The Big Four
By
Edgar Wallace

THE BIG FOUR

I. — THE BIG FOUR SYNDICATE AND THE MAN WHO SMASHED IT

TO all outward appearance, Douglas Camp¬bell was a dour and possibly a short-tempered man of forty-eight, tall and broad of shoulder. He had what women describe as a bad-tempered face, since, through no fault of his own, his eyebrows met.

As chairman and general manager of the Federated Assurances it was only right and proper that he should be credited with a total absence of any sense of humour. He was, as all who have met him will testify, a grave and serious man, who used precise language cautiously.

He sat at his table one spring morning reading his correspondence. Presently he put the letters down and looked at his watch.

"I am expecting Mr. Robert Brewer in a few minutes," he said. "Show him straight in, and see that we are not interrupted."

"Very good, sir," said his secretary.

There was a tap at the door, and the secretary took from the hands of the clerk

a visiting card.

"It's Mr. Brewer," he said.

"Show him in," said Campbell, rising expectantly.

Mr. Robert Brewer was young, perfectly and fashionably attired, and carried in his very presence the hallmark of "good tone." On his upper lip was a tiny well-regulated moustache; in his right eye was a monocle; and about him generally was that air of buoyant freshness which can only come from the consciousness of youth.

He advanced to Campbell with out¬stretched hand.

"My dear old Highlander, you're glad to see me!"

"I'm not so sure about that," said Camp¬bell. "Sit down. That will do, Mr. George. You're looking very bright and beautiful this morning."

"Aren't I?" said Mr. Bob Brewer delightedly. "Dear old thing, I feel positively pretty. Now let us get down to business. I gather you haven't brought me from New York to hand me compliments."

"You're a wonderful man, Bob," said Campbell admiringly. "Man! If I'd had half your cheek when I was your age, if I'd been half as stuck on myself as you are, if I'd had just a little touch of your coolness, audacity, and unscrupulousness, I'd have been a millionaire!"

"Instead of which you are a two-million¬aire," said Bob Brewer, "whilst I'm a poor devil of an insurance detective, finding it very hard to make both ends meet."

Mr. Campbell drew up his chair close to the table, and lowered his voice.

"Bob, the chairmen of three of our com¬panies have advised our sending to you. I represent six of the biggest insurance com¬panies in this country, mostly burglary, accident, and that sort of thing. You know the kind of business. You've been connected with it yourself."

Bob nodded.

"We insure society against their follies and carelessness," Mr. Campbell went on, "and, frankly, it hasn't paid. Bob, you've heard about the sins of society? Well, I'll tell you what its principal sin is—lack of grey matter. We've got the finest and the best clients in Britain, the cream of the whole bunch. Everybody with money and personal adornment is insured with us. But, Bob, their trouble is that whilst they had enough brains to get their money they haven't got enough to keep it.

"You know what they are," he went on. "They move like automatons from one fashionable place to another, and they move in a crowd like a flock of sheep. They're at Harrogate, they're at Paris Plage, they're at Ostend in July, at

Deauville at the end of July, at Aix in the season, at Monte Carlo, at St. Moritz, and only the happy fact that we've been at war with Germany prevents them going to Wiesbaden at the proper time. Now, when that army moves, Bob, there's another little army which follows it. They're the camp followers, or scamp followers, or whatever you like to call them. They're the parasites who live upon these mugs——"

"Oh, what vulgarity!" murmured Bob.

"They're mugs and nothing else," said Campbell. "If they weren't mugs they'd be original. They'd go to St. Moritz in the summer, and Ostend in the winter. But, as I was saying, there's a young army of parasites that moves with them and lives on them, and unless we want to go broke it's our job to frustrate their knavish tricks, as the Old Book says."

"You're a whale on insurance, Campbell, but you're rather short in the literary line. The clever little line you quote is not, as you imagine, from the Old Book!"

"It doesn't matter where it's from," Campbell went on. "The point is this—we've got to put a man on specially to watch over these sheep, and see that they are not torn limb from limb by the wolves. We are going to offer you a very big salary to take this job on and give you permission to accept any private com¬missions that may come your way. Is it a bet?"

"It all depends upon what your idea of a handsome salary is," said Bob with a little grin. "In the old days it used to be somewhere in the region of £300 or £400 per annum."

"We are more broad-minded now," said Campbell, "and we never talk under thousands."

Brewer looked at him and nodded.

"Take down the notice," he said, "I am engaged."

Campbell walked to the door and turned the key.

"I'll introduce you to the names of the king-bird of all the birds of prey," he said; "he's the boss-man of the Big Four—'Reddy' Smith."

Bob laughed quietly.

"Reddy, eh?" he said; "why, I need no introduction to Reddy! You couldn't live in the seams of New York City and not know him."

"Does he know you?" asked the other quickly.

"He does not," replied Bob. "We've never met in the way of business, but I know him. You see, in New York, I was on the commercial side of insurance—trade frauds and that sort of thing. Reddy was a con man, an advertisement faker. He used to sell non-existent shares to the deluded agriculturists of the

Middle West. I have seen him at exercise in a prison yard, but I doubt if he knows me. As a matter of fact, I was on his track about a year ago, before he sailed for Europe."

Mr. Campbell nodded.

"All I know about him," he said; "I have secured from the police. He has been working with a swell crowd in France, but they never brought any charge home to him, although it is pretty well known he was concerned in one or two bad robberies. I have information that he is at Monte Carlo. Unfortunately a number of our clients are there also, including a selection of our brightest muno profiteers."

"From which effort of word-making I gather you mean gentlemen who have made profits out of munitions," suggested Bob.

"Exactly," said Campbell. "Reddy doesn't work alone. There's a whole gang. You will find them and their womenfolk there, encrusted with precious stones and clothed in rainbow raiment. They will be eating ice-creams with diamond spoons, and new peas with golden knives, and you will possibly interrupt Mr. Reddy just as he is telling the most bloated of these about a diamond mine that he has discovered in Sicily. Reddy always carries a few spare diamonds as a convincing proof."

"What help do I get from the French police?" asked Bob, and in reply his new employer pulled open the drawer and took out a small leather-bound book.

"Here is your authority, signed by the Minister of the Interior, and countersigned by the Minister of State of Monaco. The authorities in Monaco are more anxious to keep out the crooks than we are to pinch them."

Bob took the book, examined it, and slipped it into his pocket.

"Now off you go. You will live at the best hotels."

"Trust me, old man," said Bob. "Do I draw my salary in advance, or when I can get it?"

"I knew your father," said Mr. Campbell eyeing him severely, "and he was a good and thrifty Scot. I knew your mother, and she was a Macleod and a thrifty soul. But you, Bob, you have just developed into a spendthrift Englishman, Shall I give you a little on account?"

"A lot's a little," said Bob. "I will take six months' salary, and I will let you know what I want for expenses. I shall stay for a few days in Paris, and Paris costs money."

Mr. Campbell sighed and drew a cheque.

Two men sat outside the Cafe de Paris in Monte Carlo. They were both well-dressed, both clean-shaven, and had the appearance of citizens of the world,

which meant that they may have been of any nationality, but were probably American.

The elder of the two was sucking a cigar thoughtfully, and nodding his replies to the other.

Presently he said:

"I have never met him, but I've heard a lot about him. Jimmy, this place is not going to be healthy after Monday. I think we'll skip by the Sunday morning train. That gives us four days to draw dividends. What is this Brewer like?"

Jimmy shrugged.

"Search me!" he said. "I know as much about him as you do."

"You are sure he is coming?" asked Reddy.

"Sure," said the other emphatically. "I saw the telegram engaging rooms on the clerk's counter this morning. It was sent from Paris, and asked for the best suite overlooking the entrance to the Casino. It said he would arrive on Monday, but if he didn't the rooms were to be held for him until he did arrive."

Reddy nodded again.

"That gives us four days, and I think we shall get the stuff," he added confidently. "Little William certainly looks like easy money."

He nodded towards the hotel, on the steps of which stood a resplendent figure in a shepherd's plaid suit and a Homburg hat of dazzling whiteness.

"He almost sparkles from here," said Reddy admiringly. "Gee! That fellow is the nearest approach to cash in hand that I have ever struck."

"What is he?" asked Jimmy curiously. "I saw you talking with him in the rooms last night."

"He is William Ford. His pa made enough out of fuses to settle the British National Debt. When the war finished so did pa. He died off and left a cartload of money to Willie, and Willie's seeing life for the first time."

"What did you get him with?" asked Reddy.

"With my Montana silver mine," replied the other. "He just fell for it. Come over and shake hands with him."

Mr. Ford stood with his hands in his pockets, a long amber cigarette- holder be¬tween his teeth, staring about him, and apparently oblivious to the beauties of the scene. Walking slowly across the broad, well-swept roadway to the Municipal Gar¬dens, he bought a newspaper at the little kiosk, and returned to a long garden seat facing the Casino. It was here that they accosted him.

"Good morning, Mr. Ford, I want you to shake hands with Mr. Kennedy, one of our millionaire ranchers from Texas."

Mr. Ford blinked up at the newcomer, and offered a limp hand.

"Good morning," he said to Reddy, "it's beastly hot, and I can't read this beastly French newspaper. Do you understand this beastly language?"

"Why, sure, Mr. Ford," said the other, taking the newspaper from the young man's hand. "I have seen it, and there's nothing at all worth reading about unless you are interested in French racing."

"I hate racing. I think it's beastly," said Mr. Ford, adjusting a glass in his eye with apparent difficulty. "I am a business man y'know, Mr. Redwood; gambling doesn't appeal to me. I risk a few thou-sands at the beastly table, but it bores me."

"Quite right," said Mr. Redwood cor¬dially; "that's a fool way of spending your money."

"Of course," said Mr. Ford modestly, "I can afford to lose. I brought a million francs in ready money."

"Which I hope you keep in the hotel safe," said Reddy warningly. "There are a great many dishonest people in Monte Carlo."

"Not much," said Mr. Ford scornfully. "I always say if a man can't look after his beastly money he doesn't deserve to have it. No; I keep it in my room."

Mr. Reddy drew a long breath.

"I haven't come to Monte Carlo to learn how to protect myself," went on Mr. Ford. "But look here, as a business man, and with¬out any beastly beating about the bush, what do you want for this fifth share in your mine?"

"Well, I don't know that I want to sell," Reddy said modestly. "I have come to Monte Carlo to enjoy myself, and not to deal in stocks and shares."

"You do too much of that at home, Mr. Redwood," chimed in Jimmy, feeling it was his turn to speak. "Why, Mr. Redwood is known from one end of Colo¬rado to the other end of Montana as the biggest man in the mining world. I suppose you deal in five million shares a year, don't you, Mr. Redwood?"

"About that," said the modest Reddy; "probably not so many, but somewhere about that figure."

The young man was staring at him with an amused smile.

"You can't frighten me with talk of millions," he said. "I understand that your Montana mine is capitalised at a million dollars; that is about £200,000."

Mr. Redwood nodded.

"You say you want £40,000; that is two hundred thousand dollars for a fifth interest!"

Mr. Redwood nodded again.

"The shares stand at 2.50 in the open market," he said; "and a fifth share is worth more than twice as much as I am asking for it. I am tired of mining, tired of making profits. I am going to get out of my holdings, Jimmy," he said, turning to the "rancher." "This gentle-man wants to buy a share of the Montana Deep. He's a business man, and there is something about him that I like."

"But surely," said the shocked "rancher," "you are not going to sell out your holdings in the Montana Deep? Why, they are the richest mines in the West. There would be a sensation if this were known in Wall Street."

Reddy made no reply. He took from his inside pocket a thick package, and, un¬rolling it, disclosed some beautifully-printed share certificates, stamped and sealed. These he looked at musingly, even regretfully.

"When I think," he said, "of the trouble I have taken to make this mine a success, why, I hate the idea of parting with them. I shall be giving them to you, Mr. Ford, for a mere bagatelle. Exactly the amount you have brought to Monte Carlo in ready money expecting to lose."

"Of course, I haven't made up my mind that I am going to buy them," said the young man hastily.

"And I haven't made up my mind that I'm going to sell them either," smiled the other. "Come and have a drink."

He was too wily a bird to press his victim, and made no further reference to the deal for two days.

"The time is getting short," said Reddy on the Saturday after lunch. "Did you hear from Paris?"

Jimmy nodded, and produced a telegraph form.

"Brewer is staying at the Hotel Meurice," he said. "That was the hotel his tele¬gram was sent from. I wired him last night in the name of the hotel to ask if he still wanted the rooms, and I watched the counter all morning to see if he replied. Here's a copy of the telegram. It came just before lunch."

He handed the scribbled slip of paper to the other who read:

"Yes, of course I want the rooms.—Brewer."

"The hotel people were a bit puzzled by the wire, but that's nothing. We shall be gone, anyway, before he arrives. Now, what about this boob?"

"He has bitten, but he looks like taking a few days to land," said Reddy. "I had a chat with him in the rooms, exchanged confidences with him, told him that I always kept my money under the pillow, and went out this morning forgetting to take it with me. He said he kept his money in the bottom drawer of his bureau under his clothes," he chuckled. "If we don't get his stuff to-day

legitimately, Jimmy, we are going to get it to-night by coarse, violent methods. Don't trouble to cancel the sleeper, but we are going to get away by another route."

"How's that?" said Jimmy.

"I have ordered a car from Nice to meet me outside the Post Office at two o'clock to-morrow morning. We will take the road as far as Marseilles, slip on through Narbonne, across the frontier into Spain, and lie low at Barcelona for a little while. I fixed another car to meet us at Marseilles on Sunday afternoon outside the Hotel d'Angleterre."

"Good," said Jimmy.

"Our room is on the same floor as his. It is easy to swing from one balcony to another, and he sleeps with his windows open. I will get into the room and open the door. You will come in, and if he gives any trouble put him to sleep. We ought to make Marseilles before midday."

They strolled through the big pillared hall, passed through the doors into the sale, and spent the next half-hour wander¬ing from table to table in the track of their victim, who occasionally hazarded a louis upon a number but was not apparently engaged in any serious betting.

Mr. Ford at last saw the two Americans, and favoured them with a pitying smile.

"Beastly nonsense, don't you think," he said. "I say, let's get out of this place. It makes me ill to see people wasting their money."

They followed him obediently and he went back to his favourite garden seat before the Casino.

"I have been thinking about that mining proposition, and do you know I nearly decided to buy your shares; then it struck me that Montana was a beastly long way off, I and I know nothing about mining."

"Fortunately you don't have to know," said Reddy. "There is just nothing for you to do but to sit tight in your beautiful home in London and watch the dividends pile up."

"That's all right my friend," said the young man in a superior tone, "but suppose they don't pile up, hey? I will tell you what I'll do. I will write to a friend of mine, my broker, a beastly clever fellow, who does all my work for me, and I will get him to telegraph me. Or suppose I wired him. Telegrams are so much quicker. You don't mind, do you, Mr. Redwood?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Redwood calmly; "and if he replies favourably, as of course he will, you will give me a cheque."

"Oh, no," said the young man, "I will pay you cash."

"I thought you might have put the money into the bank," said Mr. Redwood, greatly relieved.

"'Not a bit of it! Not a bit of it! I always say that if a fellow can't look after his beastly money himself he doesn't deserve to have it. Oh, by the way, I have had a telegram from a fellow named"—he fumbled in his pockets—"from a fellow named Brewer. A beastly impertinent telegram, telling me to do nothing until I have seen him. Who the deuce is Brewer?"

"Brewer," said Mr. Redwood with great earnestness, "is one of the worst crooks on the Continent. Whatever he lays his hands on is as good as lost."

"You don't say so," gasped Mr. Ford. "Well, of all the cheek! Do you think I ought to notify the police?"

"It is quite unnecessary." Reddy was thoroughly enjoying the humour of the situation.

Ford looked at his watch.

"I am going up to La Turbie. I have ordered a motor-car. Would you two gentlemen like to come up?"

"No, thanks," said Reddy; "I have got a lot of work to do this afternoon—letters to write and all that sort of thing."

The work that Reddy had to do was peculiar to his profession. He had to study road maps and improvise time-tables. He had to telegraph to one of the Big Four of Crime, who was in temporary retirement at Montdidier to fix a passport which would enable him to cross the frontier. He had to pack his scanty belongings and make a further reconnaissance of Mr. Ford's room.

He had already discovered that it was impossible to get into the room by day. By special arrangement with the hotel pro¬prietors a man stood on guard in the cor¬ridor all the time Mr. Ford was out—a guard which, owing to the young man's confidence in himself, was removed at night. Each big room had its own oblong balcony, and between the balconies was a space of two feet which a bold and an agile man could easily negotiate—and Reddy and his partner were both bold and agile. Patience was one of his virtues, and most patiently he waited for the night to fall.

At midnight the rooms closed and a big crowd flocked out, the doors of limousines banged, the engines of limousines purred; there was a great melting away of people, and presently the space before the Casino was clear.

By one o'clock most of the regular habi¬tues of the Casino had either gone home or had passed across to the Sporting Club, which did not close until four in the morn¬ing, and where baccarat was played for high stakes, and when Reddy stepped out on to the balcony there was not a soul in sight.

He listened for a full minute, then swung himself over the iron rail of the balcony, reached out for the next and in this way traversed the three balconies which separated him from Mr. Ford's room.

The windows were wide open, only the wooden jalousies being closed, and these he opened easily and noiselessly. He slipped into the room and closed the wooden doors behind him. To make his way across the room and unlock the door leading to the corridor was the work of a few seconds. He had listened intently on entering the room, and had been rewarded by hearing the regu¬lar breathing not to say occasional snore of his victim.

As he unlocked the outer door, Jimmy slipped in, closing it noiselessly behind him, and turning the key. Reddy felt for the bottom drawer of the bureau. He had pulled it open, and his hand was dexter¬ously searching amidst a mass of clothing, when the room was suddenly flooded with light.

Mr. Ford was sitting up in bed balancing a wicked-looking Browning pistol on his knees.

"Put up your hands, Reddy," he said.

"What do you mean?" said Reddy in¬dignantly. "I have got into the wrong room. I am surprised at you, Mr. Ford."

Mr. Ford slipped from his bed, and Reddy noticed that he was fully dressed save for his coat.

"I have been waiting for you, Reddy," Mr. Ford went on. "I am taking you into custody on a charge of burglary, attempted fraud by misrepresentation and impersona¬tion. I am taking your pal, too."

"Who are you?" demanded Reddy. "My name is Bob Brewer," said the young man. "You may have heard of me. I am a notorious crook who takes everything I can lay my hands on. Put out yours, I am going to lay hands on you."

II. THE BURGLARY AT GOODWOOD

BOB BREWER, Temporary Chief of the Federated Assurance Corporations' Detective Department—he loved to roll forth this string of adjectives, and for the mystification of his friends had added to his visiting card the cryptic initials, T.C.F.A.C.D.D.—paused on the second marble step which led to the imposing entrance of Federated Building, and fixed his interested gaze upon a young man, the sole occupant of a beautiful limousine which was passing at that moment.

The young man wore a grey Derby hat and a long cigar, and he lolled back in

the padded interior of the machine with an air of unspeakable boredom.

"Neatly and nicely posed," said Bob, took a note of the number displayed on the back of the car, and passed into the interior of the building.

A clerk recognized him with a nod, and showed him straight into the general man¬ager's room.

"Mr. Campbell is expecting you, sir," he said. "You got our wire?"

"I always get wires," smiled Bob. "What's the hurry?"

The clerk hesitated.

"I think you had better see Mr. Camp¬bell," he said.

Douglas Campbell, after the manner of very busy men, seemed to be doing nothing when Bob came into his office.

"Hello!" he growled. "Shut the door. What——"

"I got your wire. I had a good crossing. The weather in France was perfect. I posted my expense account, and I have no money," said Bob rapidly; "and after these preliminary pleasantries, I repeat, what's the hurry?"

"Sit down," said Campbell. "Society, Bob," he began, preparing to emphasize his points with a paper-knife, "is chiefly remarkable by its adherence to convention."

"Listen," interrupted Bob; "do I get this lecture on the simps of society every time I come to see you?"

"Nearly every time you will get it," said Campbell, "because I want to impress upon you this one fact, that robbing the truly rich is a simpler matter than taking toffee out of a baby's mouth. It is because it is so simple that our work's so hard. By the way," he said suddenly, "I hear that your friend Reddy escaped from the French police."

Bob nodded.

"He got away into Spain through no fault of mine," he said. "He is in Spain still. You are not suggesting that he is laying for me in London, E.C.?"

"No," he said; "I didn't ask you to come here to warn you. I think we can cut Reddy out for a month or two."

"Quite right," said Bob. "Reddy's more concerned about Reddy than he is about me, and, anyway, he is not so dangerous a man as, say, Soapy Wilkins."

Mr. Campbell sat bolt upright in surprise.

"Soapy Wilkins?" he repeated. "Who the devil has been talking to you? It was Soapy I wanted to see you about."

Bob Brewer, sitting on the end of the desk swinging his legs, laughed.

"There is no mystery about Soapy," he said, "and less about my reference to him. I saw him exactly two minutes ago, riding, so to speak, in the lap of luxury and a hired motor-car and a grand outfit which was probably his own."

Mr. Campbell looked troubled.

"That's a curious coincidence," he said; "Soapy's staying at the Hotel Magnificent, and, Bob, Soapy is a standing menace to capital—mostly our capital."

"Why don't you get the real police to pull him in?" asked Bob. "He's a well-known crook. Everybody knows Soapy in America, and I suppose the police know him here. He is one of the cleverest crooks in the world, and one of the most dangerous, because, like lightning, he never strikes twice in the same place. Most criminals are specialists, and stick to one type of crime. Soapy is so infernally clever that he can pass from commonplace burglary to the artistic forgery of bonds without turn¬ing a hair, and get away with both jobs. I admire Soapy—so named, I believe, because of his exceptionally pleasant con¬versational powers. He is a genius. That fellow has ideas——"

"I didn't send for you to listen to an eulogy of Mr. Soapy Wilkins," snarled Campbell, "and I deplore your taste that you can admire any man who at any moment may reduce the dividends of the Federated Assurances. As to pulling him in, that is impossible. We are not working in the dear old war days, when you could deport without trouble any undesirable person who was not of British nationality. The police have nothing against him, and cannot move. They are watching him——"

"Ha ha!" laughed Bob sarcastically.

"I say they are watching him, and your peals of ironic laughter exactly express my feelings in the matter."

He took a paper out of a basket and laid it on the desk before him.

"Now, I will tell you why I am worried about Soapy, although my anxiety may be groundless. Do you know Windhever Castle?"

Bob nodded.

"It is the Sussex residence of the Duchess of Manton," he said promptly, "a great dame, entirely surrounded by money and social influence."

Campbell nodded.

"Windhever Castle is exactly five miles from Goodwood," he said. "Next week we have Goodwood races, at which all the fashionable people in Britain will be pre¬sent. Society goes to Goodwood because it lies on the weary road which society tramps from Christmas Day to Christmas Eve. Society goes there because it is the thing to do."

"Cut out all that society stuff," said Bob, "and come to the dramatic climax of your interesting story."

Mr. Campbell gulped something down.

"I will put it within your comprehen¬sion," he said. "Next week Windhever Castle will be filled with exclusive ladies and gentlemen who will bring for their adornment bright and beautiful jewels, all of which are insured by us. Now, what is worrying me is this. A month ago there was a burglary at Windhever Castle."

Bob nodded.

"Did they get anything?" he asked.

"Nothing," replied Mr. Campbell. "As a matter of fact, there were no guests there, the Duchess being at Ascot with the flock. There were only a few servants in the house and practically no portable property. Nevertheless an entrance was effected in the night, the Duke's safe was opened, three or four locks leading from the garden to the study were picked, and, in fact, it was a clean job, and the burglars got away."

"That's strange," said Bob thoughtfully. "Give me some details of the work which these enterprising fellows performed."

Mr. Campbell sketched the work of de¬struction briefly.

"It took them three hours, eh?" said the thoughtful Bob. "Of course, it was easy; because, as you said, there were only three servants in the house, and they had all the time. The burglary was evidently the work of real fellows—men who knew their game, and must have known there was no money in the house. Now, what the dickens did they expect to find? The job must have cost them two or three hundred pounds, and professional burglars are thrifty souls who do not waste money."

"That is what is puzzling me," said Campbell; "as a matter of fact, the burglary was not reported to us, because the Duke himself does not insure with our companies, and I only found it out in a roundabout way. However, forewarned is forearmed. The Duke has had new patent locks fixed to all the doors, a new burglar-proof safe of one of the best makes installed, and I understand that the library, where the safe is situated, is to be guarded by patrols whilst the house party is in residence."

"Do you connect Soapy with this busi¬ness?"

"I am bound to," said Campbell. "He is the only big man in London at the present moment. I want you to go down and see the Duke—I have a letter of intro¬duction to him from one of our clients—and offer him any assistance which you can. Look over the servants and see if you can recognize any, and be on hand on the night of the Goodwood Cup, when the Duchess gives a big

dance, and that safe will contain the Penson emeralds. Lady Penson is one of the guests, and I have reason to know that her jewels will be sent down for the occasion. Above all, don't forget that society——"

"There's nothing you have ever said about society that I am likely to forget," said Bob, and made his escape.

Windhever Castle is a building in the Georgian style, standing in beautiful grounds on the Chichester road. The Duke was a gentleman whose portrait was familiar to every newspaper reader. He was a small, thin man, with a small, thin face. His expression was somewhat vacant, and he had probably gained his reputation for profound thinking by the extent and rarity of his library, and his habit of never speak¬ing save to disagree with every view which was expressed to him.

He received Bob in that same library, and offered a limp hand.

"I don't think it is necessary that you should interest yourself in the safety of my guests' jewellery," he said; "but as Lord What's-his-name"—he looked at the letter of introduction (he made a point of never remembering names, or, if he did remember, never committing himself to their pronunciation)—"as Lord What's-his-name wishes you to look after his missus's property, of course you can go anywhere you like, except into her Grace's boudoir."

"I quite understand. Your Grace has taken every precaution?"

"Of course you do," said the Duke. "I have told you so, haven't I? I have a new safe here"—he pointed to a great steel cupboard bearing the little name-plate of the best maker. "I am having a patrol outside the window, changed every hour, and I think you will agree it will take more than an hour to open that safe."

Bob did agree. He knew the make; and in the most favourable circumstances it could not be opened in one hour or in six.

"If Lord What's-his-name doesn't think his missus's jewels are safe, there's no need for him to come," his Grace went on. "What the deuce have I spent £200 in getting the house fitted with burglar alarms, buying a new safe, fixing new locks for, hey?"

He again held out his limp hand.

"Well, Mr. What's-ye-may-call-it, don't make yourself an infernal nuisance. Go and see my house-steward, and he will do anything he can for you."

Bob found the house-steward, and inter¬viewed him, though the interview did not take the form which the Duke might have expected. He also had an opportunity of seeing, one by one, the various male servants who were to be on guard outside the library on the night of the ball.

"There's only one way into the library from the ground," said the house-steward: "that is through the little door which his Grace uses, and through two other doors, all of which are fitted with new locks, and one of the doors is sheeted with steel."

"Could a burglar get in from the house?"

"That is more difficult still," said the house-steward. "He would have to go through the main corridor, where I shall be on duty throughout the night."

Bob scratched his chin.

"I suppose you have known all the foot¬men for years?" he said.

"Every one of them," said the house-steward promptly. "They have all lived in this neighbourhood since they were children and, with one or two exceptions, they-have been here all the time."

That the appearance of a stranger in a little country village should fail to excite interest and attention was not to be ex¬pected, Bob knew. In a few hours his business was known, as he expected it would be known, and the landlord of the little inn at which he lodged had even tried to get his views on the recent burglary, which was still the topic of conversation.

"There will be a lot of ladies and gentlemen down here for the races next week, sir." he said. (He was attending personally upon Bob at his solitary dinner.) "And I suppose you are down here to see that there are no more burglaries?"

"Something like that," said Bob.

"By all accounts," said the garrulous landlord, "there won't be much chance for them this time. The young gentleman who came down from the safe company said that he defied any burglar to open their safe."

"I think it will be difficult," agreed Bob good-humouredly.

"It's a mystery to me," the landlord went on, "why they burgled the castle. Why, everybody in the village knew that his Grace was away—even the silver was at the bank, by all accounts. I was talking to Mr. Cole, the Duke's valet, about it, and he said they must have been mad. That's him, sir," he said, nodding to the window.

Bob looked, and saw one of the man¬servants he had observed that morning. He was a man of thirty, soberly dressed and expressionless of face, as befitted a gentleman's gentleman.

"He often comes in here for a glass of sherry wine," explained the landlord. "Of course, he is, practically speaking, his Grace's right-hand man. He was born here, and used to be one of his Grace's footmen. Then he went to Australia for six years. His brother died suddenly and he had to go out and

look after his property. It wasn't much, by all accounts," continued the landlord, "and when he came back to Windhever he had no money, and it was a bit of luck that his Grace wanted a valet."

Bob rose, strolled through the stone-flagged entrance-hall into the yard outside. The valet recognized him, and touched his hat, and Bob got into conversation with him. It was a curious conversation, for it was all about English hills and their heights, and the conversation flagged until Bob brought up the question of the great Tors of Devonshire.

"No, sir; you're wrong," said the valet in answer to one statement Bob had made; "Hay Tor is the highest. Why, you can see it for miles!"

"There's a wonderful view from the top," agreed Bob.

"I've never been on top," he said, "but I should say you are right, sir."

He seemed willing to continue the con¬versation which, again at Bob's instigation, took a curious turn, being mainly about horses, and particularly ponies, and wild ponies at that. Here again the man's knowledge was extensive. It was a ran¬dom shot of Bob's, but he had struck his target.

"You must have a glass of wine with me, Mr. Cole," he said, and led the way to the private sitting-room he had engaged. It was Bob who, with his own hands, and despite the protests of the landlord, bore the glasses and the bottle. He paused outside the door of the sitting-room to give one of the glasses an extra polish with his silk handkerchief, for he wanted it very clean.

"'Here's very good health, sir," said Mr. Cole, and drank his wine at a gulp.

Bob took the glass from him, placed it carefully on the table, and led the way into the open again. Then, when he had said good-night to the valet, he sat down and wrote the following letter to Douglas Camp¬bell:

"'I think I have smelt out the plot, and can explain the abortive burglary almost as easily as I shall be able to describe the burglary which will be committed on the night of the Goodwood Cup. I hope to send you to-morrow a finger-print which I have taken off a glass, and which I be¬lieve will reveal the identity of an old lag. The man's name is Cole. He had a mysterious absence from the village for six years, which immediately followed the arrest of the Perrers gang. Apparently Cole's identity is not known to the Duke, and his crime is unknown to the villagers. At any rate, from his knowledge of the hills of Dartmoor, and his acquaintance with Dartmoor ponies, I should say that he had seen the interior of the Princeton prison. The rest, as they say in books, looks like being easy."

Bob Brewer went to the Goodwood Races for his own pleasure and profit. Though there might be minor rogues about, he could afford to concentrate upon the bigger gang, and the bigger gang would not begin operations before

the night. On his return from the races on the day of the Goodwood Cup he found a telegram awaiting him. It ran:

"Have made important discovery. Your theories are wrong. Am going Portsmouth by 7.53 to-night. Motor over and meet me Grand Hotel 10.15."

Bob folded up the telegram and sent for the landlord.

"I want you to get through to Chichester to any garage you know and hire me a car," he said. "I have to go to Portsmouth."

There was some little difficulty about hiring a car in Goodwood week, but the hour favoured him.

At eight o'clock a noisy but serviceable machine was at the door. He left in¬structions that any message which came through to him by telephone, or any tele¬gram which might arrive should be repeated to him at Portsmouth.

"I'm sorry you are going, sir," said the landlord. "I thought you would be here until after the ball."

"I don't think my presence is necessary," laughed Bob. "In fact, I don't mind telling you, Mr. Landlord, a confession which few detectives make: I have been working on the wrong track."

He had to wait a little while because he had put through a call to London to the residence of Douglas Campbell. It came a few minutes before he left, and it was Mrs. Campbell who answered him.

"I have had a telegram from your hus¬band telling me to meet him at Portsmouth. I suppose that is all right?" he asked.

"He is going to Portsmouth by the 7.53," replied Mrs. Campbell's voice.

Bob hung up the receiver. A few min¬utes later his car was disappearing in a cloud of dust along the white road to Chichester.

It was the Duke of Manton's boast that he went to bed early, and, fortunately for him, he had as his guest a royalty who shared the same views; so that before midnight the big Georgian house was in darkness, and there was no sound but the occasional cough of one of the servants told off to guard the entrance to the library. At a quarter past twelve the coughing sentry was relieved. Scarcely had his footsteps died away on the gravel walk when a man came noiselessly from the shrubbery, crossed the gravel path with scarcely a sound, and approached the sentry.

"Is that you, Cole?" he said in a low voice.

"Yes," was the reply. "You had better get a move on. They are relieving me in half an hour."

"Gee!" said the man, "being a Duke's valet gives you a pull."

He moved past the sentry on the way to the door, but not very far past. An arm was flung round his neck, a deft hand slipped the loaded revolver from his hip pocket, and a voice in his ear said:

"Are you going rough or going quiet, Soapy?"

"Quiet," said Soapy philosophically, and put up his right hand mechanically for the handcuff. "So you are not Cole; you're Brewer, aren't you?" he asked.

"That's so," said Bob. "I will relieve you of all those keys you have in your pocket, the key of the safe, and the key of the doors."

"I thought you were in Portsmouth," said Soapy.

"Aw! Come off it!" scoffed Bob. "You didn't think a fake like that would go, did you?"

"But you got Mrs. Campbell on the 'phone?"

"Yes; but I happened to know he was going to Portsmouth anyway, and I suppose you found it out, too. Come on, Soapy, it's the long, long trail for you."

"It was one of the easiest tricks, and it had been worked before," explained Bob to the gratified Campbell. "The first burglary was a fake, and was intended to advertise the insecurity of the locks and the poor quality of the safe. On top of this, down comes Soapy as an agent for a safe company, and talks old man Duke into putting in a new outfit.

"The Duke is as mean as the devil. When Soapy offered to install safe and locks and burglar alarms for £200—it was the fact that the Duke casually mentioned he had paid £200 for a £400 outfit which put me on to it—the old man fell for the bargain. Soapy had an old friend in the house, and all he had to do was to walk in, unlock the door, unlock the safe, of which he very naturally had keys—since he had supplied it—walk off with the swag, and nobody would know when or how the burglary was committed. Of course, it was only accident that Cole had got a job as valet. He would have been just as useful if he had been a plain under-footman."

"What did the Duke say?" asked Camp¬bell.

Bob laughed.

"He cursed me. He said he had lost the best valet he had ever had."

"That's what I say about society," said Mr. Campbell; "they are thickheaded and heavy——"

"What do you say about my expenses?" said Bob. "They are a bit thick and heavy, too!"

III. — BACCARAT AT COWES

WHEN Henry B. Vandersluis determined to break into English society he went about his work in the same thorough business¬like manner which had enabled him to create in the Vandersluis Furniture Cor¬poration the largest wonder of the furnishing world. Nobody knows accurately how many acres of ground are covered by the Vandersluis Works at Grand Rapids, Michigan, and now that Mr. Vandersluis is a British citizen, having forsworn his allegiance to the United States Govern¬ment, it is inexpedient to ask him, since he would probably fix his uncomfortable monocle and ask:

"Is there such a place as Grand Rapids?"

He brought to Europe in the late 'nineties twenty million dollars and a passionate admiration for the British aristocracy, into the ranks of which he set himself to climb.

And Henry B. was some climber. His feet were so impervious to the icy blasts of British indifference, and to the rugged character of the stony steps he was mount¬ing, that they grew neither cold nor sore.

He bought a wonderful estate in Somer¬setshire, a town house in Grosvenor Square, which has more Dukes to the inch than any other square. He bought a racing stable, and equipped it with thoroughbred race¬horses which pranced down to the starting-gate very proudly, and came back to the winning-post at their leisure, and he pur¬chased with real money that curiosity which is so often described in the public Press, but which is so very seldom seen, "a floating palace."

The only people who can float palaces are company promoters, and they only float picture palaces anyway, but the steam yacht Oisa, or, as it was commonly desig¬nated in Southampton, the Oh I Say, was palatial in its fittings, furnishings, and feedings. It was beautiful as to line, most powerfully engined, skilfully captained, officered, and manned, and lacked only one thing to complete its palatial character. To cut a long description short, the Oisa was a palace with a king but without courtiers.

There were wonderful suites, which were suitable for the habitation of princes. They were mostly occupied by Mr. Vandersluis's portly city friends, who had no titles and few "h's" to their names. There was a wonderful reception saloon, in which Mr. Vandersluis was wont to receive letters from the aristocracy saying that they deeply regretted that, owing to a previous engagement, they were unable to avail themselves of his kind invitation to be present at the gala performance he had arranged, and begged to remain his very sincerely, etc. etc.

Cowes week was beginning. The road¬stead was gay with dainty white craft.

The lawn of the Yacht Squadron was packed with hot but exclusive humanity. On every yacht, however small, was a gay little party except on theOisa, where the party was Henry B., who was neither gay nor little, for he weighed 260 pounds in his stockinged feet.

He stood on the high poop of the Oisa surrounded by comfortable but empty deck chairs, and his secretary, a sallow young man who chewed gum all day long and far into the night, gazed through his pince-nez over the sun-kissed waves and wondered how long the old man would give him ashore.

Henry B. turned from a contemplation of the well-filled yachts to his own tenant-less poop.

"Fine, isn't it?" he said bitterly. "I have a good mind to hire a band, open champagne for the deck hands, and cruise around."

"It will be all right to-morrow," said the secretary, "but I told you it would be lonely. Why didn't you get Smithers and Jackson down?"

"Smithers and Jackson are out," snarled Mr. Vandersluis. "Say, they're no good, those city people. They do nothing except talk about where they can get the best dinner in London, and how they put one over on the Bank of England, and all that sort of stuff. But I think I'll set 'em alight to-morrow," he said with a grim smile. "All those girls are coming down. You are running a special train for them?"

"Sure," said his secretary; "there's Gaby de Vere and Gertie Summers and Teddy Bristowe—a whole bunch of 'em."

"That's right," said Mr. Vandersluis; "get the women and you will get the men. I'll bet when they know all that crowd is on board we will have to put down extra ladders over the side to get 'em up."

He spoke with conviction, but neverthe¬less he was not convinced, and after striding up and down the deck for a little while, he came back to his secretary.

"I thought the other idea would have brought 'em in, George," he said patheti¬cally; "I got the best roulette table that you can find on any of these yachts. D'ye think they know they can have a game here?"

"Sure," said the secretary, "I have put it about very thoroughly. I have seen a lot of fellows from the other yachts. I have talked with the servants, and passed the quiet tip that if anybody likes to come aboard they will be welcome."

"Did you put in the paragraph I told you?"

George nodded, slipped his fingers into his waistcoat pocket, and pulled out a folded newspaper cutting.

"Here it is."

Mr. Vandersluis adjusted his glasses and read:

A FLOATING BANK

AMERICAN MILLIONAIRE CARRIES HALF A MILLION POUNDS ON HIS YACHT

"Mr. Henry B. Vandersluis, a well-known figure in London society"—(Mr. Vandersluis groaned)—"does not bother about banks when he is on a yachting cruise, and is ready to move off to any part of the world, and with this possibility in view he carries aboard with him an enormous sum of money, reputed to be half a million. There is method in this apparent eccentricity, because Mr. Vandersluis is a great art collector, and the necessity for cash transactions in this busi¬ness is obvious."

"You would have thought that would attract them," said Mr. Vandersluis. "I have never known money that didn't, and I don't suppose my money's different to anybody else's. But somehow we only attract the fellows we don't want. Who is this?"

He pointed over to the side, where a boat was rowing direct for the yacht's gangway.

"Perhaps it's a real fellow," said Mr. Vandersluis hopefully.

"He looks like a clerk to me," said the unimaginative George. "Lords don't wear white flannels and black boots—not the lords I've met."

The boatman brought his little craft alongside, and the passenger stepped up the ladder. He lifted his straw hat to Mr. Vandersluis, and produced carefully from his inside pocket a letter.

Henry B. was used to receiving letters. He turned it over and read on the flap, "The Federated Assurances."

"Business, eh?" he said, and ripped it open.

It read:

"Dear Sir,—I have read with some un¬easiness in the morning Press an account of the large sums of money which you are carrying on the Oisa, and I am sending you this letter by special passenger and, as you may be sure, in no interfering, but in a helpful spirit, to ask you, in view of all the circumstances, and particularly bearing in mind the fact that you are heavily insured against burglary at this office, whether you would agree to receive as your guest our best detective, Mr. Robert Brewer, of whom no doubt you have heard in America.

"Mr. Brewer informs me that there is at present in the Isle of Wight a particularly dangerous band of crooks, and he fears that the announcement in the papers may induce them to visit you. ("Let 'em!" grunted Mr. Vandersluis.)

Our suggestion is that Mr. Brewer should come to you to-morrow, disguised as a deck hand (our Mr. Brown, the bearer of this, will point Mr. Brewer out to you, but it would be in¬advisable that he should meet you). Society, as you know, is a prey to the malefactors of all nationalities, and it would be a great pleasure to us to offer you this service, for which no charge is made."

It was signed "Douglas Campbell."

Mr. Vandersluis folded the letter and looked at the bearer over his glasses.

"Do you know the contents of this?"

"Yes, sir."

Henry B. pursed his lips.

"I don't like having sleuths on board," he said, "and I think I am quite capable of looking after my own money, but if this insurance fellow worries I don't mind. You can send a wire telling Brewer he can come along. My secretary will see that it is sent off."

He called to that worthy.

"George, put Mr. Brown up for the night. What do you drink?"

"Lemonade, sir," said the virtuous Mr. Brown, and Henry B. Vandersluis, who had fifty unopened cases of Moet and Chandon 1906 in the hold, groaned.

In the evening at dinner, however, Mr. Brown in a spirit of reckless dissipa¬tion, took no less than two glasses of port, which he insisted upon calling port wine, and under the mellowing influence of alcohol he babbled freely. He and George and Henry B. were the sole occupants of the long table, which filled an almost regal dining-saloon.

"Society, bah!" said Mr. Vandersluis.

"That's what Mr. Campbell says," said Mr. Brown. "He says that society——"

"I don't want to know what Mr. Campbell said," said Henry B. inconsistently. "He has no right to discuss society the way he does. In the first place, he is not a society man; in the second place, he is society's servant—my servant."

"That's what Mr. Brewer tells him," said the undaunted Mr. Brown.

"Brewer? Oh, that's the fellow that is coming to-morrow. What's he like? I seem to remember that I heard about him."

"He is a very nice man," said Brown enthusiastically. "He's a most wonderful disguiser."

"Bah!" said Mr. Vandersluis, "you needn't point him out to me. I would spot him in a thousand. I know these detectives. There's something about 'em that is unmistakable. It's a mare's nest, this crooks' dope. What chance have they got of getting on board here? I've twenty deck hands and stokers. I am half a mile

from the shore, and I can pull quicker and shoot straighter than any man lying off Cowes to-night."

"I am sure you can," agreed Mr. Brown, helping himself to another port wine. "The moment I saw you I said—'That man can pull quicker and shoot straighter than any man lying off Cowes to-night.'"

"They've all tried to skin me—the Moore gang and the O'Donovans, and that feller that went over the water for twenty years. They've all failed. They can't skin me, boy!"

"The first thing I said to myself when I saw you," said Mr. Brown a little drowsily, "was—'That's the fellow they can't skin.'"

Henry B. looked at him with an amused smile.

"It doesn't take much to affect you, and really, I think you ought to have stuck to lemonade."

"I'm all ri——" said Mr. Brown heroi¬cally attempting to rise, and sitting down unexpectedly, to judge from his look of pained surprise which crossed his face.

"Make yourself comfortable in that chair. Here, give him a hand up."

They lifted Mr. Brown and dropped him into a luxurious arm-chair originally designed for the comfort of royalty, and there they left him and went on deck.

It was Henry B.'s practice to sit on the deserted deck till twelve o'clock, though he found no pleasure in the sound of revelry by night, the bleating of distant gramo¬phones, or the sedate and distant "Hump! Hump!" of the Yachts Squadron Band.

George, his secretary, under a deck light, was playing patience, and Mr. Vandersluis had left his seat, and was leaning over the rail when a voice in the darkness hailed him. It did not exactly hail him, but was addressed impersonally—

"Yacht ahoy!"

The hour was close on midnight, and Mr. Vandersluis hesitated, for the voice was that of a woman.

Presently the voice spoke again, and this time it was nearer.

"Help me, will you, please; I've lost an oar."

He peered down in the water, and only a few yards from the yacht's gangway he detected a small boat. Without waiting to call a deck hand, he ran down the com¬panion ladder, lifted a coiled line from its hook, and threw it dexterously in the direction of the boat. The first time he missed, and had to pull in the wet rope, but the second time he heard the "thwack!" of it fall across the gunwales,

and he hauled in.

It was a woman, and in the darkness he saw she was in evening-dress. He lifted her on to the little platform, made fast the dinghy, and supported her on to the deck. In the overhead lights he saw she was young and beautiful. Her dress was expensive, and the rope of pearls about her neck represented a fortune.

The girl was apparently overcome by fatigue, and dropped limply into one of the padded chairs.

"Get some brandy, George," said Mr. Vandersluis, thrilled by the adventure, "or open a bottle of that wine," he said, brightening at the thought.

The girl drank the amber liquid eagerly, and looked up with a grateful smile.

"I have been very foolish," she said. "I thought I could row to my father's yacht. When I came out of the club the man was not in the boat, so I rowed by myself. I am Lady Mary Glendellon," she introduced herself, "and my father is the Earl of Crouboro."

"Glad to meet you," said Mr. Vandersluis huskily; "I was hoping to meet your father, but he has had an important engage¬ment in Wales. I didn't know he was back."

The girl smiled faintly.

"Oh, yes; he's back," she said. "I am awfully grateful to you. You have prob¬ably saved my life, and my father will never be sufficiently grateful to you. It was so silly of me. I stayed later at the club than I should; you see, really, we weren't at the club at all," she said in a burst of frankness, "but at Lord Bentel's place, but you mustn't tell father that, and we were playing baccarat."

Mr. Vandersluis smiled politely.

"Oh, you modern girls," he said. "What would your grandmother think about play¬ing baccarat."

She laughed and he laughed, and they were good friends at once—so good that she refused his offer to provide a boat for her to row back to her yacht.

"It's lovely here. What a beautiful boat," she said with an admiring glance round. "Do let me see it before I go." He escorted her round, and everything delighted her.

"I will come to-morrow and bring father," she said (Mr. Vandersluis took a deep breath). "They really ought to see this yacht. It's lovely. And I'll bring the Duchess of Thatcham. She is a most de¬lightful creature."

By this time they had reached the door of the saloon, and the girl was in before Henry B. realized that the occupant of one of the large chairs was a

dishevelled clerk. He nodded to his secretary, who went in advance and skilfully swung the chair round so that only its back was visible.

"And this is the saloon!" she said.

The table had been cleared, and great bowls of roses had taken the place of the silver and glass. She sat herself down at one end of the table, laid a big silk bag be¬fore her, and Mr. Vandersluis sat on her left, his ear sensitive for any snores which might come from the chair.

"This has been a very exciting day for me," said the girl.

"Are you sure I ought not to order a dinghy for you?" said Mr. Vandersluis. "Won't the Earl be worried?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "I don't think you are quite used to our ways, Mr.—I didn't get your name."

"Vandersluis," he informed her.

"Yes, it has been an exciting day," she said, ticking off her lingers. "I have been nearly lost at sea; I won £1,000 at baccarat; I was nearly robbed of my pearls."

"Nearly robbed of your pearls?"

"Haven't you heard?" said the girl. "There's an awful lot of people at Cowes—what do you call them—it's an American word?"

"Crooks?" suggested Mr. Vandersluis.

"Yes, that is the word. There are two men and a woman. You've heard about them?"

Mr. Vandersluis had not heard about them, but he nodded. It was not his practice to admit that any secret of the world was a secret to him.

"Well, it was this horrid woman herself—what do they call her, Swift Sara?—isn't it a ridiculous name?"

"Oh, I have heard of Swift Sara," said Mr. Vandersluis in truth. "What happened?"

"She came on board this morning," said her Ladyship, "pretending that she had been engaged by me as a lady's maid. I was ashore at the time, and as I had en¬gaged a maid, nobody questioned her. They showed her down to my cabin, and if it had not been for the astuteness of our chief steward, who wouldn't let her open a single box until I returned, she would have taken everything."

"You're a very fortunate young woman. Did she escape?"

Lady Mary nodded.

"She made an excuse to go ashore, and she hasn't been seen since," she said.

"It worried me terribly. Otherwise I would not have worn my pearls to-night."

Mr. Vandersluis tried to continue the conversation, but he found the lady absent-minded.

"I wonder if you would get your man to row me ashore?" she said.

"Ashore?"

She nodded.

"It is the fever," she laughed gaily. Dipping her hand into her bag she produced first a thick pack of cards, and then a large roll of money.

Mr. Vandersluis was shocked, but he was amused.

"Come, come, you're not going back to lose that money," he said.

"I shan't lose it," said the girl with con¬fidence. "Why, I have won consistently for twelve months."

"Look here, if you want to play baccarat you can play with me," said Henry B. "I don't want to take your money," he said hastily as he saw the girl hesitate.

"Oh, please, don't be horrid," she pleaded "If you like I'll play, but you mustn't tell my father."

So they played, and Mr. Vandersluis won and won, and the lady's roll grew thinner and thinner. He was wondering what ex¬cuse he could make for returning the money, and congratulating himself upon having touched the top notch in the most exclusive set—for who does not know that the patron¬age of the Earl of Crouboro is equivalent to a presentation at Court?—when she pro¬duced an even bigger roll from the depths of her bag.

"It's all winnings, so you needn't mind taking it," she said. "It is my bank, and I will make it £2,000."

"Banco!" said Mr. Vandersluis obligingly and lost.

With alternate winnings, he lost consis¬tently for the greater part of an hour. George was despatched to the safe under Henry B.'s bunk and came back with a large wad of £100 notes, which faded and faded and faded until what had resembled a volume of the encyclopædia bore the appearance of a slender volume of poems.

Mr. Vandersluis was getting hot. It was one thing to win from the aristocracy, and devise means whereby the money could be restored without hurt to the fair loser, but when the fair loser had devised a method of her own which hurt nobody's feelings but his——

"Open that port light," growled Mr. Vandersluis; "the saloon is getting hot, and bring some more money."

The money came, and half-way through it her Ladyship looked at her watch

and uttered a little scream of consternation.

"A quarter past two," she said, thrust¬ing some loose notes into her bag; "really I must go now."

A little light passed the port-hole, and she jumped up and looked out. "Oh, it's father's steam launch. He must have heard I was on board," she said. "Good night, Mr. Vandersluis; I'll come and see you in the morning."

Mr. Vandersluis, who was perspiring heavily, and was conscious of severe finan¬cial loss, held out his large hand.

"Won't you say good night to me?"

It was Mr. Brown who stood by the door, his hands in his pockets, a beatific smile on his face.

The girl raised her eyebrows.

"I beg your pardon," she said coldly.

"Won't you say good night to me, Sara?" said Bob Brewer. "It's years and years and years since we met. Do you remember the night I pinched you at what the newspapers picturesquely described as your Long Island bower, for robbing James H. Seidlitz of everything except his beautifully embroidered shirt?"

"Aw, you make me tired!" said the girl, then leapt like lightning to the port-hole and cried a word of warning.

"Don't worry about your pals," said Bob lazily. "There's been a police-boat waiting for them ever since you came on board."

"Then, then?" gasped Mr. Vandersluis, "she's not Earl Crouboro's daughter?"

"I know nothing about the Earl's private life," said Bob carefully, "but if she is he's quite unconscious of the fact."

"Of course," said Mr. Douglas Campbell, "he had no claim on us, even if he lost his money at cards. That is a risk we do not take, but you will get your commission just the same, Bob. It only shows you that what society wants ____"

"What I want," said Bob, "is ten per cent, on the gross savings, and I suggest to you that you should put it up to old man Vandersluis that he hasn't a dog's chance of getting into the Peerage unless he pays it!"

IV. — A RACE AT OSTEND

"WHAT do people go to Ostend for?" asked Bob Brewer irritably, addressing

the general manager of Federated Assurances.

Douglas Campbell shook his head.

"Why do people do anything?" he asked, "because somebody else does it. Ostend I like, personally. I like to paddle with the kids and to bathe with the girls."

"Phew!" said Bob, fanning himself vigorously.

"I mean," said Mr. Campbell hastily, "I like the mixed bathing; I like the sea, and I like the Digue, and I like to sit in the Kursaal and listen to the orchestra."

"Nobody cares what you like," said Bob. "I am asking why regular people who have got money to spend do it?"

"Well, there are the races," explained Mr. Campbell; "there's the Cercle Privee where you can make or lose money, accord¬ing to your luck. There's the perfectly delightful air, the lobsters—anyway, people go to Ostend, and I have booked you an inexpensive room at a nice little hotel near the docks."

"You can cancel that," said Bob, "and book me a suite de luxe at the Splendid, which I understand is the most expensive of the hotels."

"But, my dear chap, there's nothing on," said the desperate Mr. Campbell; "you are simply going over with a watching brief. You are not taking on any special job. In fact, it's a kind of holiday for you. The directors feel that they would like you to enjoy yourself without any worry or care. Of course, if you see a man go up to one of our clients and take his pearl pin, you will do your best to persuade him not to. But there is no special reason why you should go over."

"All right, I won't go," said the other.

"At the same time," Mr. Campbell was in a hurry to explain, "there are four necklaces and a collar of diamonds already there; about £100,000 worth of pearls which are going on Saturday's boat, and quite a number of emeralds which are due to leave next week."

"What am I to do with these interesting jewels if I see them?" asked Bob. "I pre¬sume you mean that people who are owners of these baubles, and who are heavily insured with this office, are either in Ostend or are going there. You don't mean to suggest that three or four necklaces are going to walk arm-in-arm on the boat, or that I shall meet an emerald in the smoking-room drinking an absinthe frappe?"

"That is what I mean," said Mr. Camp¬bell. "You go over and keep your eyes skinned."

"It is not keeping my eyes skinned that worries me. It's sitting on a confoundedly hot beach getting my nose skinned that worries me. But because

you are a nice, kind Scotsman, or rather you bear a Scottish name, which is altogether different, I will oblige you. Book me that suite at the Splendid."

"Couldn't you go disguised as a humble tourist?" asked Mr. Campbell anxiously, "and live in accordance with your role."

"I am going disguised as an arrogant millionaire—I find I can live up to that part much better," said Bob.

It was, however, at the more modest establishment, the Hôtel des Thermes, which during the war had been a regimental headquarters of the German Army, and had been bombed accordingly, that Bob took up his residence. He spent the first day in a motor-car, visiting the battlefields between Dixmude and Ypres, and came back in a chastened frame of mind.

He went to the Kursaal that night and heard the music, strolled into the Cercle Privee and found it very interesting, searched a few cafes in the hope of meeting undesirable acquaintances, and drew blank, and went to bed that night with the con¬viction that whatever temptations divers unattached ropes of pearls, diamonds and emeralds might offer to the criminal classes, Ostend at the moment was singularly innocent.

When he turned out to take the early morning sunshine he thought he had never seen Ostend looking so beautiful. The flower-beds in the centre of the broad avenue leading to the Kursaal blazed with colour. The building, white and delicate looking, the glass-fronted restaurants, the flower-decked balconies all combined to produce that sense of a holiday which only the Continental town can bring to the stranger.

After breakfast, he strolled into the office of the chief of police, and the Belgian greeted him as a long-lost brother, for they had worked together in New York two years before the war.

"No," said the chief, "there's no bad men here. We watch the boats very care¬fully, and so do the British police at the other end. Lew Simmons got through, but I pulled him in and sent him back by the next boat. A couple of crooks—who came from Paris by way of Brussels—I caught the first day they were here, and they are in prison at Ghent on a charge of travelling with forged passports. No, Monsieur Brewer, Ostend is blameless."

"It's too blamed blameless to be good," said Bob. "It isn't natural with all this portable property lying about, and the right hooks of crookdom suffering from chronic itch for spoil, that you should not shelter a lad or two who is collecting material for his great work on 'How I got Rich at Ostend, By One who Did It.'"

"It does seem unreal," admitted the Belgian, "but there you are! I've been through the Coq d'Or crowd with a small tooth-comb, if you will pardon the vul¬garity."

"Oh, I'll pardon it," said Bob; "I've been through there myself. It's full of simple-minded people drinking lemon squash and playing dominoes. Yet I can't escape the conviction that a raid is being planned. By-the-way, isn't Teddy Bolter in Bel¬gium?"

The police chief nodded.

"A reformed character, monsieur," he said emphatically. "He was in Brussels during the occupation by the Germans, and rendered invaluable assistance to Belgium. He is running a little American bar here in this town. You will find it in the rue Petit Leopold."

"I'll see Teddy," said Bob—and to Teddy he went.

Mr. Bolter was a stout, broad-shouldered man of middle age. He carried in his face a cigar, which maintained itself at an angle of forty-five degrees, and never seemed to grow any shorter.

"Why! if it isn't Mr. Brewer," he said, extending a hearty hand across the zinc counter. "Well, wonders will never cease. Will you have a soft drink, Mr. Brewer, or shall I make you a nice Bronx, Manhattan, Ginsling Martini, Clover Club?"

"Get thee behind me, Satan," said Bob; "how are things, Teddy?"

"Bright and straight," said Teddy slowly and deliberately, emphasizing the last word; "and honourable old age for mine and a lovely little villa at St. Jean de Luz, where I can tell my golden-haired grandchildren the story of my adventurous life."

"Very, very pretty," said Bob; "that's the stuff to give 'em, Teddy. I can see you sitting in front of your château, bathed in the golden sunlight, spielling the story of how you smashed the Bank of Detroit and shot up the watchman. It's a story," Bob mused, "which would bring tears to the eyes of the young and innocent," he added, "and golden-haired."

"Say, that's all gone by," said Teddy. "I'm straight now, Mr. Brewer. Gee! If I had my life to live over again."

"It's hardly likely that you will have," said Bob; "so why worry. Any of the boys here?"

"Boys?" said the puzzled Mr. Bolter, "you don't mean crooks, I hope, because if you do I haven't seen one for years—except my Dago bar-tender, who dipped into the till and lit out for Holland."

"Deepest regrets," said Bob; "a new experience for you, Teddy."

Mr. Bolter ignored the implication.

"No, sir," he said, energetically swabbing the counter as he spoke. "I'm through with that game. I've got a nice lot of customers. All the trainers and

jockeys come in here, and I get a lot of information about horses. I suppose you're not staying for the races, are you, Mr. Brewer?"

"I'm not so sure," said Bob. "My movements are a little uncertain."

"Here on business, perhaps?" suggested the other carelessly.

"I am making a business of pleasure just now," said Bob; "but if I stay on I'll come to you for a tip."

"You needn't trouble to come," said Teddy earnestly. "I can tell you what will win the big handicap—Thotis, the English horse that has come over to run, Mr. Mandle Jones's."

Bob was on his way to the door, but at the name of Mr. Mandle Jones he turned, for who did not know Mandle Jones (his father was born Mendlessohn), the young gentleman who had discovered 195 novel ways of losing money?

"I'd like to do you a good turn, sir," Teddy went on, but was stopped by the queer look in the other's eyes.

"Would you, Teddy?" said Bob quietly. "Well, I don't know that you owe me any great love."

"Let bygones be bygones," said Teddy stoutly. "You were only doing your duty, and I'm not a man that harbours malice. You back Thotis. It arrived from England this morning, and if it doesn't win I'll eat my boots."

"A fat lot of good that would do me," said Bob, "if I had backed it. However, I'll take your word for it."

He went back to his hotel, to find a tele¬gram, which ran:—

"Urgent; am coming to Ostend. Meet me this afternoon's boat."

Bob knit his forehead over this, but punctually at the hour was waiting on the quay when the Princess Clementine came alongside.

"Welcome to Ostend," said Bob ex¬travagantly, as Douglas Campbell stepped ashore. "You have just come in time to make money. I've had a great tip for to-morrow's race."

Mr. Campbell looked at him.

"It isn't Thotis by any chance, is it?" he asked, and Bob stared.

"Now, you've been reading the sporting newspapers," he said. "What do you know about Thotis?"

"Nothing," said Campbell; "except that I've come over with the owner. I want to introduce you to him. Just stand here for a little while."

The owner was a young man who looked as if he had stepped out of a band-

box, so polished and well creased was he,

"Hello, Campbell!" he said, "I thought I had got rid of you."

"May I introduce Mr. Robert Brewer?" said Campbell, and the young man favoured Bob with a nod, and after a few generali¬ties passed on to join his valet at the Customs counter.

"What's the idea?" asked Bob. Campbell did not explain till they reached the hotel.

"Bob," he said, "I have often talked to you about the follies of society."

"Too often," said Bob.

"Well," said Campbell, "I am inclined to revise my opinion. I discovered yester¬day that one of our companies had effected a policy which, for sheer insanity and one-¬sidedness is about the worst thing I have seen in all my career. That a member of society should have put one over on us makes me, as I say, revise my opinion of the aristocracy."

"For heaven's sake!" said Bob, "you are not referring to young Mendleheimer in these flattering terms."

"That's the man," nodded Mr. Campbell. "His blood may not be as blue as the Bruces or the Stuarts, but he is very popular and has money to burn. Now listen to this."

He took out his pocket-book and drew forth a folded paper, which he opened.

"This is the rough scheme of his policy. 'We undertake to insure all his personal property against burglary, larceny, whether larceny from the person or from the house, larceny by fraud, larceny by trick, and robbery by violence.' Now, nobody who knows this young man's habits would have effected a policy like that, and the manager that put it through has been fired and the director who endorsed the policy has had to resign. It has six months to run, and hitherto he has been watched by the insurance company concerned. But now, in the terms of a contract by which the company in question came into the Federa¬tion, the liability is ours."

"Well?" said Bob.

"Well," said Campbell, "that poor, misguided young man has brought £30,000 in Bank of England notes to Ostend to back this very horse you spoke of."

Bob scratched his chin.

"That's absurd," he said; "how could he put £30,000 on his horse in the totalizer; he would get such a poor return for his money that it wouldn't be worth doing. Besides, what if he does lose it, or risk it? You have not insured him against betting losses."

"We have insured him against larceny by a trick, and I am convinced it is by a trick he is going to lose it; because, accord¬ing to people who understand such things, his horse cannot be beaten."

"I'll have a talk with him," said Bob, after a moment's thought; "I am rather curious on one point."

"Talk with him after dinner. He is coming to dine with me to-night."

Mr. Mandle Jones came to dinner, but with an ill grace, evidently regretting his appointment.

"Look here, you fellows," he said, "I shan't be able to stay long, and why you came over goodness knows!" he said to Campbell. "If you don't mind my being perfectly frank—that's my weak point, frankness—I think it was a bit of cheek of your company to interfere. Just as if I wasn't to be trusted with money."

"Mr. Jones," said Campbell earnestly, "I was an old friend of your father, and the least I can do is to look after his son's interests."

Mandle Jones laughed.

"I know all about you," he said. "I've got a funny insurance policy which you have just taken over haven't I?" he winked at Bob. "I forget the details, but do you guarantee me against any losses I incur at horse-racing?"

"That's the question I was asking," smiled Bob. "I can't see you losing any¬way, if all I hear about the horse is true; but I certainly can't see you winning any¬thing."

"Why not?" asked Mandle Jones sharply.

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you know how the Pari Mutuel works. The money taken by the totalizer is divided up, less 10 per cent, amongst those who have backed the winning horse. Suppose you have a big bet, £30,000 shall I say?"

"You evidently know all about it," grinned Mandle Jones.

"Well, suppose you do, and the general public subscribe £20,000 between them on yours and other horses. That means £60,000 to be divided out, less 10 per cent. Obviously you cannot make much more profit than about £10,000."

"Agreed, my buck," smiled Mandle Jones jovially, "and that is why I am not going to bet on the infernal totalizer."

"But what bookmaker would take your money?" asked Bob.

"Burgen & Brock," replied the other promptly, and Bob noted the names. "I have fixed it up with them. They are going to lay me four to one to my money. What do you think of that?"

"I think they must be philanthropists," said Bob.

When the young man had left the dining¬-room he rose.

"I am going out to make a few inquiries, Campbell. Bookmakers don't bet in that big way, and somehow it doesn't seem natural to me."

He sought out the hall-porter, a mine of accurate information on all things Belgian.

"Oh, yes, monsieur. I know Burgen & Brock. It is the oldest established bookmaking firm in Belgium."

"Are they straight?" asked Bob bluntly.

"Oh, yes, perfectly straight, and in the old days all the aristocracy who came here used to bet with them. Of course, they have had a bad time during the war like everybody else. Mr. Burgen died, and Mr. Brock carries on the business."

He strolled into the Cercle Privee at the Kursaal, and found two or three men who were associated with British sport whom he knew well. Lord Tathington was one of these, and his Lordship was very emphatic.

"Both Burgen and Brock are straight," he said. "Brock, who has the business now since his partner died, is as honourable a man as you could wish to deal with. Why do you ask? Have you had a bet with them?"

"No," said Bob. "Where does Brock live?"

"He has an office in Brussels, but either he or his representative attend the Ostend races."

Bob looked at his watch. He had ten minutes to catch the night train to Brussels, and though it meant travelling in evening dress, he made the journey, arriving in the middle of the night.

It was not until lunch time on the day of the races that Douglas Campbell, an un¬easy man—he was cursed with a psychic sense of impending loss—saw his sleuth.

"What have you discovered?" asked Campbell.

"Lots of things," replied Bob. "Say, have you ever tried making inquiries about the stability of a bookmaker at 3 a.m. in a foreign town? Unless I am greatly mistaken about Mandle Jones, he is one of those simple souls who have implicit faith in themselves and nobody else."

Campbell nodded.

"So I thought."

"But I think it is a little too late to make explanations to him. I want you to do exactly as I tell you."

"They are not going to poison the horse, are they?" asked Campbell.

"I shouldn't imagine so," said Bob. "I believe the horse is very well guarded, and there is not a chance of getting at him. At least, my brief inquiries lead to this view."

"But what do you mean when you say I have got to carry out your instructions?" asked Douglas Campbell fearfully.

"You must agree to every suggestion I make, and now if you are ready we will go to the Hippodrome."

The Wellington Hippodrome was crowded with race-goers, and with difficulty they made their way into the paddock. The numbers had gone up for the first race, but it was not until that race was being run and the paddock was comparatively empty that they saw Mandle Jones, who also saw them and tried to avoid them. But Bob was not to be avoided. He planted himself squarely in the young owner's way.

"Mr. Jones, I have got a plain proposition to make to you."

"Chuck it off your chest," said Mandle Jones inelegantly.

"Well, I will tell you first of all that I am a detective, and it is my job to make in¬quiries. Are you backing your horse with ready money?"

Jones frowned and hesitated.

"Yes," he said shortly. "I have brought the money with me."

"In £1000 notes, I presume?" said Bob.

The other nodded.

"Well, what about it?" he asked.

"Will you do me this favour?" the detec¬tive went on. "Don't back this horse of yours until it has gone to the post."

"You can bet your life I shan't," smiled the other, "not until I see him safe on the course do I invest a penny."

"That's promise number one," said Bob. "You have been offered four to one on your money. Does it seem strange to you that the bookmakers guarantee this price up to the time of the race?"

"It's a gamble for them," said Mr. Jones. "What's the next thing you want?"

"I will tell you that later," said Bob.

The crowd came swarming back into the paddock and waited with patience till the price of the last winner was displayed on the Pari Mutuel board and then the betting began for the Municipal Cup.

Bob saw with interest that on the book¬maker's list Thotis was a two to one

chance and was never quoted at more than five to two. He took his place near the mild and speckled young man who stood in line with the other bookmakers and bore the magic legend upon the band of his straw hat—"Burgen and Brock."

Presently he saw Mr. Mandle Jones approach him, and gripping Campbell's arm he moved towards him. The horses were leaving the paddock, and Mr. Jones had kept his promise.

"Don't detain me," said the young man; "put your proposition as quickly as you can."

"It is this," said Bob. "Burgen & Brock offer you four to one for your money. Mr. Campbell offers you five to one."

The wail of protest which rose to Camp¬bell's lips was not heard in the din. Mandle Jones hesitated.

"But you are not a bookmaker."

"Do you doubt Mr. Campbell's ability to pay?" asked Bob.

"Certainly not," said the young man, and looked over Bob's shoulder to the ex¬pectant representative of Burgen & Brock.

"Is it a bet?" asked Bob.

Mr. Mandle Jones came from a race whose passion in life is to bet a little over the odds.

"It's a bet," he said.

Bob held out his hand and thirty crisp £1000 notes were counted in.

"You lay me £150,000 to £30,000," said Mr. Jones.

Douglas Campbell could make no reply, but Bob was prompt.

"That's the size of it," he said, and gripping Campbell's arm more closely he led him unprotesting and dazed to the front of the stands.

"But—but you're mad!" gasped Camp¬bell. "Good heavens! we shall have to pay if it wins. You're mad, Brewer! You've ruined me!"

"Hush!" said Bob. "Look at the pretty racehorses lined up at the gate—they're off!"

The gate snapped, and ten horses leapt forward like one. Bob was watching the race through his glasses, and knew the worst after the horses had gone two furlongs. Right ahead of the field stretched Thotis, two lengths in front of everything. The race is easily described. Thotis led from start to finish, and won in a canter by six lengths.

"Sit down," said Bob kindly. "This, I fear, is a slight shock for you."

Campbell could only shake his head helplessly, and at that moment the jubilant Mandle Jones came towards them with long strides.

"How did he do it? Well, Campbell, old sport, I hope you like bookmaking. You can give me a cheque on your jolly old insurance company for the £150,000, and I'll take my £30,000 back."

"Don't be precipitate, young sir," said Bob.

"What do you mean?" asked the other suspiciously.

"The boy, Seul, who rode your horse, is a great pal of a dear old friend of mine, one Teddy Bolter, of whom you have never heard, but he is a gentleman who gets his money by fleecing the mugs."

"Here, I say," said Mr. Jones explosively, "I don't want to hear a lecture on jockeys."

"Come away, Brewer." It was Douglas Campbell, who had found his voice, but had found it very shaky. "I will arrange for that cheque for you, Mr. Jones, and——"

A man ran past from the direction of the weighing-room and shouted something. "Hey, what's that?" said Bob.

"It sounded to me as though your horse had been disqualified for carrying short weight," said Bob. "I should go along and find out if I were you."

Mr. Jones raced back to the weighing-room to discover the sad truth. Thotis was disqualified. One of the leaden weights which had been placed in the saddle-bag to bring the jockey's weight up to that which the horse had to carry had mysteri¬ously disappeared.

They found it later in the afternoon on an unfrequented part of the field, where the jockey had thrown it on his way down to the post, having extracted it whilst seem¬ingly adjusting his stirrups.

"I went to Brussels last night," said Bob, on the way back to the hotel, "and found that the business of Burgen & Brock had been sold earlier this year to Mr. Bolter for £5,000. Bolter did not associate himself with the business, knowing that sooner or later he would catch a rich boob lured by the traditional honesty of the firm. You will probably find that it was Bolter who suggested this horse running. He has always one or two touts working for him, and certainly it was Bolter who got in touch with Mandleheimer and offered him this magnificent bet. We shall have to give that child back his £30,000, I suppose."

"Well," said Mr. Campbell, "I suppose we shall. But tell me, Bob, wasn't I acting as a commission agent?"

"You were," said Bob, anticipating the next question, "but you get no

commission except the commission of a good conscience and three minutes of excitement that should last you for life."

"I had that all right," said Mr. Campbell, shivering at the recollection.

V. — THE HEPPLEWORTH PEARLS

LORD HEPPLEWORTH looked over his pince-nez at his young wife, who sat at the other side of the breakfast-table—as far, if the truth be told, as she could get from her lord and master—and remarked:

"My dear, the young man from the insurance company will be here at ten o'clock precisely."

Gladys, Countess Heppleworth, yawned.

"What is he coming for?" she asked indifferently, and Lord Heppleworth shud¬dered.

"My dear," he said, "how often have I told you never to employ a sentence which ends in a preposition? You should ask—'Why is he coming?' or, 'For what reason does he come?"

Lady Heppleworth looked wearily out of the window and suppressed a sigh.

"He is coming, of course, to inquire into the loss of the Heppleworth pearl," said his Lordship; "a most mysterious and baffling business, which I confess puzzles even me."

Lord Heppleworth was something over fifty, a lean, fair man, innocent of humour and wholly devoid of imagination. The mystery of the Heppleworth pearls was not, in the eyes of his friends, so great a mystery as that of his marriage. The last person in the world one would have imagined this childless widower would take to wife was Gladys de Vere, who played small parts in the Colidrome revues. Society was shocked and grieved, and waited for Lord Heppleworth's explanation. The possibility that he had fallen in love with a pretty face and a pert manner did not occur to them, be-cause they were of the opinion, as are so many people, that there are certain types of men to whom a pretty face does not appeal.

The truth is, of course, that no such type of man exists. It is true to say that Lord Heppleworth never regretted his marriage. It is equally true that Lady Heppleworth seldom ceased to regret it. She had had dreams of a most wonderful time—of parties, of trips to the Continent, of living in a gay whirl from morn till night, year in and year out. The reality was a little different.

Lord Heppleworth had an estate in Shrop¬shire, where he spent eight months

of the year, and a town house in London where he spent four months of the year. He left his town residence for his country seat on precisely the same day and at exactly the same hour every year, and he returned as punctually. He dined at the same res¬taurant every night; he went to the opera in the season; he attended committee meetings at his club, and took a mild interest in bees, with special and particular reference to the Mason bee. He did not dance or jazz, or do any evil thing, save play auction bridge for penny points.

Lord Heppleworth folded his copy of The Times and rang the bell for the maid.

"Parker," he said, "there are three pieces of bacon left; kindly preserve them, I like cold bacon for supper."

"Yes, m'Lord," said the girl.

"And I notice," said his Lordship, "that there were six loaves of bread purchased last week in excess of the quantity usually ordered. Can you account for this?"

"Yes, m'Lord," said the girl. "Her Ladyship had the extra bread to take into the park to feed the ducks."

Lord Heppleworth raised his protruding eyebrows at his wife.

"My dear, my dear," he said reproach¬fully, "isn't that a terrible waste? Don't you realize that there are thousands of poor children who would be most grateful for this bread that you are literally throwing to the ducks?"

Lady Heppleworth shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I'll send the bread to the poor," she said.

"That is unnecessary," said his Lordship, "absolutely unnecessary. There exist phil¬anthropic societies and institutions, with one of which I am associated, which carry out the distribution of food in a properly systematic manner."

"What do you expect me to do?" asked the girl, flouncing round exasperated. "Am I to sit here all day long twiddling my fingers?"

Lord Heppleworth raised his hand in protest.

"One moment, my dear," he said. Then, turning to the servant, "Parker, you may go. Now, my dear," he said when the door had closed, "let me ask you again to control yourself in the presence of servants. You have really nothing to complain about. You have a very generous allowance."

"Generous!" scoffed the girl. "Two hundred a year!"

"A very generous allowance, I assure you," said his Lordship. "When I was at Eton my father allowed me £50 a year and expected me to save money on it. And, what is more, I did," he said with some satisfaction.

"I'll bet you did," said the girl.

There was a discreet knock at the door, and Parker was back again.

"There's a gentleman to see your Lord¬ship," said the girl.

"Hasn't he a card?" demanded Lord Heppleworth, then looked at his watch.

"It must be the man from the insurance company," he said in a low tone to his wife. "Show him in here, Parker, You had better be present, my dear, because you will be able to supply him with information."

Bob Brewer came into the sunny breakfast-room, bowed to the girl and nodded to the man, whom he knew by sight.

"You are the young man from the in¬surance company, I suppose?" said Lord Heppleworth. "Will you please take a seat? Will you entertain Mr.—er?——"

"Brewer's my name," said Bob.

"Will you entertain Mr. Brewer, my dear, whilst I get the pearls?" said his Lordship.

"I think there's a great deal of fuss being made over the loss of a pearl," said the girl when her husband had gone.

"A pearl?" repeated Bob, interested, "I understood it was the necklace that had been stolen."

"Oh, no," said Lady Heppleworth quickly, "only one pearl. I suppose he has insured them with you?"

Bob nodded.

"Yes; the pearls are insured with us for £25,000. I suppose you have informed the police?"

"No; I do not think he has informed the police" (she never referred to Wilfred Emmerly, Earl of Heppleworth and Viscount Chipstone, in any way otherwise than "he"). "He'll tell you all about it when he comes back," she said; "I think a great fuss is being made."

Further conversation was interrupted by the return of Lord Heppleworth, carrying in his hand a flat, black leather case. This he opened, and displayed against a blue velvet interior one of the most beautiful ropes of pearls that Bob had ever seen.

"In that string," said his Lordship, "are, or were, sixty-three pearls. They are famous amongst jewels, having been ac¬quired by my great grandfather who, as you know, was one of the Governors of Madras in the reign of William IV. They were originally the property of an Indian rajah, who gave them to my ancestor for services which he was fortunate enough to render to his Highness."

"I know the story," said Bob readily. "Your relation ran away with the rajah's wife, or something of that sort, and she happened to be wearing them."

Lord Heppleworth coughed.

"There was some scandal, I believe," he said hurriedly, "but we need not go into that question. At any rate, here are the pearls—the finest in Europe. It is a practice of mine, and has been for years, to insist on my wife wearing the Heppleworth pearls whenever I take her out.

"I am so particular about these pearls," he added impressively, "that I make a point of counting them every night when they go out, and every night when they come in. That also is an old practice of mine, and one which, perhaps, may seem odd to you, if you did not know that I am a very careful man. Her Ladyship will tell you that I am most particular, and that I have even checked the laundry, both coming and going."

"And it needs checking," said Bob grimly.

"Very well," said his Lordship. "Last night we dined as usual in the restaurant of the Magnificent Hotel. I counted the pearls, and there were sixty-three, as I have counted them night after night—a fact that my wife will confirm."

"Oh, yes, I'll confirm it," said the girl, and Bob was a little startled at the under¬current of hostility in her tone.

"I counted sixty-three," said his Lord¬ship impressively. "We went to the restaurant and, except that my wife went to the retiring-room to take off her cloak and her furs, she was never out of my sight a second. We dined, taking an hour and a half over the meal, and during that period nobody approached her Ladyship except the waiter. Naturally, I am proud of my pearls, and I scarcely took my eyes off them during the meal. My wife went into the retiring-room, put on her cloak and furs, and returned with me in the car to the house. She took off the pearls in my presence, and I placed them in this very case; but before doing so I counted them, and there were only sixty-two."

He looked at Bob.

"Only sixty-two," repeated Bob. "You counted them again, of course, and you have counted them since."

"I have counted them a dozen times since, and there can be no mistake. Every pearl in that rope is familiar to me, and the pearl which is missing is one of the largest."

Bob picked up the rope and examined it carefully.

"There seems to be no sign of a break here," he said; "if a pearl has been taken off it is the work of an expert. At what do you value the missing pearl?"

"Between £700 and £1,000," said his Lord¬ship promptly. "It was one of the

best."

"Is there a possibility of it having fallen off in the car coming back?"

"None whatever," said Lord Hepple¬worth with asperity. "What a ridiculous question to ask! You've seen the string."

"Yes," said Bob slowly; "I've seen the string. I'll make a few inquiries. Her Ladyship has no theories, I suppose?"

"I don't know anything about it," said the girl. "I didn't even know how many pearls there were."

Bob went back to the office of the Federated Assurances and saw Douglas Campbell, the managing director.

"Well?" asked that anxious man.

"This holiday adventure of mine is rather a curious business," said Bob. "I suppose old Lord Thingumyjig is as honest as the day?"

"Oh, he's honest all right," replied Campbell. "Just tell me exactly what is amiss."

Bob described the loss and the circum¬stances which preceded it, and Campbell nodded.

"He is perfectly right. There were sixty-three pearls insured, and if there are now only sixty-two we are liable for the other one. Did you count them?"

"I took that trouble before I left," said Bob; "and the old man counted as well."

"What do you think of him?"

"A mean old devil," said Bob irrever¬ently. "I should imagine that his unhappy wife would be glad of the loss of the pearl if it's only for the sake of the excitement."

"He's all that," said Campbell. "As I say, I know him well. He's the sort of man who allows his servants so many ounces of bread a day, and wants to have all the bones accounted for. He has plenty of money, but doesn't know how to spend it."

Bob pursued his inquiries in unexpected quarters, and on the second day he returned with a whole lot of information.

"I can find out nothing about Lord Heppleworth," he said, "except that, by common consent, he is an unmitigated bore, painfully mean and frantically pedantic. Lady Heppleworth was in real life Gladys Surpet—that wasn't her stage name, but It was the name she acquired through the accident of birth. She has no mother or father living, but has one sister and one brother. The sister has been in a lot of trouble, and was associated in the Man¬chester bank fraud. The case was never brought home to her, but there's no doubt that she

was the woman who passed the drafts on the bank at Carlisle. The brother has not been as fortunate. He was con¬victed of larceny two years before the war, and served twelve months in His Majesty's prison."

"What do you suggest?" asked Campbell; "do you think the brother is in it?"

"I am certain he is not in it. As a matter of fact, he is in Australia. The last heard of him was that he was poor but honest. The sister, on the other hand, is still in the black books of the regular police. And what makes the case look rather queer against her is that she is known to be an expert jeweller. Old man Surpet was a working jeweller in a small way of business, and all the children except Gladys apparently worked in the shop."

"That doesn't explain the loss of the pearl," said Campbell.

"It may help," replied Bob; "at any rate, I am going to renew my acquaintance with the family, his Lordship having con¬descended to invite me to dinner. I may learn something fresh."

He was at the house to time, and found Lady Heppleworth waiting for him in the drawing-room. She was dressed for dinner, but he noticed that she was not wearing her pearls. She followed his glance and smiled.

"You're looking for the pearls?" she said. "Lord Heppleworth does not invest me with them until we leave the house—Lord Heppleworth is rather careful, you know," she said carelessly.

"I have noticed that," said Bob. Further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Lord Heppleworth carrying in his hand the familiar leather case. This he opened and lifted out the pearls.

"Sixty-two, my dear," he said with heavy jocularity. "I don't think you'll lose any to-night, with Mr. Brewer's eye on you."

She smiled faintly and picked up her cloak from the chair.

"The car is at the door," she said, and led the way out.

Lord Heppleworth was by no means an engaging companion. There were two sub¬jects on which he could speak at length, but without any great point. One was the habits of the Mason bee, the other was the high cost of living and the extravagance of servants in relation thereto. They arrived at the Hotel Magnificent and waited a few seconds whilst Lady Heppleworth divested herself of her cloak in the ladies' room, and his lordship led the way to the table which, it was his boast, he had occupied every night for the past eighteen seasons.

The dinner was no greater intellectual treat to Bob than the drive to the hotel had been. Lord Heppleworth was voluble but uninteresting; Lady Heppleworth was for the most part silent; and Bob found himself wondering what she was

thinking about as she sat there staring ahead of her, her fingers idly playing with the pearls about her neck.

"I want you to wait and come back with us," said his Lordship, when at long last the dinner ended. "I have one or two theories which I worked up this morning, and have written down for your examina¬tion."

"I have one or two theories myself," smiled Bob, "but I shan't write them down for your Lordship. Perhaps if you sent your notes on to me I would ——"

"I would rather explain them to you," said Lord Heppleworth.

Bob groaned inwardly, and entered the motor-car, bracing himself for another two hours of boredom. He was spared that ordeal, however. When they reached the drawing-room Lord Heppleworth put out his hand, and obediently his wife removed the necklace and gave it to her husband. Carefully he counted pearl by pearl, and suddenly gasped.

"Impossible!" he said, and counted again.

"There are only sixty here—two have gone!"

There was a dead silence as Bob took the rope from Lord Heppleworth's hand. He had spoken the truth; there were only sixty pearls left.

"But—but——" stammered his Lordship, "how could it have happened? It is in¬credible!"

"Are you sure you did not make a mis¬take in the counting?" asked his wife mildly.

"Don't talk like a fool," blurted his Lord¬ship. "Didn't this detective fellow count them, too? Now, what is your theory, Brewer?" he demanded.

"My theory is a very simple one," said Bob, "namely, that those two pearls have been taken from the rope by some person or persons unknown."

"That is a very clever piece of reasoning," sneered Heppleworth. "Can't you do bet¬ter than that?"

"Not till to-morrow," said Bob. "I will call on you at ten o'clock, and with your permission I will take the pearls to an ex¬pert and ask him a few questions."

"I will accompany you," said his Lordship. "That is quite unnecessary," said Bob. "You can trust the pearls with me, since we are guaranteeing their value."

At ten o'clock he called, and carried the pearls to the best jeweller in London.

"I want you to see these and tell me if there are any joins in the string, and if it is possible that two pearls could be de¬tached from the centre without disturbing the others."

"It isn't necessary to unstring them," said the jeweller. "I can tell you straight

away that it is quite possible to detach two pearls from the centre, if the person who took them had sufficient time."

"Suppose you wanted to remove two pearls from the centre," said Bob, "what would you have to do? I mean to leave the rope apparently untouched."

"I should have to unstring the pearls one by one, take out the selected, shorten the string by a corresponding amount, which means refitting the string to the clasp—rather a lengthy business."

"How long would it take you to do?" persisted Bob.

"If I worked hard at it I should probably do it in an hour," said the jeweller. "Would it be possible to do it in a few minutes or a few seconds?"

"Absolutely impossible."

Bob nodded.

"Suppose, for example, that the lady who was wearing them wished for any reason to detach a pearl or two, could she do it, if she were an expert, during the time it takes a lady to put her hair straight and hang up her cloak?"

"Impossible!" said the' jeweller. "There's nobody in this world who could fix that job under an hour, and I'm speaking as a man who has had years of experience."

"Thank you," returned Bob.

He put the pearls in their case and re¬turned them to Lord Heppleworth.

"Yes, sir; I have a theory," he said, "and if you will be kind enough to allow me to take Lady Heppleworth to dinner to-night without you, I think I can guarantee a discovery."

Lord Heppleworth pursed his lips.

"It is not my practice, sir," he said, a little stiffly, "to allow my wife to go to dinner with a stranger."

"I don't want to know anything about your practices, good, bad, or indifferent," said Bob wearily. "I only know that if you wish your pearls returned, and you do not want to incur further losses, you would be well advised if you do what I ask."

"It's a lot of money," said his Lordship, "but, of course, the insurance company will pay."

"I am not so sure of that," said Bob. "Certainly, unless you agree to my wishes, I shall throw up the case."

"Very good," said Lord Heppleworth after a while; "I will inform my wife."

"She must be wearing her pearls, re¬member."

His Lordship nodded.

At eight o'clock Bob presented himself and the pearls were produced with the same ritual which had been observed on the previous night.

"Sixty," counted Lord Heppleworth. "Now, check them yourself, Mr. Brewer." Bob checked them, and found that there were sixty.. He made no explanation to her Ladyship until they were in the car.

"I don't understand all this," she said, a little petulantly; "why do you want me to go to dinner? Is there anything wrong?"

"I don't know yet," said Bob, "but I am under the impression that you're as anxious to clear up this mystery as anybody."

"Of course I am," she said sharply. "Why should you think otherwise?"

He waited for her a few seconds while she deposited her cloak, and then followed her to Lord Heppleworth's table. No more was said about the object of the somewhat chilly dinner party until they had reached the coffee stage. Then suddenly Bob asked: "Lady Heppleworth, you are not particularly happy with your husband, are you?"

She stared at him for a moment, and went red.

"I don't see what business that is of yours," she said defiantly; "and I don't think Lord Heppleworth would like to know that you asked that question."

"You can tell him, if you like," said Bob carelessly. "I am not interested for the moment in what he thinks of me. I am very much interested in what he will think of you."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Let me ask you again," said Bob, "are you particularly happy with your husband? Do you, for example, harbour any idea of running away from him and retiring to some quiet, little country town in Australia, and living your life free from the irritating atmosphere in which you now move?"

She dropped her eyes. "I don't know what you mean," she said in a low voice.

"Let me put it plainly. You have a brother in Australia and you are anxious to get there. Lord Heppleworth allows you just about enough money as would pay an ordinary woman's car fares. He is, not to put too fine a point on it, extra¬ordinarily mean. And you, who were expecting a very brilliant life as a Peeress of the realm, find yourself very much in the position of a servant who hasn't even a Sunday out."

"Yes, that's God's truth," she blazed. "He watches me like a cat. Why, a year ago, when my brother was starting in Australia, I couldn't raise £50. Think of that!"

"You could have pawned a ring," sug¬gested Bob.

"He counts the rings every morning and every night," she said, struggling to sup¬press the laugh which her sense of humour provoked. "Isn't he silly? Sometimes I feel I'll cut his throat and run away. I would, too," she said, "if it wasn't for the fact that there's nowhere to run to, and there's no money to run with."

"And now as to the necklace," said Bob, looking at the glittering white line about her neck. "Will you let me see it?"

She hesitated.

"Why do you want it?" she said.

"I want to put it in my pocket," he said.

Her hand went to her throat.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," she cried.

"Now, do me a favour," said Bob. "You have a sister, I understand?"

Her face went very white.

"At the present moment she is acting as cloak-room attendant at this hotel. When I say 'at this present moment' I am per¬haps wrong," he corrected. "She is more likely to be engaged in taking a pearl from the rope you slipped off when you went to hang your cloak, and neatly doctoring the string so that it cannot be detected. You can do a great deal in the way of stringing pearls in an hour. You usually sit here for an hour and a half, don't you?"

She was white as death, but she did not speak.

"The rope you have about your neck." said Bob, "is a rope of imitation pearls which match yours as near as possible. They were purchased in the Burlington Arcade two months ago by a woman an¬swering to the description of your sister. The modus operandi, as I understand it, is simple. You come in, with your husband, you take off your coat, slip off the string of pearls and receive instead the imitation string. With these, you sit at dinner what time your sister is engaged in pinching whatsoever her hand findeth to pinch. When you go out you exchange the imitation for the real, and on arriving home it is discovered, to the consternation and horror of your ungenerous husband, that you are one or two pearls short—correct me if I'm wrong."

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a low voice.

"I suggest you go to your sister, and ask her to restore the pearls she has taken, and to give her time to do so we will go to a theatre, for which I have already booked seats."

"What shall I tell my husband?"

"Tell him nothing," said Bob.

"I wanted the money—I wanted it badly," she burst forth. "I don't want to steal. Though Fanny is wrong, I have never done a dishonest thing in my life. We were going to share the money. I was going to use my share to get to Australia—out of this stifling, horrible place."

Bob thought for a while.

"I think that I can get £200 from your husband as a reward for the recovery of the pearls," he said. "You can take that £200 and leave just as soon as you like."

"But what am I to tell my husband?"

"Tell him it was pinched by a Mason bee," said Bob flippantly.

VI. "PINKY" AND THE BANK MANAGER

BOB BREWER was eating his solitary dinner in the Windsor Restaurant, when to him came his employer and manager, Mr. Douglas Campbell.

"Bob," said he without preliminary, "I've been round to your flat, and heard you were here—the fact is, I want your advice."

"My advice," said Bob, with a magnificent wave of his hand, "is marry the girl!"

The outraged Mr. Campbell spluttered his indignation.

"Why is it," he asked severely, "that you always introduce a ribald strain into the most serious business conversation? I've thought very often that maybe it is your mixing with society that brings you into this state of mind. There's something about society which—"

"There's nothing about society that you haven't already described," interrupted Bob hastily, "and may I remark, on the spur of the moment, that I have had a good dinner, and I do not wish my digestion to be disturbed by long dissertations upon the sins and follies of the upper classes. Leave them alone, Campbell; they have their troubles. Now, what is yours?"

"You were telling me a little while back that there were a great number of criminals in town."

Bob nodded.

"In fact, I think you mentioned the Big Four."

"The Big Three," corrected Bob. "Poor Bill Hoy is spending the season at his winter palace on Dartmoor. But I have observed that the other three are

hanging loose. For example, I saw Reddy—you've heard of Reddy? He was in this restaurant about an hour ago. And with him was a young lady known to the profession as Pink Mirando."

"A queer name," said Mr. Campbell, and asked thoughtfully, "her complexion, I suppose——"

"Complexion nothing," said Bob brutally; "she is called 'Pink' because she has a penchant for pink garments. I remember once——"

"Never mind," said Mr. Campbell hastily, "it is not about her or any of the gang that I want to speak. It is about the London, Devon and Cornwall Bank."

Bob produced his case of cigars and handed it across the table. Mr. Campbell chose the best and lit it before he disclosed his story.

"I had a visit to-day from M'Kay, the manager of the London, Devon and Corn¬wall Bank," he said; "he is an old friend of mine; we were born in the same town."

"That doesn't make you a friend of his," said Bob. "I suppose the truth of it is, you both got rich in the same swindle. Well, what about it?"

"He's worried is poor M'Kay, desper¬ately worried," Campbell shook his head. "About six months ago one of his branch managers was found to be betting heavily, and was in debt to a bookmaker. M'Kay ordered an immediate audit and an exam¬ination of all accounts. Timmes refunded a large overdraft which he had granted to himself, resigned on the spot, forfeiting his pension and other emoluments, and left the bank employ."

Bob nodded.

"I suppose the suggestion is that this man Timmes managed to get the money to refund his account from some disreput¬able acquaintance on the strength of services to be rendered."

Campbell beamed on him.

"Bob, there are moments when you have intelligence," he said admiringly.

"Go on," commanded Bob, ignoring the flattery. "I've got an idea that there's some dirty work for me at the end of this yarn of yours, Campbell."

"That you'll discover," said Campbell. "As I say, the man disappeared, but he carried away a great deal of information about the bank, its business and its methods."

"But branch managers haven't very much information that would be useful to an outsider," said Bob.

Mr. Campbell nodded.

"Unfortunately," he said, "Timmes, be¬fore being appointed to the branch, had

a very confidential position at head¬quarters. Now at the headquarters of the bank is a little 'Who's Who' of all their subordinate officials. The character, the strength, the weakness of every branch manager, together with confidential notes on his capacity, are inscribed in a ledger to which Timmes had access. It was in¬tended that he should be maintained at the head office, in a responsible position, for, ordinarily, access to this book is never given to a man who himself is likely to become a branch manager."

"I see," said Bob; "but he hasn't got the book?"

The other shook his head.

"No," he said; "but Timmes is a man of remarkable memory. They say that he is one of those freaks who can read a column in the newspaper twice and repeat it almost word for word. From what he knows of him now, M'Kay is certain that Timmes has not trusted to his memory all these years, but must have written his impressions from the book after he had read it through."

"What makes you think that?" said Bob.

"Because he approached the branch managers, who were written in the book as being "generous" or "unworldly," asking their assistance to help him out of a mess. M'Kay is worried, and very naturally. He thinks that a raid is being planned upon the bank, and he and his directors have fallen into such a panic that they held a board meeting yesterday at which it was decided to get into communica¬tion with me."

Bob raised his eyebrows.

"You don't mean to tell me the bank's going to insure themselves against loss?"

"That's the idea," nodded Campbell. "You see, it will take them the greater part of three months to close certain gaps through which the trickster and the fraud might be able to crawl! They want us to cover their risk in that three months, and I have seen the Federated Directors, and we have agreed to issue the policy, and the bank has agreed to pay all expenses you may incur whilst you are covering this policy."

"Poor bank!" said Bob ominously. "It may be cheaper for them in the end to be robbed."

Bob Brewer made all his plans on the spur of the moment, and had perfectly decided his line of action before he rose from the table.

M'Kay, a little man with a bald head and twinkling eye, gave him a great deal of information, much of which was wholly useless.

"Now, we'll come right down to brass tacks, Mr. M'Kay," said Bob. "We will take it for granted that your dear Mr. Timmes is in the hands of a gang of rogues. I will also take it for granted that that gang is out to fleece you. The

third point, which is beyond dispute, is that Timmes has supplied the gang with a great deal of useful information. Now, the only question we have to deal with is, on which of your branches will the blow fall? You have, I see, a hundred and eighty branches."

Mr. M'Kay nodded.

"But don't you think," hopefully, "that they will make their attempt on the prin¬cipal office of the bank? You see, Timmes knows more about the principal office than he knows about any of the branches."

Bob shook his head.

"It is extremely unlikely," said he. "You don't imagine for one moment that they're going to try any hanky-panky here, where you're sitting in your office within call, with all the details of the business at your finger-tips ready to confirm or refute any documents they may put in? Oh, no; you do the Big Four a great injustice, Mr. M'Kay."

"But what branch will they select?" asked M'Kay with a wail. "I can't protect the whole hundred and eighty!"

"Yes, you can," said Bob, nodding. "At least, I can. But, first of all, I must see this confidential ledger of yours, which will give me, at any rate, a clue to their intentions."

It took the greater part of a day, and the decision of a Board of Directors to get a glimpse of the leather-bound volume in which was inscribed the virtues and idiosyncrasies of branch managers and accountants. Bob was locked in a room with this precious volume, and at first M'Kay insisted that no notes or extracts from the book should be taken. But Bob dealt with this restriction in his usual cavalier fashion.

It was a curious volume, and in many ways interesting. Bob read how one mana¬ger was inclined to spiritualism, and of an¬other "Has a brother who has spent two years in an Inebriates' Home," and yet another "had a weakness for whippet racing," but mainly the entries were as eloquent to the virtues of the London, Devon and Cornwall Branch Managers as is the average tombstone to the average citizen.

Bob, plodding earnestly through these lists, came to the 68th entry.

"George Bowley, Branch Manager, Merstham Bassett. Reliable man, in¬terested in Y.M.C.A., but gave up connection. Single, has been engaged three times, susceptible to feminine charms. Inclined to be flirtatious. Drinks moderately, good accountant. Suitable for large farming area, or small town with no great social attractions."

Bob made a brief note. He toiled through the remaining entries, discovered one or two suspicious qualities, but it was on Mr. George Bowley "susceptible

to feminine charms," that he stopped.

He interviewed M'Kay again, and after mentioning two or three branches, he very casually referred to Merstham Basset.

"What sort of business do you do at Merstham Bassett?" he asked.

"A big and important business," said M'Kay. "It is a farming centre, and all the farmers have large accounts. There is also a branch account for the Duchy of Cornwall which gives it a certain social importance. You are thinking of Bowley?" he asked quickly.

"I was thinking of him," admitted Bob. "What sort of man is he?"

"A very good lad, indeed," said M'Kay; "the only fault with him is that he is inclined to flirting. He was in London the other day with his latest fiancée.

"This time I hope that boy is going to get married," M'Kay continued. "I think there is a chance. I like my branch mana¬gers to be married. Marriage anchors them down and steadies them, and certainly if he is not satisfied with this young lady, he will never be."

"Pretty?" asked Bob.

"Pretty as a picture," said M'Kay, with rare enthusiasm. "And she was jolly well dressed. She was at the age when pink becomes a woman——"

"Pink?" said Bob.

"A sort of pink," said M'Kay.

"And beautifully manicured nails," said Bob.

M'Kay looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, since you mention the fact, I remember she did have beautifully mani¬cured nails. Are you going?" for Bob had risen.

"I am going," said Bob gaily. "It is me for the open-air life and joys and delights of Devonshire cream. I am bound for Merstham Bassett to meet your susceptible manager."

He left Paddington by the midnight sleeper, reached Newton Abbot in the grey dawn and, entering the car that he had ordered to meet him, drove to Merstham Bassett. It was a drive which took him across the wind-swept moor and down into the folds of the hills which sheltered the little town. He took breakfast at an inn, and found the landlord communicative, as most landlords are.

"By the way," said Bob, "have you any other strangers staying here?"

The landlord nodded. "We have two gentleman who have come down for the fishing and, of course, several people have taken houses and cottages in the neighbourhood." He enumerated them all, and came at length to the name of

Miss Kilroy.

"Miss Kilroy," repeated Bob. "Is she a visitor? I seem to know the name."

"She is the young lady Mr. Bowley is engaged to. He is our manager at the bank here," explained the landlord. "Quite a romance so far as I can understand. They met at Torquay about three months ago. Her father was a banker in Australia, so Mr. Bowley will be getting somebody who knows the business," he added humorously.

After breakfast he strolled into the village, not unconscious of the fact that he was being watched.

The little town consisted of one large and two subsidiary streets. In the main thoroughfare were the principal shops, and in a corner lot in the very centre were the premises of the London, Devon and Corn¬wall Bank. Into this he turned, showed his card to the manager, and passed through to that worthy's private office.

"I have a card of introduction from your general manager, which you had better see. It is a general introduction to all your branches," said Bob, and showed his credentials.

The manager, a good-looking young man, scrutinized it and nodded.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Brewer?"

"In the first place, I want to know if you live on the bank premises?"

"I live up above," said the manager with a smile. "I am a bachelor—for the moment—and have very good quarters."

"Where do you feed?" asked Bob to the other's surprise.

"As a rule, I have my dinner at the George, over the road," said the manager, "but three nights a week my supper is sent into my room on a tray. There's a side entrance to the bank, as you probably noticed."

Bob scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"There is another question I would like to ask you. You have supper here three nights a week. Where are you the other four nights?"

The manager stiffened.

"I have a friend in town," he said rather shortly. "I presume the bank does not want to know what I do in my spare time?"

"Only to this extent," said Bob, "that I suppose in your absence from the bank premises there is somebody here?"

"That is so," nodded the manager. "My accountant remains on duty when I am out. There is always somebody on the premises."

"Excellent," said Bob. "Now one final question: Do you ever have guests here in your room?"

The manager hesitated.

"I have not as yet," he said with a show of irritation. "Of course, if I ask anybody in to have a cup of coffee it is nobody's business but mine."

"Naturally," said Bob. "And remember that this conversation is nobody's business but yours and mine. I say this in parting, because I do not want you to say a word to any person, however dear they may be to you," he particularly emphasized the "dear." "And perhaps you will tell me whether you have fixed a little coffee party?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," said the manager, "I have. My fiancée and her aunt are coming in to coffee to-morrow evening. I always feel after market day that I want some sort of relaxation. It is quite a sight here. By the way," he added, "you are staying, of course?"

"No; I'm going back to town to-night," he said.

"It is a pity. I should like you to have met my—a friend of mine."

"I'll meet her later," said Bob, "if I have any luck."

"By the way, you haven't anything un¬usual happening to-morrow, besides market day?" asked Bob.

The manager looked at him with a smile. "You have heard rumours, eh?" he said. "Yes; a big American syndicate is buying up a lot of farms in the neighbourhood, and I believe their agent is coming down to¬morrow to make offers to the principal farmers. At any rate, they are depositing about £60,000 in cash—rather a large amount for me," he said, "although there are market days when I have had as much as £30,000 in my little vault."

"Why cash?" asked Bob, curiously.

"The farmers here wouldn't take cheques from strangers, you know," explained Mr. Bowley.

"I see," said Bob.

The next morning the streets of Merstham Bassett were crowded with farmers' carts and cars, and a brisk trade was driven. But the principal topic of conversation was undoubtedly the story of this mysterious American syndicate and its agent.

As the day wore on, and no agent ap¬peared, there were some who thought the whole thing was a hoax, but this suggestion was negatived by others who had inter¬viewed the bank manager. Nevertheless, it was a fact that the agent did not put in his appearance, and the day closed without event.

It was a weary Mr. Bowley who finally dismissed his clerks and went up to his snug sanctum and made preparation to receive his after-supper visitors. That supper, brought in by the old waiter of the George, was disposed of, the dishes taken away (Mr. Bowley following the waiter down the stairs to lock the door behind him, for he was a very careful man), the coffee tray got out, and laid upon a snowy cloth, and the final touches given to his apart¬ment before the bell rang.

Bowley hurried down the stairs, opened the door to the two women, and, locking the portal behind him, he led them upstairs to his room.

The girl was something more than pretty. The woman who was with her was as plain, as hard, and as middle-aged as a duenna should be.

"What a delightful room," said the girl. She was wearing pink—and a most becoming shade of pink. "Will all this furniture be ours, George?"

"Every bit of it," he replied. "But, of course, we won't live here. I have prac¬tically taken a house on the edge of the town, and am handing these quarters over to my accountant."

"How delicious," said she, ecstatically. "Shall I make the coffee?"

"I'll make it," said George. "I'll show you how coffee should be made."

A few minutes later he placed three steam¬ing cups on the table, and then it was that the elder woman spoke for the first time.

"My dear," she said, "look at your boot; it is untied."

The girl thrust out her foot with an ex¬clamation of dismay; the laces were cer¬tainly dragging. "Have I come all the way like this?" she asked, and stooped.

"Let me," said the obliging Mr. Bowley. He knelt on the floor. He was in such a position that his back was to the table, and the hard-faced chaperon found her task an easy one. The phial of butyl chloride which she had carried in her muff was expedi¬tiously tilted into the coffee cup nearest Mr. Bowley's chair.

"That's done," said the young manager and straightened himself out. "Now you shall try my coffee."

The two women took their cups.

"Delicious," said the girl, sipping daintily. Mr. Bowley smiled, not without pride. He did not sip; he drank the contents of his cup at a gulp.

"Not so good as——"

So far he got when the cup dropped from his hand and he fell backwards carrying the chair with him.

The girl rose swiftly, walked to the window, lifted the darkened blind a little,

and dropped it again.

"Go down and let the boys in," she said very briskly; "I'll stay with this guy." The two men who had "come down for the fishing" had left the comfort of the inn, and were waiting on the step when the older woman swung the heavy door open.

It was Cris Wall himself, that redoubt¬able leader of criminals, who came up the stairs and glanced approvingly at the girl's handiwork.

She had just searched the unconscious manager, and had extracted the two keys from his waistcoat. "That is the key of the safe," she said, "and that's the office door. Get busy, Cris; has the car arrived?"

"It's at the end of the street," said Wall, taking the keys. "You won't want your apparatus, Buck," he turned to the second man, who was carrying a small bag; and Buck grunted.

They went out of the room, and the girl sat in an easy chair in view of the figure on the floor, took out a cigarette from a gold case, lit it, and puffed thoughtfully. They were a long time opening the door of the safe; she had thought that it would be such a simple matter. Then the door opened.

She did not glance round but threw her cigarette into the fire-place and rose.

"Finished?" she asked.

"Quite finished."

She swung round, her mouth an "O" of surprise, and faced the smiling eyes of Bob Brewer.

"Quite finished, Pinky," said the cheer¬ful Bob. "We've been sitting in the cellar waiting for brother Wall."

He glanced down at the figure on the floor and shook his head.

"I'd like to have saved you that, my son," he said, "but if you will philander with criminal females, you've got to take what's coming to you—ah, would you!" He sprung at the girl, wrested the little revolver from her hand and flung her breath¬less against the wall.

"Pinky," he said, "you ought to be down on your knees praying that your 'knock¬out drop' does not kill our young friend here. They hang women for this, Pinky. Did you know that?"

For answer, she made a dive for the door and he heard her flying feet patter down the stairs, and laughed, for not only was the office below filled with police, but a cordon of the Devonshire Constabulary entirely surrounded the house.

"The American Syndicate is the Big Four who paid money into the bank only

to steal it again," he explained to Campbell. "Legally, the money which is with the Devon and Cornwall Bank can be drawn out at any moment, but there are about six Scotland Yard men at Merstham Bassett waiting to pinch the fellow who presents a cheque for it."

"What about Bowley—will he recover?" Bob nodded.

"If his young heart can stand the strain of Pinky," he said, "it can certainly stand the effect of butyl chloride."

VII. — THE START OF THE WORLD

MR. DOUGLAS CAMPBELL, that eminent man of affairs, looked twice at a written slip which lay on his desk, and grunted. It was Bob Brewer's expense account, and the frugal soul of Mr. Campbell was seared within him. It is true that the expenses were incurred whilst Bob Brewer was en¬gaged in saving the Company tens of thousands of pounds, and a penny in every pound saved would have been suf¬ficient to cover the expenses and provide a handsome surplus.

But Mr. Campbell did not look at things this way, and when Bob Brewer went into the office he was met by sad eyes and a shaking head.

"Man, Brewer, you are eating up the dividends of this company," said Mr. Campbell soberly.

"By rights there shouldn't be any dividends," said Bob. "Conducted and managed as this insurance company is conducted and managed, it should be in the hands of the official receiver if it weren't for me. I'll bet there isn't another com¬pany in the City that has as many crooks as you have! What's the trouble now?"

"It is your expense at Monte Carlo," groaned Mr. Campbell. "Look at it—look at it, man! Laundry, £8 10s. You were only there a week! Couldn't you make a shirt last you three days?"

Bob Brewer laughed.

"When you talk like that," he said, "I know you have a piece of work for me, and one which will involve the spending of a great deal of money. You need have no fear. For this commission, fill in a blank cheque and trust to my sense of decency."

Mr. Campbell locked away the papers in his desk before he replied.

"Lord Yarrowby——" he began.

Bob jumped to his feet.

"You don't mean to say," in an awe-stricken voice, "that you have had the temerity to insure the Yarrowby diamond?"

Mr. Campbell looked at him uncom¬fortably.

"Why not?" he challenged. "It is good business; we only take the risk for a few days, between the time of its arriving at Southampton and its presentation to the nation."

"A few days too long," said Bob Brewer briskly. "I was scared all the time that you would take that risk. Why, the whole of the Big Four are after that stone—Tommy Waters, Reddy, the Hoy Brothers—the whole of the world—the crooked world—is waiting for the Yarrowby diamond."

A great deal of space in the newspaper world had been devoted to the Yarrowby diamond, its size, weight, and brilliance, and its romantic discovery in the Yarrowby Mine by Lord Yarrowby himself when, in turning over a piece of blue clay with his walking-stick, he had discovered this in¬comparable gem. The story of its presenta¬tion to the nation had been told and retold until the Yarrowby diamond was a house¬hold word.

It had been cut and polished in South Africa. One of the first great stones to be so treated, its arrival had been awaited not only by connoisseurs—but by the general public—with interest which, if it was not breathless, was, at any rate, sincere.

"Well, anyway," said Mr. Campbell, "I have taken the risk, and you will go down to Southampton to-night to meet the Manderic, which arrives to-morrow morning at day-break. Remember we are only responsible from the moment the package crosses the gangway until the stone arrives in the hands of the King's Minister."

"May I ask the amount of our risk?" said Bob politely.

"Two hundred thousand pounds," said Mr. Campbell with irritation. "Man, with your gloomy face, you make me nervous! Now, off you go to Southampton. It should be no bother to you," he added pointedly. "Two real detectives will ac¬company it all the way from South Africa."

But Bob was too genuinely worried to make any adequate retort. He caught the first train for Southampton, where he learned the diamond was being brought over in a special case in Lord Yarrowby's own stateroom, and was guarded night and day, Lord Yarrowby himself sleeping within reach of the safe door, whilst there was a guard at the door of the cabin, and another in the alley-way. In addition were the two men from Scotland Yard, who had been specially sent over to keep a vigilant eye on the general events.

The Castle boat did not put into South¬ampton until seven o'clock the next morning, and one of the first of the visitors aboard was Bob.

He sought out Lord Yarrowby, and he sent down his card.

In the eccentric nobleman's stateroom there were already occupants. There were two men, probably the detectives, the ship's purser, Lord Yarrowby himself, and his valet.

It was at the valet that Bob stared, and well he might, for the man was stripped to his waist, and his self-conscious grin indi¬cated that he himself was not unconscious of his position.

Lord Yarrowby, a tall, alert man, saw Bob's amazement with a gleam of amuse¬ment in his eyes. He took the detective's card and nodded.

"Yes, I was expecting you," he said. "This ill-clad person," he waved his hand, "is my valet, and he is in that condition because I never allow anybody to touch the diamonds unless they are so costumed that it is impossible for them to play monkey tricks upon me. Look at this."

He put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out a red stone.

This he handed to Bob with a smile, and the detective looked at it curiously. It was very light, and was evidently made of dried clay, a sort of terracotta.

"What is the exact significance of this interesting souvenir?" asked Bob as he handed it back to its lordly owner.

The great man only laughed.

"I have had three of those since the voyage started, left in my cabin by some person or persons unknown," he said, "to¬gether with the little slip of paper on which was inscribed the words—'The quickness of the hand deceives the eye.' I don't trust Louis any farther than I can see him"—he nodded at his valet—"I don't trust anybody to be exact, and I'm following the rule which I have established since this diamond was cut—namely, that any¬body who handles it must be so attired that they cannot play tricks. You, I under¬stand, are the insurance agent——"

"Detective," corrected Bob.

"Very good. Then I am going to show you the jewel of great price."

There was a safe clamped to the wall of the cabin, and this the old man opened, taking out a steel box, which he placed on the table, at the end of which stood the valet.

"Louis will take it out. I don't even trust myself," laughed his lordship, as he unlocked the box, and stood back.

The valet opened back the lid almost reverently, and lifted out a mass of wadding. This he laid on the table, and Bob saw something big and knobbly, tied in a square of blue silk, which the Swiss deftly un¬knotted, revealing to the amazed eyes of those assembled in the cabin, that most gorgeous jewel

which was named, not un-reasonably, "Star of the World."

Bob gasped as his lordship lifted the diamond and handed it to him.

"You are holding a king's fortune in your hand."

"For heaven's sake, take it back," said Bob hastily; "the thing dazzles and fascin¬ates me."

The valet had replaced the wadding in the box, and had methodically laid on top the blue square of silk.

"You see that diamond? You observe it being put back in the box? You will also see it placed in the trunk and upon the train," said Lord Yarrowby.

The diamond had been passed back to Louis, and he was busy re-tying it. From where he stood, Bob could not see his operations very clearly, and walked along till he stood over the valet, who had already fastened the blue silk, drew over the protecting layer of cotton wool, dropped the lid gently and stood back with ex¬tended arms and outstretched fingers.

"Turn round, Louis."

The man swung round, showing his back. Now Bob saw that, save for a pair of bathing drawers, the man wras quite nude.

"You may think this method rather fantastic," said his Lordship, "but I've been used to dealing with niggers who can palm nine carat diamonds between their fingers, and what a nigger can do a white man can do, eh, Louis?"

The Swiss smiled again.

"Oui, milor," he said.

His lordship locked the box, and replaced it in the safe, and snapped the three locks of the safe door.

"And now, gentlemen," said his lordship, "I have a surprise for you, a very pleasant surprise. I think it will prove to you, Mr. Brewer, as you are representing the Insurance Company. This safe will be taken on to the guard's van, and will be guarded by ten armed men from now onwards. Each of these men has been nominated by old friends of mine, commanding battalions at present in England. They are all soldiers, all non-commissioned officers, all men above suspicion. I made the arrangement by wireless, and I expect the guard will be on board in a few minutes."

Bob remembered having seen a miscel¬laneous collection of soldiers standing on the quay, and a few minutes later he was to meet them. They came, marching with military precision, into the cabin, and they were all everything that Lord Yarrowby had claimed. Hard-faced men, without a smile amongst them, who took their re-sponsibilities with the greatest seriousness.

Bob watched the transference of the safe to the train: from its removal from the wall to its arrival on the specially constructed shelf in the guard's van. Then he drew Lord Yarrowby aside.

"I want to ask a few questions, if you don't mind answering them?"

"Ask anything you like," said his genial lordship.

"It is mainly about Louis," said Bob, "who, unless I have been greatly mistaken, is a paid agent of the Big Four."

Lord Yarrowby lifted his eyebrows.

"What makes you think that?" And then quickly: "Did you see him take out ——?"

"I saw him take nothing. The diamond is in your safe, where he put it. I repeat that he is the agent of the Four, or one of the members of the Four. You must know, Lord Yarrowby, that there is in Europe four separate and distinct gangs of big men. They generally work independently of one another, but on great occasions they combine for mutual benefit. Whether your valet is one of the agents of the Four in combination or of an individual gang, I am unable to tell you. I merely assert that he has been squared."

Lord Yarrowby thrust his hands in his trousers pockets and scowled at Bob, not unpleasantly, as he hastened to explain,

"I am not doubting your word, only I am puzzled how you made the discovery."

"I made it this morning," said Bob.

"You know my man?"

"I have never seen him before in my life," smiled the other; "but let me show you something."

He put his hand in his pocket and took out half-a-crown and held it up by his finger-tips, then slowly, and in full view of his "audience," laid it on the palm of his hand and as slowly closed his fist.

"Is that half-crown there?" he said.

"I'd like to bet on it," said Lord Yar¬rowby.

"Agreed," said Bob, and opened his hand. It was empty.

"It is a simple trick," Bob went on; "I only did it to show you that in my extreme youth I practised that sort of thing, and practice not only enables you to perform these tricks, but it also helps you to detect them in others?"

"You mean——?" began his lordship.

"I tell you the diamond is in the safe, and you may accept my assurance on it,

but——"

"Bosh!" said Lord Yarrowby im¬patiently. "My dear chap, you are work¬ing on your imagination. Louis has been with me for five years. His name is Heltz, a native of Rolle, in the canton of Vaud."

"What do you pay him a week?" asked Bob.

"I pay him—well, a hundred a year."

Bob laughed scornfully.

"A hundred a year never kept any man faithful," he said. "Still, I am not worry¬ing about the diamond now, for if it dis¬appears I know just where I can find it." Lord Yarrowby looked at him, and a little smile creased his eyes. Then he laughed.

"I like the look of you," he said. "If I didn't I should say you were a poseur. Now let us to our breakfast."

Bob had a cheerful journey to town, for half or more than half his worry had dis¬appeared. As the train was nearing Lon¬don Lord Yarrowby came along and sat in Bob's compartment.

"Look here," he said, "I am inclined to agree with you up to this point, that I won't allow Louis within a hundred yards of that case again."

"You may do as you wish about that, but I don't suppose he will want to go near it," said Bob. "In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't bolt the moment he gets to London."

"Without the stone?" asked his lordship incredulously.

"Without the stone," said Bob.

He was thoughtful for a while, then he asked:

"Those little red stones that were put in your cabin, can I have one?"

"Certainly; I have them in my bag. I will bring one along to you."

He went through to his compartment and returned presently with the little terra¬cotta mass. Bob weighed it carefully in his hand, and then, with a word of thanks, slipped it into his pocket.

He came into Douglas Campbell's office and reported his arrival.

"Good heavens, what are you doing here?" demanded the agitated man. "Don't you understand that I want you to watch that safe day and night, and never leave it?"

"I am a human being in need of a cer¬tain amount of sleep," said Bob; "besides, the diamond is all right."

And to prove how right it was, he sat down and related the story that Lord

Yarrowby had told. He had hardly finished his narrative before Mr. Campbell was bordering upon hysteria.

"Then they are after it, they are after it," he wailed; "for heaven's sake go, Bob, and don't lose sight of it!"

"The safe is in the vaults of the Bank of England," smiled Bob. "I doubt whether they'll admit me even on your card; any¬way, you needn't bother. On Tuesday Yarrowby is taking it to the Colonial Office, where the diamond will be handed over with musical accompaniment, toastings of champagne, and innumerable shouting and speeches."

On the Tuesday morning Bob received a telephone message from Lord Yarrowby, and at once the voice of his Lordship re¬vealed anxiety.

"I say, that infernal valet of mine hasn't been home all night!"

"The virtuous Louis?" said Bob with much surprise.

"The virtuous Louis," was the reply. "He was seen at Charing Cross Station last night."

"He will be in his native cantonment, yodeling amongst the hills, to-morrow," said Bob easily; "perhaps he'll buy an hotel with his gains."

"Do you think he has the stone?"

"I'm sure he hasn't," said Bob. "Calm your mind, Lord Yarrowby. I shouldn't be sitting here in my pyjamas discussing society gossip and items of criminal intelli¬gence if I thought that the stone had gone."

He heard a grunt, then:

"The presentation is taking place at eleven o'clock. I want you to be there."

"I shall be there whether you want me or not," said Bob, and he heard a little chuckle at the other end of the wire.

He accompanied the safe from Threadneedle Street to Whitehall, and was one of the select few who stood near Lord Yar¬rowby after his little speech. There fol¬lowed a speech by the Minister about in-dustry and patriotism, then Lord Yarrowby, opened the safe door, and drew forth the smaller box containing the treasure. This he also opened, not without a certain display of nervousness, removed the cotton-wool which covered the little blue bundle, and, with fingers that shook somewhat, untied the knot which the dexterous Louis had fastened.

And then he stepped back with a hoarse cry, for no diamond was visible!

In its place was an irregular red stone, which he lifted, gazing upon it with wide-open, unbelieving eyes.

"It is gone!" he cried in a strangled voice. "My God! He took it!"

Bob heard a low moan near him, and looked round to catch the eye of the pallid Mr. Campbell, who had been invited to the ceremony.

Lord Yarrowby swung round upon Bob, and he was no longer the genial person whom the detective had met in the cabin.

"You are responsible for this," he said. "You told me that the diamond was there! If you thought Louis had taken it, you should have had him arrested!"

One of the Ministers came forward.

"Do you mean to say that the stone has been stolen?" he demanded incredulously.

Yarrowby had no words; he could only nod his head.

The silence which followed was almost un¬nerving. Lord Yarrowby's eyes fixed Bob.

"What have you to say?" he asked.

Bob was scratching his chin thoughtfully.

"I can only say that when the safe left the ship, the diamond was safe."

"It is a very serious matter for you," said Yarrowby, recovering himself.

"The stone was insured, then?" asked a Minister.

"For two hundred thousand pounds," said the grim Lord Yarrowby.

Campbell licked his dry lips.

"The money will be paid if the stone is not recovered," he said, not without dignity. "If Mr. Brewer says the stone was in the safe when it came ashore, I have every con¬fidence that he spoke the truth. We have to find out who had access to the safe since it has been in England."

"Nobody," said Lord Yarrowby.

"In the meantime," said Bob, "I will take this."

He picked up the terra-cotta rock from its bed of cotton-wool, and compared it with another stone that he had taken from his pocket. He then accompanied Camp¬bell down the stairs into Whitehall.

No word did they speak till they reached the office.

"This is a mighty serious business," breathed Campbell as he flopped in his chair.

"Take care of that," said Bob, and handed a red stone to the other; "put it in the safe; I am going out to make a few investigations. And keep calm!"

His investigation took him to Scotland Yard, at which building his stay was short. He did not return to the office until three o'clock, to find Mr. Campbell

in a condition bordering on frenzy.

"I have been telephoning for you all over the place, Brewer," he said; "where have you been?"

"Loafing round," said Bob easily.

"Scotland Yard have sent for the stone."

"I know," he said; "they sent a man over with a written order, and, of course, you gave it to him; in fact, I know you did."

"Shouldn't I?" asked Mr. Campbell.

"No harm was done," said Bob; "the in¬telligent officer who brought that order is known in real life as Bill Hoy. He is the biggest man of the Big Four; also the order was forged and did not come from Scotland Yard at all."

Mr. Campbell gasped.

"Don't worry," said Bob; "he was pinched as he came out of the office—in fact, we were waiting for him to call. Ah, here is Lord Yarrowby."

Yarrowby came in at that moment, and with him an official from the Colonial Office.

To say "he came" in is rather inaccurate; he burst into the room like a whirlwind.

"What's this?" he asked rapidly; "is it true?"

"Perfectly true," said Bob; "we caught the gentleman who worked the oracle—Mr. William Hoy, as eminent a thief as you are likely to meet in your lifetime."

He took from his pocket a red stone.

"That which Mr. Hoy called for, and which I gave into Mr. Campbell's care, knowing that it would be called for, was one received by his Lordship during the voyage.

"This," and he held the stone in his hand, "is the fellow that Lord Yarrowby found in the jewel case."

Somebody brought him a glass of water, and he slowly immersed the stone therein. Instantly the water was coloured red.

"You see, it is almost like clay. In fact, it is clay, and very porous," explained Bob, and waited.

Two minutes later he lifted it out and laid it upon a paper with his fingers, pushing aside the stodgy mass.

Suddenly Lord Yarrowby let out a yell.

"The diamond!" he roared.

"The diamond," said Bob calmly. "Simply covered with a wrapping of clay by your clever Louis, with great dexterity, and a piece of oil-paper laid on the cotton-wool, whilst we were examining the diamond in the cabin. When you handed it back he covered the diamond with a layer of damp clay. So quickly was it done, and so rapidly did he tie it with its silk, that you did not realize that all the time he was pinching through the silk to mould it to the diamond shape. When it dried, as it did in a few hours, it would resemble one of these pieces of dried clay which were left in your cabin, with no other idea than to suggest to you that an attempt was to be made to substitute something of this sort for the 'Star of the World.'"

"But how could they hope to get hold of the stone?"

Bob laughed.

"It is easier to burgle the safe in an insurance office than a safe in the Bank of England," he said significantly. "And, anyway, they didn't depend on burglary, did they, Mr. Campbell?"

Douglas Campbell shifted uneasily in his chair.

"The order from Scotland Yard looked right enough," he said. "Otherwise I wouldn't have handed over the stone."

"Well, you didn't hand it over," said Bob; "so why worry?"

VIII. — BOB BREWER'S BIGGEST COUP

"YOU can say what you like of Reddy," said Joe Crane impressively, "but you've got to hand it to him that he's the boy with the brains."

Tyke Sullivan grunted. He was a big, dark-looking man, with a short, close-cut beard, and his attitude to his smaller com¬panion was one of ill-disguised contempt.

"He hasn't got it all, Joe," he said, "and I'm telling you straight that I wouldn't have Reddy in my gang, no, not if he paid me a thousand dollars a week."

"He's not likely to," said Joe Crane, and went on, "I ain't saying that he's the best man in the world, and I ain't saying that I'd have him myself. My ways ain't Reddy's ways, Tyke, and I don't run the same class of business as Reddy, or for the matter of that, the same class, of business as you."

They were sitting on the front at Brighton, two apparently innocent members the leisured classes. Past them prom¬enaded all Brighton, resident and visitant, for the morning was gay with lemon sun¬shine and the sea had a sparkle.

"I like jobs where I can work four-handed and split four ways," said Joe Crane. "Give me a big house or an hotel, or a public reception where the wedding presents are all in view, with a couple of Wine-fed bulls (policemen) to watch, and I'll guarantee to get nuts to last me through the winter. You, on the other hand, Tyke," he admitted handsomely, "are in a bigger game. You work with a crowd of twenty, and you're all for pulling strings."

"I work without risk," said the other shortly, "and that's where you and Reddy have got me rattled."

"Here's Reddy—tell him yourself," inter¬rupted Crane.

Reddy came up at that moment, a resplendent and cheerful figure, dressed in the height of fashion, a grey Homburg set at a rakish angle on his grey head, and a long cigar in his mouth. They edged up to make room for him on the bench they monopolized.

"We were just talking about you, Reddy," said Joe.

Reddy shot Tyke a swift and appraising glance.

"Cold feet, Tyke?" he asked pleas¬antly.

"Yes, something like that," admitted the other; "this policy sleuth has got me guessing. I'm for home sweet home after that affair in Devonshire."

"Is that a fact?" said Reddy. "Why, I'm seriously thinking of leading an honest and respectable life myself."

"Can that stuff!" growled Tyke Sullivan.

"It's a fact," said Reddy, blowing out a cloud of smoke; "I'm going in for legiti¬mate business, and if you fellows like to take a share in a new company I've floated, why, you can."

"What sort of company, Reddy?" asked Joe Crane curiously.

"Ship-owning company," said Reddy. "In fact, I'm starting a line to South America. It is not in my name, but I have bought all the shares of a corporation that owns one small, fast boat, which can pull out fifteen knots, and is sailing from London river on the 7th of next month with a general cargo for Buenos Ayres."

"That's an idea," said Tyke Sullivan.

"And we sail with her, not from London," said Reddy; "oh, no, not from London. I have also acquired one large motor-boat, which is permanently stationed at a place called Seaford."

"What's the idea?" asked Sullivan. "Why not sail straight away from London?"

"Because," said Reddy, "I have the game of our lives, the one coup which is going to bust Mister Brewer to everlasting."

"You're beginning to interest me," said Tyke. "Anything big appeals. Now how big is it?"

"It is the size of London," said the other impressively.

"Money in it?"

"A few," said Reddy. "Just a few. Say five million dollars."

Sullivan drew a deep breath.

"I know you're not talking through your hat, and I'll go you one more fling, Reddy. The idea of squaring accounts with Mr. Bob Brewer kind of attracts me."

"There is a curious thing about society. I don't know whether you've noticed it," said Mr. Douglas Campbell.

"I've noticed many curious things about society," said Bob Brewer gently. "But without any trimmings just throw off your chest what you are aiming at."

"Well, I'm thinking of the Hospital Ball," said Mr. Campbell.

"Everybody's thinking about the Hos¬pital Ball," said Bob, "and everybody's hoping that there'll be such a slump that the ten-guinea tickets will go for a guinea on the night, but I don't think that's very likely. Victoria Hall is certain to be crowded with the elite, and surely it will be packed with women, if your theory about the cupidity of the female sex has any foundation in truth."

Campbell nodded.

"It is coming at the height of the London season," he said, "and I happen to know that all the best people, and even some of those who want to be amongst the best, have bought their tickets already. It is the lucky dip which has pulled 'em."

Bob looked at him interestedly, but obviously without knowledge.

"Lucky dip?" he repeated; "that's a new one on me."

"It is one of the features of the ball," explained Mr. Campbell. "They are going to have a huge bran tub, and every lady will have a ticket entitling her to a dip."

"Rather childish," was Bob's comment.

"Not so childish," said Mr.. Campbell; "and this is where my theory about society comes in. As I have said before, society——"

"I know," said Bob hurriedly; "get on with the bran tub. Is there a good prize?"

"A pearl necklace worth five thousand pounds," said Mr. Campbell impressively. "How does that strike you?"

Bob whistled.

"That'll get 'em there," he said.

"Of course," Campbell went on, "there will be other prizes worth comparatively nothing. In fact, there's a little gift for everybody. But the pearl necklace has been donated by an anonymous——"

"Hold hard," said Bob in alarm; "you haven't insured the necklace of this anonymous person against its being drawn, have you?"

Campbell smiled.

"Not much," he said; "no, thank heaven, we're not concerned in the Hos¬pital Ball. I'm merely referring to it to prove my statement that the basis of modern society is cupidity and swank."

"I always remember the bookmaker who used nightly to thank the Lord for 'them little horses,'" said Bob. "If society didn't look silly to you, you'd look silly to your directors. If they weren't sheep they wouldn't want watchdogs."

"There's something in that," said the philosophical Mr. Campbell, as he called the waiter to pay his bill.

Mr. Bob Brewer, Chief Detective of the Federated Assurances, was more than relieved to discover that he had no special duties in connection with the ball, for he was a busy man in these days.

The three most powerful members of the Big Four were at large. Moreover, they were in London, or within reach of London, and, most unhappy fact of all, they were at large.

One picks up clues in the most unlikely quarters. That evening, reading his neglected morning newspaper and coming to the end of the real news, Bob turned to the advertisements and to the less attractive columns. Amongst these was one headed—"Inflated prices for ships?"—and he read down until he came to the paragraph:

"...the price which was paid for the Luana, for example, seems to me to be wholly unjustified. The Luana is a very fast steamer, but it seems that she is not economical to work. Her cargo space was sacrificed in construction to give more speed. However, it is not for us to cavil at Mr. Batterby's purchase. He is, by the way, a newcomer to the shipping world."

"Batterby!" said Bob, addressing the ceiling. "That name is familiar to me."

He went to his safe and took out a little book, which he opened and laid on his desk. He glanced through the index, and found the name of "Reddy," and turned up the page. There, written in Bob's own hand, was the record of that notorious swindler. He read the entry line by line until he came to the list of Reddy's aliases.

"Anderson, Redwood, Coleby, Marquis de Castereaux, Newbridge, Batterby.

Harold Batterby!"

Reddy would not be the first criminal who had used the same alias twice. Indeed, it is characteristic of men who adopt other names than their own that they repeat themselves.

Harold Batterby!

"Harold" was the Christian name of the ship buyer, as he was to discover; "a tall greyish man, with a fund of anecdotes," was the description Bob had secured of the purchaser over the telephone.

The call to the shipping office proved to be a fortunate one, for he found a clerk on a visit from the Newcastle office, where the transaction had been completed. This man had seen Mr. Harold Batterby, and re¬membered a red scar on his neck.

"Oh, indeed!" said Bob. "I think I'll take a squint at the Luana."

The ship was lying in London Docks, a yacht-like vessel of graceful line. She was taking in coal when Bob arrived on the quay, having already shipped her cargo. More interesting, she was taking in stores for a voyage, and these included a large number of cases bearing a familiar Rheims brand. A ship's officer and a man in a white jacket, whom Bob guessed was the purser, were checking the goods as they were hoisted aboard.

"Are you taking passengers?" asked Bob of the officer.

The man looked round in surprise.

"No," he replied shortly; "this is a cargo boat."

"It looked rather like a fashionable passenger list," replied Bob, "with all that champagne going on board."

The officer in charge said nothing.

"Owners travelling, maybe?" suggested Bob.

"Possibly," said the laconic officer, with¬out a word of comment. Then, "I wish we were travelling the other way."

"Homewards?" said Bob, and the man nodded.

"I'd give anything else, except my job, to be home for another two months. My wife's ill."

"When do you sail?"

"By to-morrow night's tide," said the officer, whose brusqueness was evidently due to his private troubles, and not to his resentment at inquiries into his employer's business.

"We are going to some South Coast port to pick up the owner, and I tried to

per¬suade the skipper to let me join her there. But it's no go."

Bob nodded. "I have an idea that you won't go very far from England," he said.

"I wish you meant it," replied the other fervently.

"What is the port?" asked Bob. "I mean the port where you are picking up your owner?"

The officer shrugged.

"They are making a devil of a mystery of it, but I fancy somewhere in the neigh¬bourhood of Newhaven."

The detective made a mental note. "Have you any idea when you pick him up?" The officer shook his head.

"Not for a day or two," he said. "Why are you so keen on knowing?"

Bob took a chance. He liked the man's face. It was one that could be trusted. Obviously Reddy had not warned any of the officers, thinking he had covered his tracks too well, and that nobody would identify him with "Batterby."

Bob produced his card.

"A detective, eh?" said the officer, in¬terested. "Is anything wrong?"

"A great deal is wrong, but how much I don't know," said Bob. "All I want you to do is to keep this little matter to your¬self. It may be you can help me, and if you can, my company will pay you well. You need not worry about being disloyal to your owners; because, unless I am at fault, your owners will be standing in the dock at Old Bailey about this time next month, and maybe you'll be detained in London to give evidence."

The officer smiled.

"That's the biggest bribe you can offer me," he said.

Bob told him as much as he thought was wise. He argued that it was as well to have somebody on the ship who would act for him, and this officer promised to fulfill all requirements.

"One thing I know," said the officer, when Bob had finished, "is that we are being held up at Newhaven or somewhere on the coast, because the owner wants to go to a ball."

"A ball! The Hospital Ball?"

"I don't know whether it is the Hospital Ball," replied the other; "but I know it is a ball of some kind, and he is motoring down to the coast immediately after." Bob began to see things clearly. He made arrangements with the officer, drove straight back to town, and began to pick up the thread at that end. The secretary of the Hospital Ball was a woman who was some¬thing of an expert in the organization of charity functions.

"Who is the promoter of the present festivities?" Bob asked her,
"That, I am afraid, is a secret," said the organizer.
"There's nothing to be afraid of," said the detective, "because I happen to know that it is Mr. Harold Batterby."
"Well, if you knew why did you ask?" demanded the lady tartly. But Bob, in his most ingratiating manner, assured her that he had great influence in Fleet Street and thereupon she obligingly told him all she knew.
Thereafter followed long conferences at the offices of the Federated Assurances, con¬ferences at which the strangest people were represented. Not only did the Commissioner of Police send his men, but the Ad¬miralty was represented, and when the Luana came rolling down the Channel on the morning of the ball, two lean destroyers made their appearance from nowhere in particular, and took a parallel course.
And when the Luana dropped anchor off Seaford two destroyers also dropped anchor, a circumstance which puzzled the captain of the Luana, but was plainly understood by her second officer.
There was no doubt that the ball was a magnificent success. All approaches to Victoria Hall were blocked with motor cars bearing that which was best, brightest and most popular in society to the great pillared saloon, where men and women were to dance for six hours in the cause of charity.
Reddy, a fine figure of a man in evening dress, was in one of the boxes overlooking the floor, thoughtfully smoking a cigar. His companion was Joe Crane, and Joe was incoherent with admiration.
"There's class here, Joe," said Reddy, after a long silence; "look at that woman's emeralds, they are a wonderful colour!"
"You're really a genius," said the en¬thusiastic Joe; "nobody but you could have thought of it, Reddy. Is that the place?"
He pointed to a purple-curtained door.
Above the curtain was a neatly painted sign:—

LUCKY DIP!

RED TICKETS AT 11 O'CLOCK.

"Every woman has a ticket," he explained, "and before eleven we will start queueing them up. There is a smaller hall inside where the ladies with red tickets go."
"Who have the red tickets?" asked Joe, who had not been admitted to all the secrets of the organization.
"The tickets," said Reddy, "were dis¬tributed at the door. The women with the big jewels have got the red, and the others have got the white. Do you see, Joe?"
Joe chuckled.
"You're a wonderful man, Reddy," he I said, "but where do I come in?"
"You stand by the car at the side entrance and help put the stuff aboard. Tyke

Sullivan and me will attend to the women."
"Supposing the motor breaks down?" inquired the anxious Joe.
"I've got three of them on the road in case of accidents," replied Reddy. "They will fall in behind us as we pass, so we'll always have a car handy in case the first one dies. The ship is at Seaford. I have had a wire from the captain. Young Joyce will take the motor boat on to Portsmouth, leave it there, and make the best of his way to South America. I don't think I have left anything undone. Look at that one!"
He pointed to a tall fair woman in a high dress, about whose neck blazed a fortune.
"She's a red ticket," he said with satis¬faction.
At a quarter to eleven, amidst laughter and a babble of talk, the ladies began to take their places in the queue, according to their numbers on the red cards which had been given them on their entrance to the hall.
The red tickets were to go at eleven, the white tickets were to line up an hour later. The tall fair woman was in the first batch—this Joe noticed with satisfaction before he left to take up his post.
At eleven the curtains were pulled aside, the big doors opened, and the crowd trooped in, the tickets being examined as they passed. Then the doors were closed, the heavy curtains pulled, and the white ticket-holders left speculating amongst themselves as to the chances they had of securing the big prize.
In the small hall a curious scene was being enacted. The eager dippers were crowded together at one end of the brilliantly-lit room, in the centre of which was a circular tub filled with bran. Reddy, a self-possessed master of ceremonies, explained the modus operandi, but it was one for which the ladies were not prepared. Outside in the big ball a noisy coon band had taken its place practically against the door, and the sound of its din came faintly to the people in the smaller saloon.
"Ladies," said Reddy, "I want you to pay attention to what I'm saying, because it is absolutely necessary that you should understand me. My assistant is putting a sheet over the bran tub, as you will per¬ceive. This," he produced from his hip pocket a long-barrelled revolver, "this, as you will also perceive, is a gun, and it is loaded in six chambers. You will all of you walk past that tub and deposit the jewels which you have about your necks, your earrings, brooches and rings on that sheet. I would explain to you that if I am captured by the police I shall go to gaol for twenty years. I would much rather be hung for the murder of one, or several of you.
"Therefore I tell you, that if any of you raise your voices or shout or disobey me, that one I will instantly shoot. If I do not do it, my friends here," he jerked his head to the hard-faced girl who drew her¬self up by his side, and Tyke Sullivan, his back to the door of the main hall, examining an automatic pistol, "will do it for me. There's no use in shouting," he said as a faint scream rose

from the mass of pal¬pitating women, "because there's a band just outside the door which prevents your screams being heard. I've got exactly three minutes, so hurry. You first."
He glared at the tall, fair woman.
"On to the sheet with that necklace of yours, madam. And step lively!"
The tall woman walked forward, un¬clasped the collar from her neck, dropped it into the sheet, and walked round past the girl and Reddy. Another woman fol¬lowed, moaning her fear, and with trembling hands unfastened the pearl necklace from her throat. A third victim was on the way, when the tall, fair woman turned suddenly.
"I've got the drop on you, Reddy. A flick of your eye and you're a dead man!"
Reddy dropped his revolver with a crash, and his hands went up.
Not so big Sullivan, who swung round at the sound of the mas¬culine voice, his gun upraised. Before he could bring the barrel level Bob fired, three rapid shots, like the rap-tap-tap of a drum, and big Sullivan went down to his knees, gripping a bloody arm.
And then pandemonium broke loose. At the sound of the shots the last tense nerves gave way, and the scene that followed beggars description.
Half an hour later an elegantly dressed "lady," whose blonde hair lay on the table beside her, sat smoking a pipe in the office of the Chief Detective Commissioner of Scotland Yard. Facing him across the table was a dazed but admiring Mr. Campbell, the managing director of the Federated Assurances.
"Well, it is a big haul, Brewer," said the Commissioner, "the biggest haul we've had for years, and though we shall get the credit for it, of course, the credit is all yours."
"I suppose you pulled in every one of the gang?" demanded Bob.
"Every one," nodded the officer; "they couldn't very well get out of the cordon we put round Victoria Hall.
We even got the gentleman who was manipulating the motor boat at Seaford.
This puts the Big Four permanently out of business. Incident¬ally," he turned to Campbell, "it saves your company something in the region of half a million —there were enough jewels in that little room to pay a moderate national debt.
You had a bad time with the women, didn't you, Brewer?"
Bob shuddered.
"Terrible," he said briefly. "They thought I was a perfect lady, and wanted to hug me."
He rose to his feet and glanced down at his beautiful gown.
"It took two lady's maids and a valet to dress me," he said.
"Bob," said Mr. Campbell, tremulous with emotion,
"the company will never be able to reward you for this night's work."
"Won't they?" said Bob ominously, "then it's your job to see that they do. In the meantime, come along and help me un¬lace my stays."