a minute. The stranger took the glass with a shaking hand.

“Thank you,” he said; “I feel better now.”

The waiter picked up the tray, pocketed the liberal tip, and carried the tray to this strangely assorted group on the lawn. When he returned, the stranger had gone.

The fourth member of that group, Smith, felt awkward and out of place. Yet he must hold on, for Cæsar could not have telegraphed to him insisting upon his arrival at the Bellevue at an exact hour unless there was more of the game to be played out. He had drawn aside from the three, and heard little of what was said. He recognised the woman immediately as the apparition he had looked upon from his bedroom window at Maisons Laffitte.

It was old Ross who beckoned him forward, and if his tone was not friendly, it had lost some of its antagonism.

“Mr. Smith,” he said solemnly, “did you know of this?”

Smith shook his head.

“I knew nothing,” he said, “except that I suspect this lady was kept a prisoner at Cæsar’s house at Maisons Laffitte.”

“Do you know why he has released her, why he brought her here this morning?”

Again Smith shook his head.

“I know nothing except that I had instructions from my employer to be here at a certain hour.”

It was an awkward moment and a situation which required the most delicate handling. After a little while he was withdrawing when the woman beckoned him back. She was sitting looking listlessly from her daughter to the old man. A dazed, grey woman, incapable, it seemed, of understanding what was going on around her, but at the man’s movements she roused herself.

“You are Smith?” she said. She spoke slowly as one who was not accustomed to speaking. “He told me you were to wait.”

“Where is he?” asked Smith quickly.

“He was there—in the car.” She pointed to the way she had come. “But I think he has gone now. He did not wish to wait and see father,” she said simply. “But you were here. He said that. We must always do what Cæsar says.”

Smith came back to the little group and at a nod from the old man seated himself.

“I signed the paper he asked me to sign,” said the woman, “on the boat yesterday, and one of the sailors—a steward, I think—signed it too.”

“A paper?” said the girl quickly. “What kind of paper, mother?”

The woman's brows contracted.

“Mother?” she repeated. “That’s a peculiar word.” She looked strangely at the girl. “I had a little child once,” she said, and her eyes filled with tears.
Stephanie drew the woman’s head down upon her shoulder and comforted her.

“Let us hear the story, my dear,” said Ross gently. “I am sure Mr. Smith will not mind staying. Stephanie, my child, pour out the coffee, and a cup for Mr. Smith.”

“It was a week ago, I think,” said the woman more calmly. “Cæsar came to the house and told me he was taking me back to England to my father, and of course I was glad. It has been very—very dull at the Chateau, you know. And everything has been so mysterious, and sometimes Cæsar has been quite cruel. They were afraid of my running away; that’s why they only used to allow me to come out at night with horrible things on my hands and ankles so that I couldn’t run. I tried to run away once,” she said.

Smith was watching her over the brim of his cup as he sipped his coffee.

Stephanie had lifted her cup and it was at her lips when Smith struck it from her hand. The hot coffee spilt over her dainty dress and she sprang up in alarm and indignation.

“Sorry!” said Smith coolly. “Sorry to interrupt the story and the light repast; but there’s a taste about this coffee which I don’t like.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Ross.

“I only mean,” said Mr. Smith, “that it seems to me rather likely that friend Cæsar is removing the just and the unjust at one fell swoop; and, speaking for myself, I should prefer to live a little while longer.” He smelt the coffee, then

beckoned the waiter, who was visible at the far end of the lawn.

“Coffee tastes funny, sir?” said the waiter in surprise. “I don’t know why that should be.”

He was lifting the cup when Smith stopped him.

“Unless you want to be a very dead waiter,” he said, “I should recommend you not to taste it. Just tell me. Did you bring this coffee straight from the kitchen?”

“Yes, sir,” said the man, mystified.

“Did you meet anybody on the way?”

“No, sir—yes, I did,” corrected the man. “There was a gentleman who was ill and asked me to get him a glass of water.”

“Which you did,” said Smith, “leaving the coffee behind. I see.” He nodded. “All right, that will do.”

“Shall I take the coffee back?”

“No, thank you,” said Smith grimly. “Leave the coffee here. I want to make absolutely certain that Cæsar Valentine has double-crossed me, but I’d rather like to make the experiment on something less human. Bring me a bottle—a whisky bottle will do—to put this coffee in.”

There was a dead silence when the waiter had gone. “You don’t mean to suggest that he would be as diabolical as that?”

“I’m not concerned with the morality of his actions or the purity of his intentions,” said Smith, “but I am pretty certain that our friend contemplated a vulgar and wholesale murder which would remove in one swoop every person with a knowledge of his infamy.”

XV. — THE END

CÆSAR VALENTINE received the note written from Bilton’s Hotel, and was considerably annoyed to discover that the signature was T. B. Smith. It was a note at once peremptory and reassuring, for Smith had made no reference to the deplorable happenings at Babbacombe on the previous day.

Cæsar came to Bilton’s Hotel and went straight up to Smith’s room. Remarkably enough it was Ross’s old room, but Cæsar did not seem to notice this. Smith was sprawling in an armchair, smoking the pipe of peace.

“Hullo! You back?” greeted Cæsar. “I expected you at Portland Place.”

“Shut the door and sit down,” said Smith, “I am not returning to Portland Place. I think this little caravanserai is safer.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Cæsar with a smile.

“I mean, Valentine, that you’ve tried to double-cross me, and it’s the last time you’ll do it. Now I’m talking to you as man to man, and get all that I say into your mind and memory. I came in with you on the understanding that we were going to play fair all the way round, that there were to be no mysteries and no secrets. Now, you know my record and I pretty well know yours, and I want the whole facts of certain circumstances and certain relationships of yours in the past before I go any farther.”

“Suppose I refuse to offer you my confidence?” asked Cæsar. “Are you going to the police or something?”

“I’m not going to the police, and I’m not particularly afraid of the police coming to me,” said Smith. “You have nothing against me.”

“Except a murder in Paris,” suggested Cæsar.

“Oh, that!” Smith shrugged his shoulders. “Paris is Paris, and London is London. Cæsar, you tried yesterday morning to put me out of action. Don’t lie about it; I know just the strength of that affair, and I’ve had the coffee analysed.”

“Coffee analysed?” said Cæsar with a puzzled air.

“Come off it!” said Smith crudely. “Let’s get down to facts. There’s a pretty big combination against you, and probably against me. I think it’s stronger against you than me. Now you know just how much you have to fear, and I think if you let your mind wander round, you’ll guess the identity of your weird enemy.”

“You mean Number Six?” said Cæsar sharply. “It must be either Welland or ____”

“Or?” said Smith.

“Or the Gale boy.”

“Let us hear all about the Gale boy,” said Smith, “because this is something I have not heard before from you.”

Cæsar thought for a moment.

“Well, you might as well know,” he said. “George Gale, the bank manager, had a son. I believe after the tragedy he went to the Argentine, and I am under the impression that he is still there. In fact, I seem to remember your telling me as much.”

Smith nodded.

“Why should you fear Gale’s son?” he asked, and Cæsar did not reply.

“What is the truth about that Gale case, Cæsar? I can’t go on much longer unless I know just what difficulties I have to face.”

“Gale died,” said Cæsar sullenly.

“His death was providential, I gather,” said Smith.

“In a way it was,” said Cæsar. “I owed him a lot of money; in fact I had put him in wrong. If he had opened his mouth I should have been arrested for fraud, and on the day of his death he had practically decided to make a statement to the police. I knew of his practice of taking a nerve tonic at mid-day, and managed to get hold of one of his empty bottles and substituted it for the one in his study.”

“And that empty bottle contained something particularly noxious in the way of acids, I presume?” said Smith steadily.

“Hydrocyanic,” replied Cæsar. “Now you know the whole truth of it. I’m not going to explain to you the nature of the fraud, but it was a pretty bad one, and the old man was, of course, not in it.”

Smith did not reply. He sat hunched up in his Chair, looking at the carpet.

“I see,” he said at last. “Somehow I thought there would come a time in our association when you would talk, and talk freely. You seem to be in pretty bad trouble, Cæsar,” said Smith. “Just leave me to think things out, will you?”

And Cæsar went back to Portland Place cursing himself that he had been so communicative. As for Smith, he was interviewing Detective Steele, who had occupied the next room and had taken a shorthand note of the conversation.

Cæsar had gone to Bilton’s Hotel expecting something more than reproaches from his confederate, and it was absolutely essential that he should placate him, even if in the act of placation it was necessary to throw some light upon the dark past.

It is history now that Cæsar Valentine was arrested as he was entering his house and taken to Marlborough Street Police Station and charged with murder and attempted murder. He was relieved to discover a handcuffed Smith waiting in the charge-room to share his ignominy.

They were rushed before the magistrate, charged and remanded, and for seven days these two men occupied adjoining cells in Brixton Gaol, and enjoyed the extraordinary privilege of meeting together in the exercise-ground. Then one morning Smith disappeared, and Cæsar did not see him again until he stepped on to the witness-stand at the Old Bailey and began his evidence thus:

“My name is John Gale. I am an officer of the Criminal Investigation Bureau, and I am known in the official records as Number Six....”

A week after the trial and its inevitable ending, John Gale, alias Smith, alias Number Six, met a pretty girl in the tea-room of the Piccadilly Hotel.

“I suppose you’re awfully glad it’s over?” said the girl, and Gale nodded.

“There’s one thing I wanted to know from you,” he said. “I’ve never understood your attitude to me, Stephanie.”

“Haven’t you?” she said demurely. “I thought I’d been rather nice.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean, when you were watching Cæsar Valentine in Paris, you were the witness of what was apparently a terrible crime on the Quai des Fleurs.” She nodded. “Yet you never showed the horror and the loathing which one would have expected a properly constituted girl would have expressed for a man who had been guilty of such a vile deed.”

The girl laughed.

“When I looked over the parapet,” she said, “I really did think a murder had been committed. But when I saw the two boats with the French Police picking up the murdered man, and heard him using terrible language about the necessity for jumping in the Seine at midnight, I knew the whole scene had been carefully staged in order to bring you into close contact with Cæsar Valentine. If I had any doubt at all,” she said, “that doubt was dissipated when you let me out of the room in Portland Place and I saw you scribbling your message on an envelope.”

He nodded.

“It was the only possible way I could get into close touch with Cæsar, as soon as I found he had taken an interest in me, as I knew he would, after the stories I had carefully circulated through Chi So’s about my depravity. I had those

boats and that ‘murdered man’ waiting on the Quai des Fleurs night after night until a favourable opportunity occurred. You see, I’m only an amateur detective, but I have wonderful ideas.”

“What I admire about you,” she smiled, “is your extreme modesty.” Then, more seriously: “Have you discovered my father?”

He nodded.

“I found him weeks ago,” he said.

“But don’t you think you’ve been rather cruel in keeping him away from mother and me?” she asked. “Surely there is no reason why we cannot see him at once?”

He nodded.

“There is a very great reason,” he said quietly. “In three weeks’ time I will bring you to your father, who is wholly ignorant of the fact that you and his wife are alive.”

“But why in three weeks?” she persisted.

“That is my secret and his,” said John Gale quietly, and the girl did not pursue the subject.

Cæsar Valentine was destined to meet his enemy first. On a certain morning they aroused him from a deep sleep, and he woke to find that the convict clothes he had been wearing the day before had been taken away, and that the suit he had worn at his trial had been substituted.

He rose and dressed, and refused the ministrations of the chaplain, and ate a hearty breakfast. At a quarter to eight came the governor, and behind him John Gale.

“Hullo, Gale!” Cæsar greeted him. “This is the end of the road. It has been a most amusing experience. Take my advice,” he said. “Have a hobby; it keeps you out of mischief. Even if it’s only button-making, eh?”

Gale made no response, and the Governor signalled to somebody at the door, and a man walked in with the straps of his office in his hand.

“Excuse me,” said Cæsar, and to everybody’s surprise he fell on his knees by the side of his box and buried his face in his hands.

Then he rose, turned, and faced Welland.

“My God!” he breathed, and he seemed to have difficulty in talking. “You—the hangman!”

Welland nodded.

“I have waited for this day,” he said, and deftly strapped Cæsar’s hands behind him.

“You have waited in vain,” said Cæsar loudly. “Look there, my clever fellow. How many buttons are there on my coat?”

Welland looked and saw that a thread was hanging where a button had been.

“Cyanide of potassium and a little gum make an excellent button,” mumbled Cæsar, and collapsed in the arms of the warders.

They laid him down on the bed, but he was dead.

THE END