THE DOUBLE

BY

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The Double

CHAPTER I

When Dick Staines left the University of Cambridge, he was confronted with several alternatives, all more or less unalluring. On the strength of his honours degree in science he might have taken a mastership at a preparatory school; alternatively, he could have gone into a great motor works for three years at a salary of thirty shillings a week, with no sure prospect at the end of his apprenticeship; or he could have been appointed to a commission in His Majesty's Army, where he would have received sufficient pay and allowances to disc charge his monthly mess bill; or he might, had he influence, have entered that branch of the Civil Service whence one starts forth on a diplomatic career.
He had no influence, he had no money, except the rags of a thousand pound legacy which had taken him through Cambridge.
He returned one night to the furnished room in Gower Street which he had taken on his arrival in London, and set out before him the four definite offers he had received. He had discovered that even a mastership at a preparatory school was not a post easy to secure. The final offer of a motor-car company he tore up and threw into the fire. From his pocket he took a printed blank and this he filled up with some care and posted. Three days later he was invited to make a call at Scotland Yard, and within six months Mr. Richard Staines, Bachelor of Arts (Camb.), was patrolling the Finchley Road in the uniform of the Metropolitan Constabulary.

Many things contributed to his rapid promotion. A bit of luck, as he confessed, the left hook to the jaw which sent Peter Lanbradi sprawling to the floor just as his finger was pressing the trigger of a pistol malignantly directed towards an Under-Secretary of State, his skill as a runner, and, last and most important, his command of Continental languages. He spoke four perfectly, two well, and three others well enough. Four years after he had joined the force, he was a sergeant in the. C.I.D., earmarked for further promotion.

That promotion came. He was Detective-Inspector Staines when he went to Brighton with Lord Weald, whom he and most people addressed familiarly as 'Tommy.' They had been together at Cambridge, were members of the same college, had been arrested together in the same rag.

"It's the queerest thing in the world, old thing," bleated Tommy, as he sent his swift Rolls dodging between two farm carts. "Only yesterday it seems you and I were being dragged down Petty Cury by a Robert—and now you're a Robert!"

He chuckled joyously at the thought.

He was a round-faced man who looked much younger than his years, and though he was by no means a pigmy he was half fa foot shorter than the

bareheaded, brown-faced man who sat by his side. Good looks were an asset to Dick Staines, though he found no profit in them. He had, the build and eager face of an athlete; the grey, smiling eyes of one who found life rather amusing. Tommy and he had not seen each other for years. Lord Weald had just returned from a trip in South Africa, and they had met accidentally in town—somewhat inconveniently for Dick Staines, who was going to Scotland for a fortnight's fishing, the guest of a plutocratic Assistant Commissioner. Since his finances were by no means assured, he had let his pretty little Chelsea flat for a month—an arrangement which looked like being very inconvenient, as he explained to his companion.

"Why I'm sky-hooting down to Brighton for two days, heaven knows!"

"You're sky-hooting to Brighton, old boy," said Tommy, "because it would have been deuced uncivil if you hadn't accepted an old pal's urgent invitation. You told me yourself that your Commissioner, or whatever he calls himself, will not be in Scotland till the end of the week. Besides, I've got a lot to tell you. I've had tremendous adventures—lion-chasing, everything!"

"Who did the chasing—you or the lion?"

"We took it in turns," said Tommy calmly. "Sometimes I was in front and sometimes they were. And besides, Brighton's good for the liver and there's somebody in Brighton, the prettiest thing you ever met. Never seen anything like her, old boy—"

"A lioness?"

Lord Weald turned pained eyes upon him.

"She's a nurse, old boy. I've never had the cheek to find out who she is, but you're a detective and all that sort of thing—"

"If you imagine," said Dick Staines sternly, "that I'm coming to Brighton to further your low amours, you've got another guess coming, Tommy."

By the time Tommy Weald had recovered from his indignation and incoherence they had reached the hotel. They were going up the steps of the broad entrance, when a man came out—a man with a large, red face, and a short, bristling, black moustache. He stared at 'Tommy, and waved a cheery hand.

"Dashed amusin' feller," said Tommy. "Know him?"

Dick shook his head.

"Walter Derrick," explained his lordship. "Lives next door to me in Lowndes Square. Big house, pots of money, but dashed amusin'. My poor, dear old

governor used to say that his father was the most dashed unpleasant man he'd ever met, but this feller is—is—"

"Dashed amusin'?" suggested Dick.

Going up in the elevator, Tommy, whose mind could never hold two ideas at once, expatiated upon the dashed amusingness of his neighbour. So far as Dick Staines could gather, Mr. Derrick's chief claim to the title of good fellow was that he laughed at all Tommy's jokes.

Dick knew the gentleman very well by name; indeed, he had recognised his big yellow Rolls standing outside the hotel. The only thing he had heard in his disfavour was that on one occasion, when a poor cousin, his sole relative, had called at the house to secure his help in a time of domestic trouble, Mr. Derrick had sent for the police and had the importunate relative removed. Which was curiously unlike the big, genial soul. His father had been the most notorious miser in London. He had carried his meanness to such lengths that, according to legend, he had quarrelled with Walter Derrick over the purchase of a bicycle, and for years the pair had been estranged, Derrick working abroad as a common labourer.

Nothing of those seven or eight years' exile had soured the man. From the shy, furtive lad that very few people had seen, and nobody had known intimately, he returned a year before the old man died, one who saw all the humour there was in life.

"He's dashed glad to be alive—he told me so," said Tommy.

This little extra holiday was a pleasant break to Dick Staines. After dinner, the evening being warm and the light still holding, the two men strolled along the front, and Tommy, who had hardly stopped speaking since he reached England, related with great force and vigour, and with a wealth of illustrative gesture, the adventures (tame enough they sounded, even embellished as they were) that had come his way.

They had reached a less populated part of the parade when Dick felt his arm clutched.

"There she is!"

Dick Staines turned his head. A girl in severe nurse's costume was walking slowly towards them. Until they were nearly abreast he could not see her face.

There is a beauty which instantly appeals; more critical examination brings disappointment. There is another type which impresses more slowly and more lastingly, and a third, and the rarest of all, an instant discovery of loveliness which brings with it the illusion of familiarity.

Seeing her for the first time, Dick Staines was certain that a long acquaintance must have built up his knowledge and appreciation of her beauty. In less than a second he had seen and she had passed.

"Well, what do you think, old boy?" Tommy was anxiously awaiting his verdict.

"She's very pretty," said the cautious Dick Staines, and felt a brute at his churlish flack of enthusiasm.

"She's a nurse, old boy," said Tommy unnecessarily. "Pushes a dithering old Johnny all over the place in a perambulator—well, she doesn't exactly push him, but she's on the spot. Ain't she a stunner?"

"She's certainly a stunner," admitted Dick. "What is her name?"

"Mary Dane. You wouldn't guess that I'd find that out," said Tommy triumphantly, "but I have! Mary Dane—sounds like something off the screen, doesn't it?"

"How do you know her name is Mary Dane?"

"Because I asked at the boarding-house," said the shameless Tommy. "That's an idea that wouldn't have occurred to you—some of us fellers have got more initiative than Roberts. And I'll tell you something else: the old gentleman she pulls about is a man named Cornfort. They dodge up and down the coast, looking for the right kind of air. I spoke to her once—said 'Good-morning.'"

"What did she say?" asked Dick, amused at this sudden romance.

"She said Good-morning,' too," said Tommy. "But she so took me aback answering me at all that I couldn't think of anything more to say! She's a lady, old boy—got a voice like custard—you know, kind of soft and creamy..." He floundered, seeking an illustration.

They walked back, hoping to see her again, but were disappointed. That night, as they sat in the smoke room, discussing a final whisky and soda, Mr. Walter Derrick strolled in. He was in evening dress, a fine, happy-looking figure of a man. He glanced round the room, and presently his eyes rested on Lord Weald, and he walked slowly across to where they were sitting.

"Hallo, Weald! Siamese twins, you and I, eh? They lived next door in London, and in Brighton they were not divided!" He chuckled at this as he sat down.

He smiled at Dick, his eyes gleaming good-humouredly behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

"And what terrible crime brings you to Brighton, Mr. Inspector?" he said, to Dick's surprise. "Oh yes, I know you. Saw you giving evidence in court—criminal cases are a hobby of mine. I've got the best library in London."

"Dick's a friend of mine," Tommy hastened to explain his guest's position. "We were at 'Varsity together; then he became a Robert, and there you are!"

Evidently Mr. Derrick had no great interest in Dick's social position.

"It's queer I should have met you. I was only talking with somebody the other night and your name cropped up. We were discussing the Slough shooting case. You remember, the cashier of some company—I don't remember what it was—was shot dead and the pay-roll taken. I was in Africa at the time, and my impression was that they'd caught the man, but my friend tells me that he was never captured. That's probably before you went into the Force."

"On the very day I entered the Force," said Dick quietly. "No, he was never captured. We have, of course, a clue—"

Mr. Derrick nodded.

"A finger-print found on the barrel of the automatic. Yes, I know that part of it. The only thing I didn't know was whether this fellow was ever caught. If you're living about a thousand miles from everywhere, and your weekly newspapers have a. trick of going astray—I lost six mails through flooded rivers—you miss the end of these stories."

"The end is not written yet," smiled Dick.

Mr. Derrick pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Then I've lost," he said. "I could have sworn that the man was arrested and tried. I must have confused him with somebody else."

He was one of the loquacious kind that gives little opportunity for conversation.

"I had a sort of personal interest in the matter—my father, who had, I am sorry to confess, very few endearing qualities, made a collection of fingerprints. The poor old chap all his life was very keen on proving that everybody else was wrong but he!" He made a little grimace. "I suffered from that little hobby, but I'm not complaining. And he was perfectly convinced that the police theory that a man's finger-prints have no exact duplicate in the world was wrong, and he made an extraordinary collection—used to give prizes, though the Lord knows he hated spending money—to schools and factories for finger-print collections."

"He must have been disappointed," smiled Dick The big man shook his head.

"I don't know. I'm not so sure that there wasn't something in his theory. After all, how many finger-prints have you got at Scotland Yard? Suppose you've got a quarter of a million: that represents one-one hundred and sixtieth of the population. The only people you examine are members of the criminal classes, and it is the same in France and America and wherever the finger-print system is in force. It doesn't prove, because there are no two criminals alike, that there are no two honest men alike!"

"Are you continuing the good work?" asked Dick.

Mr. Derrick shook his head.

"Rather not," he said. "The first thing I did after my father's death was to go around and, collecting these beastly things, put them in the fire."

Then abruptly he turned to Tommy, asked him how he had enjoyed his shooting trip, whom he had met, where he had been. Evidently part of the country that Tommy had crossed was familiar to Mr. Derrick. His exile had been spent a few miles south of the southern arm of Tanganyika.

"Early to bed and early to rise," he yawned as he rose. "That is what makes millionaires!" He laughed at the joke, turned to go, and came back solemnly to tap Dick's shoulder. "A better way is to have a frugal father who makes it for you," he said.

"Cheerful bird," said Tommy when the jovial man had gone, "and such a sense of humour! The other day I told him a yarn about—"

"I'm going to bed," said Dick. "If it is the story about what you said to the railway guard on the Beira railway, I don't think I could stand it again."

He was up early the next morning, and had a bit of luck. He saw the nurse in some difficulties with her bath chair. They were pulling it up a steep incline, and Dick brought his weight to the back of the vehicle. This little exertion resulted in a loss—Tommy had given him a gold pencil with a large, red-lacquer top. After the bath chair had gone he missed this and went down the slope to the beach. But his search was vain. He may have dropped it from his waistcoat pocket as he was bending over the chair.

When he saw the nurse again it was in such dramatic circumstances that he forgot to ask.

It was ten minutes to one; he was sitting on a rail watching the ceaseless weaving of cars, when he saw something in the middle of the road that brought his heart to his mouth...

If Mr. Derrick's big Rolls had collided with the yellow bath chair this story would not have been written. He came flying round along the parade at a speed beyond legal limits, saw the bath chair, the nurse, and the bowed chairman only just in time to apply his brakes, and the car skidded awkwardly to the left, until its wheels bumped against the kerb, bounded back again, and half turned in its own length.

In an instant Dick was in the roadway, tugging the chair to safety.

"My friend," said Dick solemnly, "you have had a very lucky escape—by rights you ought to be in heaven!"

He addressed the nurse.

She really was beautiful, and owed nothing to her picturesque attire—if a woman cannot look pretty in a nurse's uniform she is plain beyond rescue.

She looked at him quickly, recognised the man who had earlier in the morning helped push the bath chair, and smiled. The grizzled chairman stood apathetically by; the invalid dozed in his voluminous wrappings, unconcerned.

"It was funny, wasn't it?" she said.

She had the voice of a lady, soft, yet distinct; for the moment it was rich with the quality of laughter.

"It didn't amuse me terribly," he said truthfully. "I congratulate you on your sense of humour. The only satisfaction you could hive got out of the tragedy would hay been the knowledge that you had been killed—and of course you wouldn't have known that—by a very rich and jovial man."

The nurse looked across the road. Mr. Derrick was talking to a policeman. The policeman looked rather stern, and had a notebook in his hand.

"Mr. Derrick, isn't it? He is staying at the Metropole—I've often seen his car. He was travelling at an awful rate."

"And awfully is he being rated by that guardian of the law," said Dick.

She laughed at this.

The apathetic bath chairman did not move; the invalid still slumbered.

"You are at the Metropole, too," she nodded. "The merest guest of a guest," said Dick. "My purse does not run to Metropoles."

He felt greatly complimented. This was no fly-by-night young lady to whom the formalities of an introduction were unnecessary. She offered as much as

she demanded. He knew that if he asked her to dine with him that night she would be shockingly surprised. She knew (he was aware of this) that he was incapable of any such invitation. It was just one of those curious understandings which occur between two people who have a similar code of behaviour.

"Then you're seeing life," she smiled, and signalled the chairman.

Dick watched the little party regretfully as they moved along the front.

She was lovely; those eyes of hers, as clear and grey as a spring sky, haunted him.

CHAPTER II

He carried the memory back that night to London. Tommy, was going on a tour of the South Coast to visit his innumerable relations. He looked forward, he confessed dismally, to a perfectly ghastly three weeks. One provision he made for the corn-fort of his friend.

"I've arranged for you to stay at Lowndes Square to-night. My man's in full possession, and I've phoned him to make you up a bed and call you in time for the early morning train. If you want to use one of the cars, old boy, regard it as your own."

Dick would much rather have gone to an hotel, and said so, but Tommy had been se pathetically efficient, and had gone to so much trouble (he confessed that he loathed the telephone) that he had not the heart to refuse.

Dick was met at the station by a troubled butler, who had a respectful tale of woe. He was the only servant in the house; he had misguidedly sent the cook off that morning on her holiday, the housemaids had left a day or two earlier, and he himself was in some distress. That afternoon there had been an interesting event in his family at a Notting Hill maternity home. Dick was mildly interested; he did not know that butlers had children. The butler confessed that it was the first time it had occurred, and he was naturally agitated. He added, fervently, that it would be the last time. The main point was this: would Dick mind sleeping in the house alone that night? The butler could come very early, call him, prepare his bath, and get his breakfast.

"Why, of course, my dear fellow. I could even do that myself, or I could breakfast at the station," said Dick, who wished more than ever that he had decided upon the station hotel.

There was a cold supper waiting for him, and afterwards the butler, not without evidence of his impatience to be gone, led him up to the third floor, and a beautiful guest room that ran the width of the house. There were three French windows leading out to a stone balcony. Two of them were closed with iron shutters of a type commonly seen covering the windows of suburban shops. They rolled up and they rolled down, explained the butler. He had locked two, but the third he had left open in case Mr. Staines needed air; and now he wished he had opened one of the others and had closed this particular one, because the retaining cord was broken, and the shutter must remain open all night. He showed Dick where he had wedged the shutter to keep it from falling.

"It will be all right so long as you don't touch it, sir," were his last words before he backed out of the room.

A pleasant room, with its snug four-poster bed and its old Georgian furniture; great armchairs, chintz-covered; a score of rare etchings on the

beflowered walls; it was old-fashioned and restful—Dick felt that he could spend quite a long time as Tommy's guest if he could have the use of this third-floor room.

On the table the butler had left a tiny key.

"In case you want to go out for a stroll, sir," he explained.

Long after he had gone, when Dick had changed into his pyjamas and had put on a thin dressing-gown, he slipped the key into his pocket mechanically.

It was a hot and breathless night. Even his thin pyjamas clung to his body; he could have well dispensed with the dressing-gown, and did so later, when he strolled on to the balcony and, sitting down in a deep chair, lit a cigarette and surveyed the twinkling lights of the square and the long street which stretched to infinity. It was breathless and hot and stifling. He had serious thoughts of bringing his bed on to the balcony and sleeping there. And then, to the south, he saw a jagged ribbon of light run across the sky, and there was a reverberating crash of thunder.

"This is where we go to bed," said Dick; rose and stretched himself.

He was hardly on his feet when there was a second crash, nearer at hand. The lights of the room were suddenly blotted out; the heavy shutters had been wedged, but not wedged well enough. Whether it was the reverberation of the thunder, or some other natural cause, the little triangle of wood had slipped from its place and the shutter had fallen.

For a moment Dick was startled, and then he laughed. It would be a simple matter to lift the shutter high enough to get under it. He stooped, felt along the bottom for some staple for his hand to grip. He seemed to remember having seen something of the sort on shop shutters, but there was nothing here. The lower edge of the rolled shutter fitted flush with the stone sill. Using all his strength, he pressed on the ribbed front and tried to pry it up, but it was immovable. And then a great spot of rain fell upon him, and another. He slipped into his dressing-gown and searched the street. There was nobody in sight. A few minutes before pedestrians had been plentiful; he had seen a policeman pass; but now nobody was in sight. The saunterers had hurried to places of shelter against the coming storm. He saw a big car come up to the corner of the block and stop, but it was too far away.

He tried the shutter again, but with no better success. Adventure was the breath of his nostrils, but an adventure which took the shape of an all-night vigil on an inaccessible balcony, perched high above a West End street and exposed to the full blast of a storm, was not the kind that appealed to him.

And then, a few feet away, he saw the edge of another balcony, and craning over espied a French window—unshuttered. Who lived next door? he

wondered, and then remembered suddenly. This was Walter Derrick's house, that genial man. And it was empty.

At the moment of the discovery his hand was in his dressing-gown pocket and he had touched the key. It would be a simple matter to reach the other balcony, make his way into the house—he might even be compelled to break a window, but he could explain, apologise, and pay for the damage. He was a police officer and above suspicion.

He threw one pyjamaed leg over the edge of the balcony and looked down. Ordinarily, he was not a nervous man, but beneath the ground seemed miles away, and in the flickering blaze of lightning he saw row upon row of cruel, upturned spikes, and a very hard-looking area into which he would most certainly fall.

The rain was pelting down now. A high wind howled and shrieked demoniacally through the square. He could hear the rustle and creak of the trees in the centre gardens, saw their giant branches tossed hither and thither by the force of the gale, and found it necessary that he should hold tight to the parapet to prevent his being blown to eternity.

He gripped the stonework with a firm hand, reached out one foot gingerly and felt the next balcony. After what seemed hours of testing, he leapt, grasped the parapet, and drew himself to safety. There were three windows, and none was shuttered. Behind each heavy white shades were drawn. There was no time for finesse: even if he had the necessary instruments, he would not have stopped to cut his way through the glass. Putting his shoulder to the window, he pressed. The glass doors gave creakingly, and then, with a sharp snap, opened. He drew aside the blind and, stepping into the room, felt along the wall until he found a switch, and turned it on. It was not a bedroom, but rather had the appearance of an office.

There was a little desk, two large bookcases, and a sofa. In the fireplace was a cheap-looking electric stove. There were one or two old pictures hanging on the walls, and near to the desk a large calendar. The presence of a typewriter on the desk suggested to him that this was probably the office of Mr. Derrick's secretary.

He tried the door; it opened readily. Having extinguished the light in the room, he stepped out on to a thickly carpeted landing. He could find his way with little help, for the lightning was almost incessant; and the pealing of thunder so continuous that the house seemed to be shaking from room to basement.

The stairs were very broad. He remembered now that this was a corner house, much larger than Tommy's. The butler had pointed it out to him as they had drawn up to the door.

He came to the second landing, and now he could walk with less caution. The landing windows were larger; those on the second and first floors were of stained glass. He saw the beauty of 'a design that came to him in a flash of lightning, and he saw, too, the pale ghost of a marble statuette gleam whitely into view and vanish.

His plan was a simple one: it was to go out by the 'front door and into Tommy's front door, and put in as much sleep as the storm would allow him.

The hall was in darkness. Only the reflection of the lightning, came here, and he had to walk with circumspection. It was a vast hall with a tiled floor, and there were big cabinets, he guessed, on either side. Happily, there was a fanlight which gave him direction.

He turned the handle, but the door did not move. He tried again, felt for the restraining catch, but unsuccessfully. He grinned in the darkness, and wondered what Tommy would say and what the jovial Mr. Derrick would say, and what solution Mary Dane, with her glorious eyes and her sane, friendly understanding, would offer to his predicament. It was curious he should think of Mary at that moment. There was nothing in his surroundings to suggest the serenity and fragrance of her. But he realised, with a sense of guilt, that her image had occupied his mind ever since he had left Brighton, that when he had leaned out of the window of the railway carriage ostensibly to wave farewell to Tommy, it was her face he hoped to see. He believed in miracles.

He felt round for the switch control, and, after a great deal of trouble, found it. A pale, yellow light shone in an antique lantern suspended from the high roof of the hall. He made an examination of the lock, and was quick to understand what had baffled him. The door had been double-locked, and without a key it was impossible to open it.

Dick Staines scratched his chin. He was wet through, his dressing-gown was a sodden rag that dripped an irregular circle of water about him.

There was nothing for it; he must try the basement kitchen. There would certainly be a tradesman's door. Leaving the light burning to facilitate his passage, he explored the back part of the house and began slowly to descend a narrower flight of stairs. There was a scent of ancient cooking to guide him, and, to his surprise, when he reached the foot of the stairs he saw a light burning in a wall bracket. It was dim and yellow and dusty, and had the appearance of having been forgotten by a careless servant. From the stone hall in which he stood two doors opened; that before him, he guessed, was most likely to lead to the tradesmen's entrance. He turned the handle and stepped in. Two strides he made, and stood stock still.

A light was burning here, too. It was evidently the kitchen, for the table had been pulled aside, and, lying full length on the ground, was a man bound hand and foot, his eyes tightly bandaged.

That alone would have startled him; but, bending over the man and searching his pockets with feverish haste, was a girl in a dark blue evening dress. On a nearby chair a richly lined cloak had been thrown, and as her hands went in and out of the man's pockets he saw the flash and sparkle of diamond rings.

She had not heard him enter. He took a step...and she looked up.

"Good God!" gasped Dick Staines.

For the beautiful woman, whose hand went straight out to the automatic pistol that lay by her side, raised a face to his that was a vision of loveliness—and it was the loveliness of Mary Dane!

CHAPTER III

For a moment their eyes met. In hers was no sign of recognition, only a look of horror and fear.

"You are Mary Dane!"

Dick's voice was harsh and strained. He hardly recognised it.

Still she did not move. Her hand was closed about the grip of the automatic. He took one step towards her, and at that moment all the lights went out; an arm was flung round his neck and he was jerked backwards. Somebody had come noiselessly into the kitchen behind him. Taken by surprise, he could offer no resistance. He lost his balance, cannoned against the man who held him, and fell sprawling outside the door. It closed with a crash; he heard a bolt shot, a whisper of voices, and, as he came to his feet and hammered on the panel, the thud of another door closing.

He looked round. Standing a little way along the passage was an old spade. With this as a lever, he attacked the door, and eventually forced the shaky bolt. As he expected, the room was empty, save for the motionless figure on the floor.

A wild wind filled the kitchen. The outer door, which had been slammed, had come open again, and, running out, he peered into a flooded area.

His first duty was to the bound man. In one of the drawers of the kitchen dresser he found an old carving knife, and with this he cut the ropes that fastened the prisoner.

It was some time before the man could give a coherent account of what had happened. He was caretaker, and lived in the back basement room. Every night he went out for a ten minutes' stroll, keeping within sight of the house. He had seen nobody enter, and had returned to have his supper before going to bed. The remains of the supper were still on the table: a half-filled glass of beer, cold meat and pickles, and a cut loaf of bread. He remembered drinking the beer...

"Was it poured out before you left?"

The man thought, his aching head in his hands. He wasn't sure. But he knew the bottle was opened. Now he came to gather his scattered wits he recalled the fact that he hadn't remembered opening the bottle before he left the house.

"That's all right," said Dick quickly; "you've been doped. Have you lost anything? They were searching your pockets when I came in."

The man put his hand into his hip pocket, and took out a flat, leather case containing keys.

"No, they didn't take anything...It was the man who tied me up."

"The man? Was there a man?"

The caretaker distinctly remembered the man. He had come to consciousness whilst he was being bound. A thin-faced, wild-looking man, with very short, fair hair.

He became suddenly aware of the déshabille of this providential visitor.

"I came in from next door—Lord Weald's house," said the detective, interpreting the curious glance the other gave him.

He had a hasty look round the other rooms, and came back to the caretaker, who had sufficiently recovered to be searching for the glass of beer.

"Don't touch that," said Dick sharply. "Just leave it till the police arrive. You're connected by telephone—get on to the nearest police station and ask them to send an officer round."

He walked out into the area; the rain was pelting down, but he was so wet that a little added discomfort meant little or nothing. He found the key in his pocket, admitted himself to Weald's house, and ten minutes later he was in a hot bath. He dressed himself, put on his heaviest boots and a mackintosh, and went out again into the street. As he did so he saw a motor-cycle and side-car pull up before Derrick's door, and two men, obviously divisional detectives, jump out. They had not seen him, and he waited till they disappeared into the area.

He was still a little stunned by his discovery'; but his duty was obvious—to place in the hands of the local police all the information he possessed. What was that information? That a girl whom he had only seen three times, and to whom he had only spoken once, had, with some other person, engaged in a burglary, and that girl was Mary Dane. He made a little grimace at the thought. It was incredible; but police work was made up of incredible happenings. He could stake his life that he was not mistaken...he could make that stake with equal vehemence that this girl with the clear, grey eyes was incapable of a criminal act.

The storm was less violent; with the exception of an occasional crash overhead, the rumble of thunder was dying away in the distance, but it still rained. He did not remember ever having seen such rain.

And then, wilfully ignoring the claims of duty, he went inside and closed the door. If the police wanted him they would know where to find him, he told

himself. It was not part of his duty to interfere with local detectives, and very likely the divisional inspector would resent his appearance in the case.

All that he could say was that he had seen a girl, handsomely dressed, bejewelled, that she was very pretty...Inevitably the question would be asked:

"I suppose you didn't recognise her, Inspector?" Naturally he was acquainted with crooks, male and female. How should he answer?

He carefully considered this, and decided upon a formula. He would say:

"I did not recognise her as any person known to the police."

With this crude sophistry he contented himself.

For some extraordinary reason he was feeling hungry. He made a search for the kitchen, opened a door, and went down some stairs and found himself not in a kitchen, but a garage. He stood staring at a fast little Italian car nearest the garage door. He tapped the tank: it sounded full. He looked at the indicator on the dashboard, and saw that the machine was ready for a journey. It was, indeed, intended and prepared for a surreptitious run in the country by Lord Weald's second chauffeur, but Dick did not know this.

There was an extraordinary arrangement over the car; a pulley handle, rather like one of those contrivances he had seen in American fire engine stations. You could sit in the machine, pull the handle, and the garage doors would open, he guessed. He got into the driver's seat, reached up, and pulled—the big doors of the garage folded back noiselessly.

It was raining heavily outside. He put on the headlamps to confirm this belief, though there was no need. Anyway, Tommy had said, "Use one of my cars," and he did not feel very tired. He stood up, drew the hood over the windscreen and fastened it. Very deliberately, he started up the car and drove out into the dark mews.

He felt a heavy iron bar across the mouth of the garage sag under him. He was hardly clear before the big doors folded noiselessly back and the garage was closed to him. One of Tommy's contrivances: he delighted in effects produced by the pressure of buttons or the turn of handles...Here was the fact, staring starkly at Inspector Richard Staines, that he was in a very dark mews in a small, but high-powered car, the garage was closed behind him, the front door of the house was closed before him, and the only key was in his sodden dressing-gown pocket in the bathroom.

It wasn't exactly the night for a joy ride, but he seized eagerly upon the excuse. He must go down and tell Tommy all about this remarkable adventure...He could not deceive himself: he was going down to make sure that Mary Dane was at Brighton; he had intended that step from the very

first, and the only thing he had not considered was the possibility of using one of Tommy's cars. Moreover, he was running away from inquiry. By now the detectives would be knocking on Tommy Weald's front door and waiting on the doorstep to interview him, and all the time they were waiting he was putting more and more distance between himself and the scene of the burglary.

"You're not only a sentimental jackass, but you're a bad police officer," said Dick Staines aloud as the car glided over Vauxhall Bridge.

"I am doing my duty," said Richard Staines virtuously, "and my duty is to confirm or dispel my suspicions,"

He knew, better than any man, that his suspicions required not so, much confirmation as expression.

All of the storm which had not come to London he met outside Dorking. The car sped along winding roads between high hills, and the lightning flickered and crackled overhead, and the thunder drowned the sound of his engine. With his screen-wiper swinging madly, his mackintosh black with driving rain, Dick Staines came to Brighton. The hour was 1.15.

There was a big fancy-dress dance at the Metropole. Long lines of motor-cars stood bonnet to tank along the front as far as he could see. A porter told him his lordship was in the ballroom, and thither Dick made his way, shedding his sodden coat en route. There were cavaliers and the inevitable pierrots and pierrettes, marvellous circus ladies, and circus ladies who were not so marvellous, sitting out in the lounge. As he came to the entrance of the room he saw a girl walking towards him across the floor, which at that moment was clear of dancers. She wore a nurse's uniform, and her face was masked. But the walk was already familiar to him, and his heart thumped painfully. Then, to his astonishment, she lifted her hand in greeting and took off the mask in one movement.

"I've been looking for you everywhere, Mr. Staines. Lord Weald told me your name."

Indubitably it was Mary Dane. He could only stare at her stupidly; then, recovering his presence of mind, he stammered:

"Has—have you been here all this evening?" Her eyebrows went up.

"Yes, but you haven't. Why?"

Dick swallowed something. "Why did you want to see me?" he asked, feeling extraordinarily foolish.

She opened a little bag that hung from her broad, white belt, and took out a gold pencil-case. Dick recognised it instantly as his own.

"Either earlier in the day, or when you dashed madly to my rescue, you dropped this—the chairman found it. I've been trying all the evening to find you to restore it. And I'm terribly thirsty, and...do you think you could find me an ice?"

He went, clumsy-footed, to the buffet, and returned to find her sitting under a palm in a deep armchair. She took the plate with a little smile of thanks.

"I suppose you think I'm rather too frivolous for a staid nurse? The truth is, I came up here to see you after I'd handed over poor Mr. Cornfort to the night nurse and then I found the ball was on and somebody lent me a mask. What time is it?"

He told her, and she made a little moue.

"You saw Tommy, did you?"

"Who's Tommy?—oh, Lord Weald! Yes, he was very amusing. He wasn't quite sure who I was and wanted me to unmask. I think he's rather a dear. He's a great friend of yours, isn't he?"

And then, looking at his attire and his somewhat bedraggled appearance:

"I thought you'd gone to London?"

"I did go—I've come back to-night to see Tommy on rather an urgent matter," he said glibly.

That the matter more closely affected Mr. Walter Derrick had not occurred to him until that moment, and he put a question to her. She shook her head.

"Mr. Derrick? He's the man who tried to run over me to-day. No, I haven't seen him. He's probably here somewhere, disguised as Juggernaut!"

They both laughed at this. A little later she handed him the plate and he went with her to find her cloak, and very boldly (he felt it was a bold act, at any rate) he offered to see her home.

He was foolishly pleased when she accepted his invitation, and he went in search of Tommy's car. When he came back she was waiting for him under the portico. She and her charge were living at a small house on the outskirts of Hove, she told him. Mr. Cornfort did not like boarding-houses.

There was a little silence after she had told him this, and then, unexpectedly, she said:

"Why did you ask me whether I'd been at the dance all the night? As a matter of fact, I hadn't. I didn't come till nearly eleven o'clock. You looked so

very severe—and—magisterial is the word—when you saw me, I thought you were going to arrest me on the spot—you are a detective. Lord Weald told me all about you. A 'Robert' he calls you."

Inwardly Dick cursed the loquacious lordling. He was floundering with an excuse when she pointed.

"There's the house, past the lamp-post on the left…thank you."

He pulled up before a small, semi-detached villa; a light shone in one of the upper rooms: presumably it was the bedroom of the sick Mr. Cornfort.

"Thank you very much." She put her warm hand in his, and was gone.

He saw her go up the garden path, stop at the door, and evidently she rang, for a few moments after the door was opened by the night nurse, and was closed upon her. Dick swung round the car and went back to the Metropole to find Tommy Weald, and had the satisfaction of killing two birds with one stone. For Tommy, in the absurd costume of a bull-fighter, was telling what was evidently a very good story to a tall, stout pierrot.

"Very good, my boy, very good!"

Dick grinned and wondered how good would sound the story which he had to tell to Mr. Derrick.

Tommy gaped at the unexpected spectacle of his friend.

"Good heavens!" he piped. "Aren't you in Scotland?"

Dick led the two men to a quiet spot and told them everything that had happened that night. He did not, for what seemed good and sufficient reason to himself, reveal the amazing resemblance of the woman whom he had discovered in the basement of Derrick's house to Mary Dane.

Tommy was all a-twitter with excitement.

"This is the most stupendous thing that has ever happened, dear old boy," he said. "Never in all my experience have I heard anything like it."

The big Mr. Derrick received the news and became unusually serious.

"This is not the first time this has happened. There was an attempt made to get into my house three or four months ago," he said. "What they expect to find, heaven knows. I keep no valuables, and certainly my silver doesn't seem to be worth all the trouble. Was Larkin hurt?"

"Larkin—is that the name of your caretaker? No, he wasn't at all hurt. I don't know what his head will be like in the morning: they evidently gave him a pretty stiff dope."

"You say you saw the woman?" asked Mr. Derrick. "Would you recognise her again."

"I saw her only for a few seconds, then the light went out. It is very difficult to undertake identification, especially of a woman. I'm not even so sure I should be able to recognise her dress, which was a pretty expensive one."

"You didn't see a car outside the house?"

For some extraordinary reason, Dick had forgotten the limousine that drew up at the corner of the street when the storm broke.

"Yes, I saw a car, but I saw nobody get in or get out. I'm not so sure that it was in the street." He tugged at his memory. When he reached the top of the steps he had turned to the left towards Weald's house. He had never dreamt of seeing any trace of the fugitives, who would have had plenty of time to make their escape by the time he got out. It was probable, however, that the car was the means of escape.

"Have you any enemies?" he asked.

Derrick shook his head.

"None whatever. If it had been my poor old father, I could well understand why quite a number of people would have liked to come after his worldly possessions, but I have never had the slightest trouble with the few tenants I have, and it's very unlikely...no." He shook his head.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Dick quickly.

But Mr. Walter Derrick did not attempt to explain. However exuberant he might have been before Inspector Staines had told him of the adventure, he was well sobered now.

"I'll have to get back to Lowndes Square."

"I can drive you back to-night," said Tommy eagerly.

"We'll go in your car," interrupted Dick, "but I shall want a chauffeur to do the driving. Somehow I don't think this is my lucky night."

They routed out Tommy's chauffeur, who, happily for him, had gone to bed very early that night, and by half-past two in the morning Lord Weald and his neighbour had discarded their fancy costumes, and, in the garments of civilisation, taken their places in the car.

The journey back to Town seemed interminable. Dawn was in the sky when, splashed with mud, the big Rolls pulled up before Derrick's house. As Dick expected, there was a policeman on duty outside the door. He was a little uncommunicative until Inspector Staines made himself known. The case, he said, had been taken by a detective-sergeant and a detective, but they had long since left the house.

Derrick let himself in with a key, and the two men followed. They found that the caretaker was up and dressed. Though he was not a nervous man, he confessed that he had found it impossible to get to sleep that night.

Together, the three men made a tour of the house. On the way up Dick had explained the circumstances which had brought him, a trespasser, into Mr. Derrick's household; and apparently the broken French window on the third floor had been seized upon by the detectives as proof that an entrance had been effected by this means.

"Which shows that Roberts don't know everything," said Tommy.

When they came downstairs the caretaker remembered a piece of news which he had omitted to give them.

"The police found a finger-print on the beer-glass. They took the glass away to Scotland Yard to have it photographed," he said.

This was intensely interesting news to at least one of the three.

It was broad daylight when Lord Weald open the door his house and a weary Dick followed him into the hall.

"You've got time for a nice bath, a bit of breakfast, and you'll be able to sleep on the train," said Tommy. "To tell you the truth, old boy, I'm rather sorry you're going—"

"I'm not going," said Dick quietly. "This is a matter which I feel requires a little personal attention. I'm reporting to the Yard this morning, and if I'm in luck I shall get this case allotted to me."

He had a leisurely breakfast, and at the earliest convenient hour he called upon the Assistant Commissioner, whose guest he was to have been, and explained why he would prefer to spend his holiday in London. His host was too keen a policeman to object to this change of plans.

At ten o'clock Dick went on to Scotland Yard, interviewed the Chief Constable and the Superintendent, and had the case given into his hands.

"And it's a pretty big case, Staines," said Superintendent Bourke; "bigger than you imagine."

Dick looked at him in surprise. That it was an unusual case he was well aware, but its importance was not so obvious.

"Nine years ago," said Bourke, very slowly, "the cashier of the Textile Company was shot down by a motor cyclist, who robbed him of about six hundred pounds. Do you remember that?"

Dick nodded.

"I read the case. I'd only just come into the police force."

"We never caught the man," said Bourke, looking at him thoughtfully. "The only due we got was a very distinct thumb-print on the pistol barrel—remember that?"

Dick nodded.

"I remember it very well: I've seen the thumbprint a score of times: it was also used as an illustration in the late Commissioner's memoirs."

"Late Commissioners shouldn't have memoirs!" growled Bourke. "But get that fact into your head, Staines. Ten years ago a man is shot in cold blood, robbed of six hundred pounds, and the murderer gets away without a trace, leaves only an unknown thumb-print on the barrel of the pistol."

"Yes, I've got that in my mind," said Dick, wondering what was coming next.

Bourke opened a drawer, took out a photograph, and threw it on to the table.

"Take a look at that," he said. "It's interesting—it's the finger-print of the Slough murderer, and it was found on the beer-glass in Derrick's house to-night!"

CHAPTER IV

Dick looked at the thumb-print, hardly believing the evidence of his senses. The Slough murder was one of the classic cases, where an unknown man commits a murder in broad daylight, escapes, leaving a finger-print, is not arrested, and disappears as though the earth has opened for him. How many hundreds, how many thousands of new criminals who had fallen into the hands of the police had had their thumb-prints taken and compared with the mark on the pistol? He himself had examined the impressions, every whorl, every island—he could have almost drawn it from memory.

"The whole case is rather mysterious, isn't it? Why they should have gone into Derrick's house at all? Even the pictures on the walls are hardly worth more than their frames. Yet this is the second attempt that has been made—
"

"Third," corrected Bourke. "There's one that Derrick doesn't know about. Do you know what I think? Sit down!" Superintendent Bourke liked his audience to be seated. "Old man Derrick, Walter Derrick's father, had a hobby—"

"I've heard about it," said Dick. "Curiously enough, his son was telling me last night."

"About the finger-prints?"

Dick nodded.

"He must have collected thousands," said Bourke. "We used to call him 'the amateur record officer.' He was out to find two finger-prints exactly alike and upset the whole of our organisation. Although he was the most miserly man I ever heard about—they say he ran that big house of his on five pounds a week—he went to any amount of expense to collect the prints. He was as fanatical as a stamp fiend. He even paid collectors in big factories to send him specimen prints. The only joy he had in life was to sit over them night and day`,' comparing, measuring, and classifying. I must say that he knew the subject even better than our men at Scotland Yard—at any rate, as well. If his eyesight hadn't failed he might have made a discovery of some sort."

He looked at Dick long and earnestly, and Inspector Staines knew his chief well enough to refrain from stimulating him.

"I'll tell you what my theory is," said Bourke at last. "I believe, in the course of his collecting, by some accident he got the thumb-print of the Slough murderer."

"But the collection has been destroyed," said Dick.

"Has it?" Bourke was obviously sceptical. "I know that as soon as Walter Derrick got home and got to work he began to clear out the collection. They were bound up in books: there was a whole wall full of 'em. As a matter of fact, I know, because I saw them. After the old man died Walter sent to the Yard and asked if we'd like to accept them, but we've no use for law-abiding folk, so we turned the offer down. They were afterwards destroyed—but were they all destroyed? This bird who is in Walter Derrick's house at odd moments knows as much about the burning of the collection as anybody else. Why, then, does he take the trouble and the risk, and spend the money? He or she is looking for a finger-print. Twice they've been after it; once they had the house to themselves—it was when he was in Monte Carlo—that's why he had the caretaker put in—and not once have they stolen anything valuable."

Bourke threw out his arms with a dramatic gesture.

"My son, go get this lady and gentleman, and you'll find the man who killed the Slough cashier!"

Dick approached this case as he had approached a dozen others, by forgetting all that he knew about it. But some things were very difficult to forget. Happily, the grey-eyed nurse was no longer under suspicion. He was thinking a lot about the grey-eyed nurse; he said very scornful and derisive things about himself, made grimaces of contempt when he was shaving in the morning, and in more charitable moments was slightly amused by his own stupidity, his childishness.

Here was something very beautiful that had swum into his ken and had vanished again—a comet figure of loveliness and grace, visible just so long as it takes to stir a man's imagination, long enough to throw tiny roots in his heart so that the wrenching out was very painful. He would never see her again.

Tommy, it seemed, was more fortunate. He had seen her at Littlehampton, reading in one of the shelters on the foreshore, Mr. Cornfort sleeping, the shabby and unshaven chairman smoking a surreptitious pipe behind the shelter, having propped the wheels of his bath chair with large cobbles. All of this Tommy related in a letter:

"Naturally, old boy," he wrote, "I hopped off my machine and gave her a how-d'you-do. She was most affable, and asked after you. Then the old gent woke up and cracked a couple of good gags about the weather that I seemed to have heard before (I told her this after he'd gone to sleep again, and she was frightfully amused)."

Tommy was going on to Petworth, or somewhere near Petworth, where he had most ferociously boring relations, who live in a sort of moated castle. Fearfully damp and terribly depressing in wet weather, but dear Aunt

Martha may pop off any day, and what with these socialists, dear old boy, you can't afford to chuck away a chance of beating up an honest penny.

Dick read the letter at Scotland Yard, and envied this flighty bachelor who had such wonderful opportunities of meeting the grey-eyed nurse, even in Littlehampton. Why hadn't Tommy stayed in Littlehampton? he thought irritably. Dick could have gone down to see him, to consult him—well, he would probably have seen her. He had half a mind to tell her of the ludicrous double business, of how at first sight he had confounded her with a soulless adventuress. It almost seemed an excuse worthy of the journey to tell her that alone. He told himself that he was getting childish, which was probably true.

The finger-print found on the beer-glass of the caretaker was without question identical with that found nine years before on the jacket of an automatic pistol. From the Scotland Yard records patient men dragged out every particular about the Slough murder and began to prepare a dossier. To bring that record up to date required no very great ingenuity. When they had finished their labours they knew no more about the murder than they had known nine years before.

Dick had an invitation one morning to lunch with Mr. Walter Derrick at his club. The postscript ran:

"By the way, did the finger-print you found on the glass help you?"

He had no intention of telling Derrick of the momentous discovery. It is not the business of the police to arouse unnecessary alarm in the bows of innocent citizens. He was by no means sure that Superintendent Bourke's theory was right, and his first step, now that he had been given the case, was to discover all that was possible about the known actors in this little drama. Mr. Derrick's position was very clear: he was a very rich man, and it was quite likely that he possessed movable property that would reward a burglar. Old Derrick's wealth had been largely in real estate, and Dick Staines sought out one of the most important agencies in the City of London, and, by great good luck, picked, upon the one firm that could inform him.

The partner whom he interviewed had a great deal to say about the miserly father of Walter, and much of it was uncomplimentary.

"The shrewdest old devil that ever bought land!" was his verdict. "He had an instinct for values. He started life as a working builder, and years ago he used to do his own repairs on his properties. He could handle a trowel with the best of bricklayers, and my father once told me that he had seen him slating the roofs of some small cottage property of his in the South of London."

"He left a lot of property?" asked Dick. The partner shook his head.

"Not he," he said emphatically. "He was too wily a bird; he knew just when values were at their highest and sold. About eighteen months before he died we sold four properties for him, the gross value of which was eight hundred thousand pounds. I remember this distinctly, because there was a wrangle about the commission. He sold another block—two office buildings in the City—through Haytors for a hundred and fifty thousand at the same time. He was a queer old devil, and invariably insisted upon being paid in hard cash. No cheques for old Joshua! I had the satisfaction of seeing him walk down Queen Victoria Street with a valise containing over half a million pounds in bank-notes. So far as I know, he never invested a penny."

"Probably he bought more property?"

The agent shook his head.

"No, but he was on the point of doing so. The market was rising again just before he died, and I had opened personal negotiations with him for the purchase of a big City block for four hundred and twelve thousand pounds."

"A man like that must have made enemies?" suggested Dick, but this view was contested.

"All business people make enemies, but I shouldn't think old Joshua aroused any very strong animosity. Even the estate agents, with whom he bargained to the last penny, did not really dislike him. The only thing he would never sell was his house in Lowndes Square, and I happen to know that he had some very good offers for it, even during the property slump—offers which I imagined he would jump at. But I suppose he had some sentimental interest in the house—he built it, or rebuilt it, himself, and he would never listen to the best of offers."

Mr. Walter Derrick's club was a large and handsome establishment in Pall Mall, devoted to motorists. Dick found him waiting in the busy vestibule, and was greeted with that cheerful grin which Mr. Derrick gave to all and sundry, for he was a very friendly man.

"Got on my nerves, that infernal burglary," he said, as he bustled Dick into the crowded dining-room. "Couldn't sleep last night. By the way, that stupid caretaker of mine is beginning to recover his memory. He says the girl was as pretty as paint. That's the worst of being a rich bachelor. They'll get you, even if they have to break into the house for you!"

He gurgled with laughter at this jest, but was more serious when he came to speak about the incoveniences to which he had been put.

"He was going to the country that evening, he said, leaving a double guard at the town house.

"I still don't know what these people are after," he said. "Now if it had been in the days of my governor, I could have understood. The poor old man kept all his money in a steel box under his bed—he never had dealings with a banker if he could possibly help it. We found in there—or rather, the nurse found it—four hundred and twelve thousand pounds in bank-notes."

Dick looked up sharply.

"How much?"

Mr. Derrick repeated the sum.

"But that wasn't all you inherited?"

Walter Derrick's eyes twinkled.

"It seems to me a fairly useful sum," he said. "Yes, as a matter of fact that was my inheritance. People think I'm a millionaire—well, I feel like one, and so will you when you have the handling of four hundred thousand pounds!"

A light was beginning to dawn on Dick Staines.

"But did you make any inquiries as to any other moneys he might have had?" he asked. "Didn't his lawyer—"

"The old gentleman never employed a lawyer," said Derrick. And then, curiously: "Why are you so excited about it, Mr. Staines? There was a little house property, but of no great value. The four hundred and twelve thousand pounds was the total I inherited."

Dick stared at him incredulously.

"Do you mean that you or your lawyer made no inquiries of the people with whom he had dealings, the estate agents, that you found no receipts or memoranda connected with his business?"

"None," said Walter slowly. "What are you driving at, Staines?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Dick. "Tell me this: Did your father die suddenly, or was he ill for very long?"

"He died quite suddenly. He took to his bed one day and was dead the next. Until then he was in perfectly good health. Now what is the mystery?"

It was no mystery to Dick Staines now, as he explained.

"The money you found under his bed was the purchase price of a property for which he was negotiating just before he died. I know that from one firm alone he received eight hundred thousand pounds, from another a hundred

and fifty thousand, and probably, if you canvassed the estate agents of London you would discover that he sold property to the value of a million within a year of his death. Therefore, the money you discovered beneath his bed was only a portion of his actual property, and since he seems to have been in the habit of keeping his wealth in hard cash, it is pretty clear that the remainder is somewhere hidden in your house."

Walter was staring at him; his face had gone a little pale.

"You must think I'm a fool not to have made these inquiries," he said; "and I probably am. Just tell me, Staines, what you know, and I promise you that if you've been instrumental in restoring my property, I shall not forget what I owe to you."

Dick Staines wriggled a little at this. He had never grown hardened to the promises of reward which had come his way from time to time.

"I suggest that you and I go back to your house, and that we make a very thorough search. Somewhere in that house is a hiding-place that nobody knew but your father. This is all the more likely because, if I understand aright, he was the builder, and probably overhauled the plans of the architect."

Whilst he was talking, he saw Walter Derrick's lips part to ask a question. The words were unspoken, but Staines knew just what the words were, and was a little startled.

They finished their lunch quickly, and Derrick drove him back to the house in Lowndes Square. Dick had already made a survey of the building in daylight. It was bigger than any other house in the square, an ugly edifice, and he might well suspect that the elder Derrick had not only assisted and amended the work of the architect, but had been responsible in the main for its unsightly additions.

He had remarked before that in appearance it was not unlike a public institution, with its façade of white glazed brick.

When Mr. Derrick opened the door he found the vigilant caretaker in the passage.

"I got your message, sir."

"My message? What message?"

"You telephoned saying the gentleman was calling this evening to measure the rooms for the new carpets."

Derrick and Dick Staines looked at one another. "All right," said Derrick quietly.

He beckoned the detective up to the drawing-room on the first floor, and closed the door.

"I sent no such message," he said. "I was leaving this afternoon for my place at Godalming, as I told you, and I had no intention of returning to Lowndes Square. That's a pretty clumsy trick—Larkin could easily have got on to me by telephone."

"Too clumsy to be genuine," said Dick. "It—almost seems as if they wanted you to be in the house to-night. I should let them have their wish, and I will be here."

Derrick looked troubled.

"I can't understand it, I can't understand it," he said vehemently. "Why the devil are they bothering me? There's something about this business that is rattling me. What is there behind it? Why should they—" He stopped suddenly and frowned. "No, I can't think."

And then, shaking off the gloom which was settling upon him, he became suddenly his old chuckling self.

"Come along and find the treasure house," he said.

From room to room they went, pulling up carpets, examining and tapping walls, prying into cupboards that had not been opened, according to Walter, since his father's death. The house had the solidity of a fortress. The walls were thick, but Walter Derrick explained that his father had a weakness for solidity. As a boy he had lived in an old house that had collapsed in the dead of night, and he had narrowly escaped death.

Most of the rooms were so proportioned as to be positively ugly. Everywhere was evidence of the amateur architect's hands: odd little staircases that seemed to have been put in as an afterthought; inaccessible windows that must have been the despair of a generation of housekeepers. The façade was not altogether unsightly. Old Mr. Derrick had conformed roughly to the general architecture of the square. There was a stone balcony on each floor, which ran continuously along the two fronts of the block.

For two hours they delved and examined and tapped, but found nothing. Eventually they 'came to the room where Dick had made his entry that stormy night, and Derrick unlocked a cupboard.

"Here's something that will interest you," he said.

He stooped and took out a dusty iron box. It was very heavy; the key was still in the lock.

"This is the box which contained the money and a few odds and ends of no great value."

It was as much as Dick could do to lift the box and swing it on to a table. It was made of solid steel, and was deep and wide. He opened the lid, and saw inside a curious brass instrument which had the appearance of a syringe. There were two curved grips, and, silver at the end of the piston, a grip rather like the butt of a pistol. Attached to the other end was a large cup of red rubber.

"What is this fearsome weapon?" he asked, examining it curiously.

"I've never been able to find out."

It was strongly made and heavy; the brass cylinder was seven inches in diameter and short. Projecting from the cylinder end on either side were two stout brass grips about four inches long. He puzzled over this for a little while, and then saw what it was; and, wetting the edges of the rubber cup, he pressed the rubber flat upon the polished surface of the steel box and drew back the piston end. Presently he heard a click, and the piston moved no more. Holding the two grips, he lifted the steel box from the table. As he thought, it was a small vacuum machine, and not until he had found the spring that released the pistol grip and allowed it to sink back again was he able to pry loose the rubber cup from the surface of the box.

"Where was this?" he asked.

"It was inside the chest with the money. I think it was on top."

Dick put back the 'sucker' in the box and closed the lid.

Later that afternoon he interviewed a retired builder in the Wandsworth Road: an old man whose memory was a little defective, but who could very well recall the circumstances of his contract with the elder Derrick. He remembered, in the course of the building, a long, shallow safe coming to the house, but where it was placed he had no knowledge. Mr. Derrick, as Dick suspected, had worked on the building himself, and, to the scandal of the neighbourhood, had even spent his Sundays in an old suit, plying a trowel. More than this: he had stopped all the work for three months and had brought in black workmen. The old builder thought they were Moors, for the only holiday Mr. Derrick permitted himself was an occasional month in Tangier, in the days when living was cheap, and it was possible to reach the North Coast of Africa on a fruit boat for a few pounds.

CHAPTER V

His memory, however, was not entirely reliable in regard to essentials. But he remembered one recent trifle, and produced a sensation by its recital.

"It's a funny thing," quavered the old man, as he offered a limp hand at parting, "that all sorts of people want to know about that there house. I had a young lady here a day or two ago—pretty as a picture she was, a bit of a girl. She said she was writing a book about houses, and wanted to know if I had any old plans. And, sure enough, up come the question of this house of Mr. Derrick's."

"What was she like?" asked Dick. "Tall or short, stout...?"

The old gentleman considered.

"Well, now you come to mention it, I don't remember anything about her except that she'd got very pretty eyes—a sort of greyish-blue, just like my granddaughter's; sort of long, dark lashes over 'em."

Dick knew that he was describing the eyes of Mary Dane, or Mary Dane's double. He thought it was a moment to make the tactful admission that he was a police officer.

"Detective, are you? Well, I can't tell you anything more than I've told you. She wanted to know where she could find the architect, and I gave her his address. She wrote it down on this very table." He pointed shakily. "She couldn't find a pencil for a bit, and then she took one out of her bag—a gold one with a big red stone at the end of it."

Dick's jaw dropped: he was describing the pencil he had lost, and which Nurse Mary Dane had restored to him.

It was a sorely puzzled man who left Scotland Yard that evening and walked to his lodgings. It was half-past eleven, and once he had left the Strand behind him he was in a fairly deserted area till he came to Holborn. This passed, he entered the silence and desolation of Bloomsbury, and was feeling a twinge of annoyance that he had so precipitately left his flat, when he found interest in one of those unpleasant little dramas which are all too frequent in a great city.

A woman was walking ahead of him, so far ahead that he could not be certain that it was a woman and not a man. As he swung along he gradually overcame her, though he was totally unconscious of the fact. Her assailant must have been coming from the opposite direction: Dick did not see him until he heard a girl's cry and saw two people struggling. He quickened his pace and came up to them as, slipping from the man's grasp, the girl turned to fly. She cannoned into the detective and almost knocked him over. In

another second the man had gripped her arm. He was tremendously tall, overtopping Dick Staines; his voice was thick and drunken and very loud.

"Hey! Come back, you!"

Inspector Staines caught him with a professional grip and swung him back against the railings of the gardens that occupied the centre of the square.

Then he heard a little gasp from the girl, and, turning his head, found himself staring stupidly into the face of Mary Dane. She was dressed in a dark blue costume, and he might not have recognised her in the closely fitting hat if he had not known her.

"Oh! Mr. Staines, please send that man away!"

The long fellow was truculent, most anxious to take up the matter of an unprovoked appearance.

"What's the idea?" His voice was louder and even more raucous. "Can't I talk to a young lady...old friend of mine from Capetown?"

He waggled his finger drunkenly in the girl's face.

"Didn't think I knew yer, did yer? But Lordy's got a memory: he never forgets people who done him a bad turn—and—"

The actions of police officers are rather definite Dick Staines again jerked the man against the railings without an effort.

"Is this fellow annoying you?"

He saw by the light of a street lamp that her ii face was very pale.

"No...I think he has mistaken me for somebody else."

"Like hell I have!" said the stranger. "Your name's Mary de Villiers! And who are you, I'd like to know?" He turned suddenly on Dick.

"I am Inspector Staines from Scotland Yard," said Dick, and at the words the long figure seemed to wilt. His voice sank to an ingratiating whine.

"I'm not giving any trouble, Inspector. Perhaps I've made a mistake with this young lady. To tell you the truth, I've had a couple of drinks—"

"Let's have a look at you," said Dick, gripping him by the lapel and drawing him to the light.

The first thing that struck Dick Staines was the man's extraordinarily narrow head; a long, brown face, a pendulous nose, small round eyes deeply set, and a ragged little moustache were photographed in Dick's memory.

"It's all right, baas—Lordy Brown is my name. I landed last Saturday from the Glamis Castle. This young lady knows—well, maybe she doesn't know."

Then, to Dick's surprise, he began talking rapidly in a language which the detective did not understand. At first he thought it was German, then he knew it to be Dutch, and the taal at that.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Do you understand that?" He turned to the watchful girl, who had withdrawn a little from the circle.

She shook her head.

"I have an idea he's trying to speak to me," she said.

"To you, miss?" said Lordy Brown, almost humbly. "Why should I talk to you? I've given you enough trouble to-night. I'm a gentleman, and I apologise. Only landed from the Glamis on Saturday; I got a good friend here, Mr. Inspector. I went round to see him, but he wasn't in. Good feller, too...knew him years ago when he was living in a dirty old tent in Tanganyika. He'll see Lordy right. Millionaire, this fellow is. Had a row with his old man and ran away to Africa, but a good feller—old Walter Derrick."

Dick looked at him quickly.

"Do you know London at all?" he asked. "Do you know—" He mentioned a cafe near Piccadilly Circus which almost every overseas tourist has visited. "Meet me there in half an hour. If you aren't there I'll come and find you. Where are you staying?"

The man gave an hotel in a street off the Strand, and gave it so readily that Dick knew he was speaking the truth.

"I'll see you in half an hour. If you're not there I'll come and find you," said Dick Staines, and without another word left the man.

The girl was already walking slowly away. Evidently she expected his escort.

"It was all very terrifying, and I rather lost my head," she said ruefully. "I didn't see this man until he came up to me...I hate drunken people."

"Where are you staying to-night?" he asked.

She was staying at a private hotel in Gower Street. She had come up for the day from Littlehampton to do some shopping, and was going back next day. She did not like London particularly, she confided to him.

"I want to ask you a question," said Dick. "Have you ever heard of somebody being so like you that you have been mistaken for one another?"

She shook her head.

"No, I don't think there's anybody in the world quite like anybody else," she said. "Have I really got a double?"

"A treble, unless Mr. Lordy Brown was talking in his sleep. He mistook you for a Miss Villiers of Capetown. Do you know Capetown?"

To his surprise she nodded.

"I was there two years ago," she said.

"But you couldn't have been a nurse then: you weren't old enough."

She laughed softly at this.

"You're in a very complimentary mood to-night, Mr. Staines."

And then she shivered.

"I wish I hadn't seen that man; I'm rather worried about him."

He did not ask her why she should he worried about a man she did not know and whom she might not see again.

"It is queer that he should know Derrick," he said.

She did not answer, and when he repeated the rather banal statement:

"Mr. Derrick? He was the gentleman with the yellow motor-car? Is he in London?"

At present, Dick told her, Mr. Walter Derrick was at his country house in Surrey.

"He is very fortunate," she said.

He asked her why, and she smiled. When he pressed her:

"How stupid you are! And Lord Weald—Tommy, don't you call him?—thinks you're so terribly clever! Wouldn't you think it good fortune not to have to entertain an old African friend like Mr. Brown? You're going to see him, aren't you—Brown, I mean? Do ask him who Miss de Villiers is—it's rather a common name in Capetown, if I remember rightly. Have you lost your pencil again?"

The question recalled to his mind a matter that troubled him.

"I almost thought I had," he said. "And this is where the question of your double comes in. There's a builder at Wandsworth named Ellington, a very old gentleman, who recently had a visitor—a lady, who, from his description, was rather like you—she called on the day the pencil was lost, and on the day...something else happened that was rather remarkable. Ellington said the young lady had asked him for particulars about Mr. Walter Derrick's house, and that she had produced a pencil to write down an address that was obviously my pencil. Am I being very amusing?" he added, a little tartly, for she was laughing.

"I think you're terribly amusing. Look!"

She opened her bag and took out a shining gold object and handed it to him. He stopped to examine it: it was identical with the pencil he had in his pocket.

"I bought it this afternoon in Regent Street," she said solemnly. "I could have bought forty or fifty or a hundred! There seems to be a vogue in these pencils just now. I saw a man using one in the train. Where did you get it?"

"Tommy gave me mine," he said.

"Of course Tommy gave you yours!" she scoffed. "There's a shop in Regent Street selling nothing else—a fountain-pen shop. If you take the trouble to look, you will see an enormous display of them in the window; and if you think they're gold, they're not! I hate exposing your Tommy, but they cost seven and sixpence each, and I should think there are nearly fifty thousand of them in use. Will you tell me something?"

"I'll tell you anything I can," he replied.

She was silent for a little while, and then asked:

"What is the great mystery? What do you mean when you say that I am three people—Miss de Villiers and myself and somebody else—who is the somebody else? Have they been committing terrible crimes, and did you really come down that night to Brighton to arrest me?"

"What an absurd idea!" he began.

"Don't prevaricate! I could see, the moment you came up to me in the ballroom, that there was something very, very wrong. I thought you'd come especially on my behalf—to catch me out—that was the sensation I had. And you did, too!"

"Have you a sister?" he asked, and she nodded.

"Aged twelve, and not a bit like me. She's rather dark. She's an awfully clever child, but not clever enough to impersonate me. Have I a twin? No. The truth is, Mr. Staines, I must be a very commonplace type."

He could protest against this in the tritest possible way, but she changed the topic.

She told him that any letters addressed to the little hotel where she stayed would always find her. That she should suggest his writing at all was ridiculously pleasing to him; the pleasure was somewhat modified at parting:

"In case you find a fourth person like me, and you would like to know where I am," she mocked him.

Dick went back to the café where he had arranged to meet the man from Africa, and found him sitting at a small corner table. Even amongst the Bohemian assembly he was an unusual figure, in his grey, soft shirt, open at the neck, his battered Stetson hat on the back of his narrow head, and the long, brown, lean face.

There were people in the restaurant who knew Dick Staines and who turned their backs on him quickly when he made his appearance, for this was a favourite rendezvous of the swell mob, the "kite" men, the confidence artists, and that queer little world of fashionably dressed young men who lie in wait for gullible strangers.

"What'll you drink, captain?" asked Lordy Brown, and his fingers snapped at a waiter like the crack of a pistol. "Hi, you! Get the captain a drink."

But Dick was not drinking anything stronger than a lemon-squash.

"I'd have had one myself, but I've lived on it for years—lime-juice and bad water! The sight of a cordial bottle makes me go sick in the stomach! Hope you don't think any the worse of me, captain, for that little business with the young lady? The truth is, I was a bit tight. Do you know my friend Mr. Walter Derrick?"

He was obviously taken back when Dick replied in the affirmative.

"A good feller, rather soft, but good. Funny' how I met him. He had a camp at a place called Pakasaka, gold prospecting, him and a feller named Creave. I come across him in the bush. He was a pretty sick man—been mauled on the leg by a lion—but I got him back to his camp. I'll bet he remembers that, captain! I'll bet he'll say 'Why, Lordy, what can I do for you, you old crook!' Full of jokes, was Walter. If ever there was a witty man or gentleman, he was that man."

"Or gentleman," suggested Dick, amused.

"I was in the camp four days lookin' after his leg—left calf cut up something awful. He went after a mangy old lion—that sort can be dangerous. He said he'd be a limpin' cripple all his life, but I says No. You trust me, Walter.' Naturally, with my experience—I'm better than a doctor. Plug in the iodine an' plenty of hot water—better than a doctor. Walter will remember that! He'll say, 'Lordy, I'm glad to see you! You saved my life, Lordy, an' now you're down and out I'll save you!'"

"I hope said Dick when the loquacious man paused.

"Of course he will. Us voorlopers always stand together. We're the salt of the earth. We're different from you fellows at home—we've been through it. My brother was one of the original pioneers. I know the country from Christmas Pass to the Falls and down again to Buluwayo. I've prospected in Barotseland and Bechuanaland; I've lived in the Kalahari."

He looked at Dick with a speculative eye. Evidently he was debating in his mind whether he should give him an item of information which he had almost given once or twice in the course of the conversation.

"I suppose you'll be finding out who I am, Inspector? Well, I'm not going to give you any bother—I believe in treating the police as gentlemen. I've been in trouble, I admit it; I've done two terms in Pretoria Central, and there's no sense in denying it—twelve months and three and a half years. But that was in the days when I used to drink, and got led astray 'by people who were worse than me. I'm straight now. The other game doesn't pay. You know that better than I do, Inspector."

"What were your offences?" asked Dick.

Mr. Lordy Brown coughed embarrassedly.

"Well, they were bad and yet they weren't bad. I wasn't the chief man in either job."

It was the old cant that Dick knew so well. Evidently Mr. Lordy Brown was not particularly proud of his crimes, since for a long time he rambled about the subject before he made the confession.

"The first job was just gold robbery from a prospector—he was tight and I was tight, and I don't really know the rights of it even now. But the police swore my life away—they're not so honest as they are in England," he added hastily. "I had my first dose in Pretoria Central. The second job I was innocent, in a manner of speaking. They told me the gentleman was buying diamonds—you're not allowed to buy diamonds in South Africa—"

"I know all about I.D.B.," said Dick.

"Well?"

"Well, sir," said Mr. Lordy Brown slowly, "I went to tip him off and tell him the police would be looking for him. I might have asked him for a few pounds to get me to Capetown, but nothing worse than that. Well, it appears that this gentleman wasn't buying diamonds at all, and I got four years on false evidence."

"For trying to blackmail him, in fact: is that your weakness?"

Lordy did not attempt to deny the impeachment, but thought it necessary to proclaim the purity of his motives with regard to Mr. Walter Derrick.

"There's a gentleman that is a gentleman. I know nothing against him except that he's too generous! That man couldn't do a crooked thing—and such a jocular chap! Full of fun and amusement. Do you know what he used to call his leg when I was dressing it—the lion's share! It takes a man to make a joke about his own troubles, don't it?"

When he said he was broke he was speaking in a figurative sense. He confessed to Dick that he had landed with 'a few' pounds, and regretted, in a half-hearted way, that he had ever left South Africk The detective guessed that there was a very excellent reason for his leaving.

"Did you ever get into trouble in Capetown?" asked Dick suddenly.

By the man's hesitation he gathered that the full record of Lordy Brown's crimes had not yet been confessed.

"There was a bit of a bother," replied Mr. Brown vaguely, "but I always say that give a dog a bad name and you might as well string him up! When I was there, Capetown was full of crooks, and naturally other people got the blame. Crooks! Half the Australian gang were there—men and women living in the best hotels and all on the make-haste."

He felt the intensity of Dick's inquiring gaze, and became suddenly uncommunicative.

"Who was Miss de Villiers?"

Lordy Brown looked past him and for an instant was ill at ease.

"Oh, her? Well, she was a—she was a lady I knew slightly."

"Crook?" asked Dick.

"I'm not giving any information about ladies," replied Lordy virtuously.

Of one thing Dick was certain as he walked home: it was that this man really had been genuinely deceived when he addressed Mary Dane. There was nothing amorous, nothing friendly in his tone when he had spoken to her; rather was it the gloating satisfaction of an injured man who had met the one responsible for his misfortunes.

He was intrigued, a little bit hurt. He analysed this latter sensation quite unnecessarily. He was hurt because he was fond of the girl and because, at the back of his mind, there was a suspicion, not entirely a conviction, that Mary and her double were one and the same. And yet, both he and Lordy Brown might easily have been deceived. They had both 'recognised' the girl in the half light: one in the basement of Walter Derrick's house, the other in the uncertain light of a street lamp. Why was she an enemy of Walter Derrick? What did she hope to gain by these mad adventures? His mind went back to the unknown Slough murderer. Was she a sister, a wife...? He shook his head. In romance such things happen; in real life people are content to leave well alone.

Suppose that the Slough murderer was behind these unaccountable outrages, he would certainly have known that all the finger-prints in the possession of old Derrick had been offered to the police by his son, and had been refused. And if they were hidden in some secret hiding place...No, he rejected the finger-print theory. More likely was it that these midnight visitors were seeking the balance of old Derrick's money which they knew to be hidden in the house.

So he could lift down Mary Dane and her double from the realm of romance, and place the latter where she would belong, if his theory held—a member of a clever gang who were seeking easy money, money which would never be missed and, therefore, would arouse no outcry.

He lay sleepless in his bed for a long time that night, thinking and thinking, creating theories only to destroy them. He went to sleep with one resolve—to find the woman who was impersonating Mary Dane, and to lay bare a mystery which had begun to get on his nerves.

Nothing but asinine infatuation (as he told himself) would have taken him to the little hotel in Gower Street where Mary had spent the night. As it was, he was punished for his act of folly, for Mary had left by an early train, although she had hinted to him that she would be in Town all day.

"Are you Mr. Staines?" asked the maid, as she remembered a commission. "Would you mind waiting here, sir? The young lady left a letter for you; she said you would call this morning."

In spite of his annoyance Dick laughed. How very sure this 'young lady' was, and how very wise in the ways of men! And his irritation was not easily dispersed. Certainly her letter did nothing to soothe him.

"DEAR MR. STAINES,

"I am so sorry I have had to go hack to Littlehampton. I had a telephone message early this morning that Mr. Cornfort was not so well. I'm so sorry I cannot lunch with you, but I do hope you will ask me again."

The writing was small, rather childish. And now Dick Staines' annoyance was more acute, for he had called to ask her to go to lunch, and he was perfectly sure that on the night before he had made no mention of such an occasion.

He could almost see her laughing at him, very gently, those grey eyes of hers alight with fun.

"Curse the woman!" said Dick mildly, and went back to his duties.

His duties that day were rather light, his task the re-reading of the Slough dossier. It was remarkable how little was known of the murder. The only evidence of the slightest value was given in a statement by a carter named, curiously enough, Carter, and a pencil note on the corner of the foolscap ran laconically: "This man has since died."

Carter had seen the motor-cycle and side-car coming slowly from the direction of Maidenhead. The driver was dressed in brown and wore goggles. His height was difficult to ascertain because he sat astride of the machine. The murdered cashier was a man of forty, an amateur boxer, and a great pedestrian. It had been his habit to walk from Slough to the works, which were just outside the town, and to carry the money in a black bag. The managing director had considered this a dangerous proceeding, and had issued orders that the cashier was not to collect money unless he had a guard with him; but more often than not this rule was ignored. He was alone this morning when, in view of three or four people and the driver of a grocer's cart, the motor-cycle and side-car came to a halt by the edge of the path and the driver alighted.

He was tinkering with his machine until the cashier came abreast, whereupon he turned round, whipped out his pistol and fired. Nobody saw the driver get back into his saddle, and before anybody realised what had happened he had disappeared. He had passed through Slough town, and, curiously enough, obeyed the signal of a traffic policeman who held him up to allow the passing of a trolley, and that was the last seen of him.

The pistol was found in the middle of the road about forty yards from the murder, and the theory of the police was that in trying to put it into his pocket the murderer had let it slip and it had fallen down between the cycle and the side-car. Nothing was seen of the man: even his motor-cycle was never traced nor its number taken. Naturally enough, Scotland Yard had pulled in every man with a bad record and who had ever committed a hold-up, but they got no nearer the solution of the mystery, and the general idea

at Scotland Yard was that he was an educated man who had escaped to France.

Now it is a peculiar fact that ordinary criminals do not attempt to leave England, and for a very excellent reason. A man without a knowledge of a foreign language or of foreign customs is a hopeless creature in a new land. He is marked wherever he goes, and since the descriptions of wanted men are circulated instantly abroad, it would be generally impossible that they should evade capture.

Scotland Yard can count on the fingers of one hand men who have committed crimes and have made for the Continent, and invariably these have beet international crooks and safe-blowers who are as much at home in Paris and Berlin as they are in London.

CHAPTER VI

There was the Slough murder in a nutshell—a commonplace, wicked crime, committed by one who was obviously unknown to the police, since all the underground channels of information could bring no hint or clue as to the perpetrator.

Dick read and re-read the various statements, as a score of other police officers had done, hoping to find the tiniest overlooked detail which would lead him to a new conception of the case. He read again the carter's statement, and no passage acquired any new significance. Returning the paper to its folder he sent the dossier back to the record office, and the messenger had hardly gone before his telephone bell rang, and he gathered from the delay that he was at the London end of a trunk call.

"...Is that you, Staines?"

He recognised the voice at once: it was Walter Derrick's.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked quickly, and heard Derrick's laugh.

"I should say not; only it's Saturday to-morrow, and I wondered if you'd care to come down and spend a week-end with me at my little place—or doesn't Scotland Yard allow you week-ends? If it's any inducement, Weald is coming...No, it's not a house-party—just we three. You'll probably be bored, but the country is looking at its best."

Dick had no very pressing engagement in London, and he was rather curious to find out Walter Derrick's impression of Mr. Lordy Brown.

"I met a friend of yours yesterday," he said.

"Who was that?" asked Derrick quickly.

"I'll tell you all about it when I come down—a queer bird!"

"That really does sound like a friend of mine," chuckled Derrick. "Male or female—not my pet burglars?"

"Nothing so interesting," said Dick.

Before he left Town he made an inquiry of the Union Castle Line and was supplied with a list of homeward-bound passengers on the Glamis Castle. Neither in the first, the second, nor the third-class did he discover the name of Lordy Brown. In fact, nobody named Brown had travelled on that ship. This was not extraordinary: if the Inspector's theory was accurate, that Brown left South Africa in a hurry for South Africa's good, he would be travelling in an assumed name. There was, of course, the possibility that the man had been in England for a long time. Support to this theory was found

When Dick discovered what was the likely cause of Lordy's flight. There had been, six months before, a series of wholesale burglaries in Capetown and a number of arrests had been made. Though Lordy Brown was not exactly wanted by the police, he was certainly suspected of being a member of the gang. Fear of detection might have been one of the reasons for his appearance in England.

The record which came from the High Commissioner's office on the Saturday morning revealed how modest had been Lordy's claim. Not twice, but a dozen times had he seen the interior of African prisons, and had even served a sentence at the hands of the Congo Government in Elizabethville. Apparently, the man was a great traveller; he had described himself loosely as a prospector, but his basic employment was trader.

Walter Derrick described his country home as being in Surrey. It was, in reality, on the very edge of Sussex, and within a few miles of Singleton. The estate was a small one, the house modern and unpretentious.

Derrick met his guest at the station and drove him to Keyley. At his request the detective had called at the house in Lowndes Square and there found two men on duty. They had little or nothing to report, and expressed the opinion, which Dick endorsed, that no further attempt would be made on Derrick's property.

"It's a wearisome business," he sighed, as his big car went swiftly down the long, straight road. "I really can't make head or tail of it. If, as you think, they suspect there is money hidden in the house, they must be just as hazy about its location as I am! Next week I'm going to get in an architect and a couple of builders, and we'll have a real search. Perhaps if I find anything these beggars will leave me alone."

They found Tommy Weald standing outside the house, and he hailed Staines' arrival with joy.

"I've had a perfectly boring week, and I looked like having the most ghastly week-end—"

"Thank you," said Derrick.

But Tommy was not even apologetic.

"I can't help it, old boy. My beastly relations have thoroughly depressed me. And if I hadn't accepted your invitation, Derrick, I should have been off to Bognor, getting acquainted with my little friend. She's adorable, Dick, old boy."

"Who is this?" asked Derrick, amused.

But Dick Staines was not anxious to discuss Mary Dane.

It looked like being almost as dismal a week-end as Tommy had predicted. Dick had had rather a heavy week and was tired; Derrick was unusually taciturn at dinner; and Tommy yawned his way from course to course, being absolutely without good manners. If he spoke at all, it was of the 'divine nurse,' who had evidently made an impression upon his susceptible heart.

"I am anxious to see your Miss Dane," said Derrick. "Have you met her?" He turned to Dick, who nodded.

"Yes," he said quietly, "and you nearly met her—with your car!"

Derrick's eyebrows went up.

"Is she the lady I almost ran down in Brighton? Good Lord!"

"I should never have forgiven you," yawned Tommy.

He confessed that he was desperately sleepy, and when Derrick suggested he should go to bed, he accepted the suggestion with alacrity.

Dick and his host walked out into the dusky grounds. It was a warm evening, and the air was heavy with the scent of roses. Somewhere in the distance Dick could hear the song of a nightingale.

"Makes you think there isn't such a place as Scotland Yard in the world, eh?" bantered Derrick. "No rogues, no thieves, no murderers—"

Dick saw a dark, sinuous shape move swiftly across the lawn. Derrick saw it too.

"No murderers...hum! I've promised myself the pleasure of shooting that stoat one of these days. He got amongst my chickens the other night and played the devil with them." And then, abruptly: "Who's this friend of mine, Staines? You've made me terribly curious."

"Not as curious as he made me," said Dick, smiling to himself in the half-darkness. "Do you know one Lordy Brown?"

There was a silence.

"Lordy Brown?" repeated the other slowly. "It sounds rather familiar. What is he—a circus performer?"

"I should imagine he's been that amongst other things," said Dick. "Do you remember, when you were in Africa, being mauled by a lion? By the way, I didn't know you were a hunter."

"I was hunted on that occasion," was his reply. "Was he the fellow who found Lordy Brown!" he said thoughtfully, adding: "A thin-faced man who talks about himself all the time. I remember, I thought he was dead...I seem to have heard or read that he was drowned somewhere in Tanganyika. How did you come to meet him?"

Here Dick Staines was prepared to lie a little.

"I met him by accident," he said. "In any circumstances, I should probably have made his acquaintance, because my section deals with undesirable people from the overseas states. And, according to the High Commissioner's report, he is one of the most undesirable gentlemen that ever came from Africa."

"Did he tell you he was a friend of mine?" asked Derrick with a gurgling little laugh as though he remembered something very amusing. "He didn't by any chance mention the fact that when he left our camp he took with him about twelve ounces of gold that we'd washed out of the river with a great deal of labour?"

Dick could well imagine such an ending to Lordy's acquaintanceship.

They paced up and down, Derrick with a cigar clenched between his teeth, his hands behind his back. Evidently the news of Lordy Brown's arrival had started a train of thought which was not particularly pleasant.

"That fellow's got a nerve!" he said. "A friend of his! Did he tell you that he was on the run when he met us and that I sent fifty miles to the nearest magistrate to give him away? I should say Lordy Brown was the only genuine enemy I've had in my life. He hates me worse than poison! Now if he'd been in the country a few months ago, when these crimes were committed, I could very well understand them, especially—" He did not finish his sentence.

"Anyway, you must expect him to call on you when you get back to Town," said Dick. "He's staying at present at the Howfolk Hotel, off the Strand. I should imagine that he wants money."

"I should imagine that he won't get any money from me," said Derrick quietly. "I remember him now—I think he's got a record of blackmail against him, but I'm not certain about this. One hears scraps of news, and I've probably fastened the crime on to the wrong man. If he comes to my house I shall certainly send for the police. He got on very well with my partner—a man named Cleave. I'm not so sure that Cleave hasn't some sort of record against him, though he was pretty well educated. Poor old Cleave I oughtn't to be talking against him. He went a little off his head—wandered into the bush and was never seen again. Just about then game had moved in our direction, and the place was overrun with lions. I shot two the day he disappeared."

He threw away the end of his cigar and lit another.

"I'm beginning to remember more about Lordy Brown," he said, after a long silence. "He blackmailed a man in Capetown, but, unfortunately for him, there's a pretty useful detective agency at the Cape, and Lordy was rather lucky not to be sent to the Breakwater. Queer—I'd forgotten all about the man," he said with a laugh of vexation, "and here am I giving you his biography! I'd like you to be with me when I meet him. He has probably written to me in Town, in which case I'll write and make an appointment on Thursday."

He did not speak again that night about the iniquitous Lordy. The next afternoon, when he and a bored Tommy were playing clock golf, he made one reference to the adventure.

"I wish you'd find out, Staines, whether or not this fellow had a record of burglary. It may be as well to be sure it was not he who broke into my house."

Mr. Derrick had the plebeian habit of sleeping on Sunday afternoon, and evidently Tommy knew of this, for hardly had their host retired when his lordship beckoned Dick into the garden.

"I've got the car outside," he said. "What about a little run to Bognor?"

Dick looked at him sternly.

"Have you any relations at Bognor?" he asked, and Tommy giggled.

"We might see her, old boy, on the front. She's always dodging up and down with that old ditherer. I'm sure she'll be awfully glad to see you," he said artfully. "She never meets me but she doesn't talk about you—says what an extraordinary fellow you are, and wonders how people like you got into the police force."

Dick required very little persuasion; at the very suggestion his heart had leapt. He was, he confessed dismally, rapidly unfitting himself for the responsible position he held.

It looked as though the trip to Bognor was to be in vain. For two hours they walked up and down the front, but there was no sign of Mary Dane, and they were seriously considering the advisability of returning to Keyley when Dick saw a yellow bath chair drawn slowly over the road at the end of the common, and a dainty blue and white figure immediately follow. In another second he was striding towards her.

She was not at all surprised to see him, and for a good reason.

"I've been watching you walking up and down the front for the past hour—our rooms in the hotel command a very good view."

Tommy gave an incoherent excuse for their presence, but this she ignored. Mary's eyes were on Dick.

"What have I been doing now? And have you found another miscreant with a seven-and-sixpenny gold pencil?"

She looked meaningly at Tommy, who started guiltily.

"And what happened at your interview with that dreadful man? I don't suppose you saw him, though."

It was not a particularly pleasant afternoon for Tommy. If he came into the conversation at all it was by his own heroic efforts. The deaf chairman pulled the yellow vehicle ahead of them, and they followed at a distance of a few yards.

"The doctor is sending Mr. Cornfort to the East Coast; we're going to Margate first, and then by boat to Clacton."

"What is the matter with him?" asked Dick.

He had never really interested himself in the invalid, and he was rather shocked by his own callousness. She looked at him gravely.

"That is the one question you must never ask a good nurse," she said, and for some reason Dick felt unaccountably foolish.

It was not Tommy's idea of an afternoon out, and he said as much most of the way back to their host. He wished, he added, that he had not suggested the joy-ride to Bognor. Dick interrupted him brusquely.

"When are you returning to Town?"

"Not for a month," said Tommy. "I've got to go on to this wretched aunt of mine. She plays croquet, and loves it, old boy! It's obscene I Why do you want to know?"

"I was wondering," said Dick slowly, "whether you would like me for a lodger. I took rather a fancy to that bedroom you put at my disposal, Tommy, and I've a mind to spend, say, the next month as your guest—don't stare at me, Tommy—stare at the road ahead; I notice your speedometer says fifty-five, and that's a bad speed to gape on."

"What's the idea?" asked Tommy. And then, eagerly: "Is it a bit of police work? If it is, old boy, I'll give up aunt like a shot and come back with you."

Dick hesitated. He might want help if the theory which was forming in his mind was justified; and he was not especially anxious to acquaint Scotland Yard with his suspicions. He had it in his mind that within the next few days the last, and possibly the most desperate, attempt would be made by the unknown to find the hidden treasure in the house in Lowndes Square.

"Slow down, and I'll talk to you," he said, and when Tommy had dropped the speed of his car to a moderate thirty, Dick expressed himself with the greatest frankness.

"You'll probably be amused and certainly be bored, and it's any odds that you'd spend a number of dull days without the slightest relief in the world. But if you'll put yourself entirely under my orders I'll make a little policeman of you. As to your unfortunate aunt, I think she will not be the loser by your absence. When can you come up to Town?"

Tommy thought very quickly.

"What's the matter with Wednesday?" he asked.

"Seems an excellent day," said Dick. "And if you don't mind, I'll go back to your house to-night. I want you to write to your man—who'll hate to see me—giving me the free run of the house until you arrive. By the way, do you park any firearms?"

"Two revolvers, old boy," said Tommy, with great satisfaction.

"Have you a police permit for them?"—and, when Tommy was silent: "I thought not I—at least I can have the satisfaction of pinching you if nothing else turns up. Where are they kept?"

Lord Weald told him, and was prepared to stop the car and draw a diagram showing the exact position they occupied in a small bureau on the left-hand side of a door on the fourth floor, but this was unnecessary.

CHAPTER VII

When they returned to Keyley they found Mr. Derrick playing bowls with his gardener. He did not seem in any way surprised that they had 'taken the afternoon off,' as he put it.

"This is a devil of a dull place without ladies. I nearly asked the nurse in to keep me company."

"Which nurse is that?" asked Dick quickly.

Derrick laughed.

"I'm blest if I know. I saw a nurse snooping round, admiring the gardens, and I hadn't the heart to tell her she was trespassing. Rather a slim little thing—pretty, as far as I could judge—I don't know whether I'm wrong, but it struck me it was the girl I nearly killed at Brighton; but then all nurses look alike."

Dick and Tommy Weald exchanged glances. "If you'll tell me the time—!"

"About an hour ago," said Derrick.

"Then I can assure you it was not," said Tommy emphatically.

"Funny...I thought it was. As far as I can recollect the girl, she was like her. She was with a man; evidently they were very friendly. They disappeared for a time, and when I walked over to the end of the rose garden I saw them getting in a car—the nurse was driving. I loathe women drivers."

Dick was dumbfounded.

"Did you notice anything else about the nurse?"

Mr. Derrick considered.

"She was some distance away from me. The only thing I saw was that she wore bright brown gloves. Most nurses wear white."

Here was another facer for the detective. Mary Dane had worn bright brown gloves: he had seen them at a distance, and had wondered why she wore something which was out of tone with her general colouring. Who, then, was this mysterious double, and why did she pick upon a perfectly inoffensive nurse?

He made his excuses to his host, and Mr. Derrick, so far from being distressed by his premature departure, offered to put his car at Dick's disposal to take him back to Town, an offer which the detective was glad to accept, for the train service on a Sunday was appallingly bad. In the

meantime, Tommy had got through to his house, and had given instructions for the reception and treatment of his guest.

Dick found that the domestic staff had been augmented by two maidservants, and so far from his presence being resented, he was greeted with something like enthusiasm. Later in the evening, when his coffee was being served in the cheery bed-sitting-room, the butler explained the warmth of the welcome.

"The maids are getting scared about Mr. Derrick's house, sir," he said.

"Why scared?" asked Dick.

The man looked a little sheepish.

"Well, of course, it's silly nonsense, but they say it's haunted. So does the caretaker who's in charge. He says he's always hearing noises, and one night he saw Mr. Derrick's father, the old miser, going up the stairs...saw him as plainly as I'm seeing you. It was a moonlight night, and he was so scared he didn't even dare to go after him."

This was the first Dick had heard of any ghost in Derrick's house, and he was so impressed by the story that he rang through to Keyley.

"Rubbish!" scoffed Walter Derrick. "That's the first I've ever heard of it."

"Do you mind if I interview your timorous caretaker?" asked Dick.

"Not a bit. Ring through to him—or I will. I don't suppose the house will be burgled in his absence. Or would you rather go in and see him?"

Dick thought the latter plan best. He gave Derrick time to call up the caretaker before he himself knocked at the door. It was' immediately opened. Dick did not fail to see that the custodian of the house carried a revolver, which he slipped into his pocket as soon as he had satisfied himself as to the identity of his visitor.

"Yes, sir, I've got the jumps, I don't mind telling you," he said. "I'm no believer in ghosts. I am an old soldier, and I've been caretaker in queerer places than this, though I never want to have another night like I had on Saturday. I saw the old man."

"Did you know him by sight?" asked Dick, surprised.

The caretaker nodded.

"I've seen him lots of times. He used to come to our office—I was porter with the estate agents that he did a lot of business with. They still work for Mr. Derrick; that is how I come to get this job."

"What was he like in appearance?"

"Rather a thin feller, and small. Little above your shoulder, sir. He walks with a limp—you could tell it was he miles away."

This was news to Dick. He had heard many stories of the parsimonious man, but, curiously enough, nobody had mentioned this physical infirmity of his.

"Now tell me what happened when you saw the ghost."

The man breathed heavily, as though the memory was something so appalling that he needed to brace himself for the effort of recital.

"I was down in the kitchen having my supper, when I thought I heard a noise—somebody walking in the passage. I got up, took this old pistol of mine, and walked up the stairs into the hall. There was nobody I could see, so I turned on the lights. The drawing-room and the dining-room were both locked, and I said to myself that it must have been my imagination. I thought I heard a sound upstairs, and I went up—not in a great hurry, I can tell you. I reached the first landing, saw nobody, and then I looked up. He was standing near the landing window, and the moonlight was full on his face—"

"The old man?"

The caretaker swallowed something and nodded. "What did you do?"

"I just stood there, and saw him limp out of sight."

"Was anything touched? Did you afterwards make an inspection upstairs? Not immediately—I don't imagine you did!" said Dick, smiling.

"No, sir, nothing was touched. I'm not going to tell you a lie, sir, though if you tell this to Mr. Derrick I shall lose my job. I bolted downstairs as hard as I could pelt, and locked myself in the kitchen."

Dick roared with laughter.

"You poor old scare-cat!" he said.

"Well, sir," said the embarrassed man, "I don't know what you'd have done. Of course, it sounds pretty silly, sitting here in a nice lighted room with lots of company, but I was alone in the house. And he's been seen there before: when my mate was with me, he said he saw him limping up and down outside the house. Naturally, my mate didn't know who he was, but when he described him to me I knew him at once."

Dick considered the matter.

"Suppose," he chaffed, "this wasn't a ghost, but a real flesh-and-blood man? Could anybody have got into the house?"

"Only through the front door, and that was locked."

"Bolted?"

"No, sir; there was no bolt and no chain on. The fact is, Mr. Staines, chains and bolts are pretty good to keep people out, but they also keep people in!"

"In other words, they stop your escape, eh? Now where do you sleep?"

"I'm sleeping in the kitchen, sir."

"Good!" said Dick. "Then I'll tell you what I want you to do, and I'll get Mr. Derrick's authority for it. I'd like you to move your bed into this next room." He pointed to the wall that separated the two houses.

"The office, sir?" said the man uneasily. "If you ask me anything, that's the place this feller's always going to."

"Let's forget the ghost for a little while and concentrate upon safety."

Dick went out on to the balcony whence he had started his perilous adventure. The iron shutters were all up now; that which had locked him out had been repaired.

"If you sleep in that room, and I am sleeping in this, it is going to be a pretty easy matter to communicate. If you're down in the basement and you get a spook visitor, you haven't got a hundred to one chance of raising a holler! All you need do, if you hear anything, is to knock on that wall, either with your fist or a hammer or a mallet. I want you to go upstairs to the room at once, knock, and I'll discover if I can hear you. Come out on to the balcony after."

The man shook his head.

"That wouldn't be any good, sir. All these walls are as thick as the length of my arm."

"This may be an exception."

Larkin, the caretaker, agreed to make the experiment, and Dick waited. Eventually he heard only the faintest of sounds, and then went out on to the balcony.

"I hit it with a boot heel; did you hear, Mr. Staines?"

Dick had to confess that it was not the kind of knock that would have wakened him from sleep.

"Wait here," he said. He rang for the butler. "Have you anything like a portable electric bell in the house?"

"Yes, sir, we have one that his lordship uses to communicate with his valet."

"Bring it along."

The butler came back with a polished wooden case and a long coil of flex, terminating in a bell-push.

Dick went out on the balcony and gave particulars of his plan.

"It is warm enough to leave your window open. I'll keep the bell in my room; you have the bell-push in yours, and fix it so that you can reach it without getting out of bed."

Larkin apparently was sleeping on a camp bedstead. He had no difficulty in moving his lodgings, and he was rather pleased to be near what he called 'company'; the only fly in the ointment being that he had to go down through the dark house every time he wanted refreshment.

"You needn't use this room till the last thing at night, and when you go to bed like a Christian man to sleep. Does your door lock?"

The caretaker disappeared and returned to the balcony with the assurance that it both locked and bolted. The cord was trailed across from balcony to balcony and led into the man's new sleeping place. Dick put the business end of the apparatus by the side of his bed.

The night brought no new adventure. He strolled out on the balcony in the early hours of the morning, to find Larkin smoking his first pipe of the day.

"No, sir, nothing happened. I've been wondering whether that skylight upstairs is quite safe. So far as I can see it isn't fastened, and can't be."

Dick swung himself over to the other balcony and followed the man into the room. From the landing led a narrow staircase, which ended in a doorless lobby. Looking up, he saw a ladder suspended horizontally and apparently by counterweights. It was a very ordinary type of fire-escape. He pulled a thick, short rope, and the ladder end came down, and, at the same time, the skylight above opened automatically. Climbing up on the the roof he closed the glass trap. The ladder came up as the frame of the skylight sank into its supports. There was no difficulty in opening it from the outside. The roof was a flat surface, cut into sections by brick chimney supports. A little way along he came to another skylight—leading down, he supposed, to Weald's house. This was similarly equipped, and could be opened from the outside.

The next house rose a story higher, but there was an iron ladder down which fugitives from fire could climb to the flat roof.

He went back to Larkin with a reassuring report.

"I don't think our friends will or can enter this way," he said; but he was glad that he had made the inspection. Later his reconnaissance was to render him good service.

He half expected that Lordy Brown would be a visitor next door, and he had left word with Larkin that if the man came he was to be sent for. Lordy he was to meet by accident.

That afternoon Dick was hurrying along Piccadilly to meet Bourke, with whom he had an appointment. He had come by cab as far as Berkeley Street, but the traffic block was so thick and immovable that he had decided to pay off his taxi and continue the journey on foot.

He looked at his watch; it was five minutes after the appointed time, and he stepped into a hosier's store, where he was known, and called up Bourke, to learn that he was out and had left a message postponing the appointment. A little relieved, Dick came out into Piccadilly and continued his stroll towards the Circus at a more leisurely pace.

He was a Londoner by birth and preference; its noises were the sweetest of sounds to his ears, its tarry fragrance more lovely than the scent of gardens. Dick Staines was something of a dreamer; he liked to let his imagination run out of hand, to picture the life of this and that chance-seen man and woman, and speculate upon the interests which sent them hurrying like tired ants from one task to another.

Coming to a halt where Piccadilly joins the busy Circus, he stood on the kerb, his hands clasped behind him, surveying the traffic tangle which two bored policemen were unravelling.

"Well, well, Mr. Staines, this is a pleasure, I'm sure!"

He turned on his heel and had an impression of a long, narrow face, a fair of pale blue eyes, and an irregular mouth that was twisted in a smile. Otherwise he might not have recognised Lordy Brown in his new grey cashmere suit that did not quite fit, and which left an impression, justified as it happened, that it had been purchased ready to wear. From his waistcoat dangled a thick gold watch-chain; on his finger was a ring with a glittering stone—he was a different man from the rather shabby individual Dick had left outside the Piccadilly cafe.

"Seeing the sights?" Mr. Brown's tone was rather patronising. "This is a queer little burg, but you and me are nobody in it! Give me a little place where you're a big man. I remember when I was in Geelong—"

"You're dressed to kill, Brown. Have you had a good 'touch'?"

Mr. Brown gave his sideways grin.

"Me? No. I've got a little bit of money put by, and I had a letter from Africa this morning with some dividends. I've got two or three blocks of shares which bring me ix a pound or two."

He took a cigar-case, very new and shining and gold-bound, from his inside pocket.

"Thank you, I don't smoke," said Dick, rejecting the offer. "Not those kinds of cigar, at any rate."

Lordy Brown bit off the end of a cigar and lit it. "Come and have a drink?"

Dick's first inclination was to refuse, but he was curious to know something more of this stranger who had blown into his orbit.

"I'll have a cup of tea with you."

"Tea's mine, too," said Lordy. "Liquor at this time of the day is immoral and disgusting. At night, yes. A man like myself that can drink any two men under the table prefers to have his pleasures when business is done."

They walked across the road in the direction of a large café in Coventry Street, and Brown expounded his philosophy. He believed that to the 'good feller' fortune comes as naturally as the rain from heaven. He was a 'good feller,' and therefore entitled to all the benefits which the more erratic gods disposed so indiscriminately.

"Have you seen Mr. Derrick?" asked Dick, when they were seated in the cafe and had given their order.

"Him?" Lordy Brown smiled contemptuously. "He wouldn't see me. He's not in Town, is he? In the country—Keyley—that's the name of the house."

"You've been there, have you?" asked Dick, interested.

"Went yesterday. Matter of fact, I saw you comin' away on the road. I sent a message in to him; he told me he was busy and that he'd see me in Town. Is that the kind of friendship you'd expect from a man whose life you saved? There's no gratitude in this world, Mr. Staines."

"You didn't see him, then?"

"I saw him, but he didn't see me," corrected Lordy. "That fellow hasn't changed a bit. I can see him laying there in the bush with the lions chawing

bits out of him as if it was yesterday! But I'm not the sort of man who forces myself on anybody. I'm no cadger. You ask anybody who knows Lordy Brown, and they'll tell you that he's a good feller who'll take a liberty with nobody."

Dick smiled.

"And you don't think Mr. Walter Derrick is a good fellow?"

"Oh yes, he is," said the other quickly. "I'm, broad-minded myself. Ask anybody in Africa, and they'll tell you that there ain't a broader-minded man on either side of the Tuli River. Mr. Derrick was right—he's a business gentleman and he doesn't want anybody barging in on him when he's got company—a lord, they tell me. My own idea is that they didn't give him my name properly. You see, Mr. Staines, I make excuses for people, even when they treat me like dirt. He's a very good feller, and I remember him as well as if it was yesterday."

He pulled a gaudy handkerchief out of his trousers pocket, and incidentally dropped a bundle of notes on the floor, which he hastily retrieved.

"You don't seem to want his help now. Your dividends seem to have been pretty extensive."

"The dividends are all right, the stock's good—I've got enough to live on. I don't want any man's charity." He was looking steadily at Dick as he spoke. "I shouldn't be surprised if he'd offered me a hundred pounds. But I wouldn't take it. I'd say 'No, thank you. I never take money for saving a man's life.' I'm like that, Mr. Staines."

"I shouldn't have thought it," said Dick, and Lordy chuckled.

He became serious immediately.

"You remember that de Villiers girl I saw, or thought I saw—Miss What's-her-name? She's at Bognor—a nurse, looking after an old gent."

"How did you know?" asked Dick in surprise.

"Because I saw her when I went to Bognor in a charabanc. She's a stunner!" He smacked his lips. "She's the dead image of a girl I knew in Africa. You'd think they was twins."

He said he thought of building a house in Bognor. He was buying a little car to get about.'

"What is it—just plain burglary, or have you 'caught' somebody for a lot of money?"

Lordy Brown turned pained eyes upon the questioner.

"If there's anything straighter than me in London it must be a foot-rule," he said. "I can afford to be straight."

"And yet you are hoping that Mr. Derrick will express his gratitude in the usual way?"

Lordy Brown smiled pityingly.

"Him! I wouldn't get a dog-biscuit! That's the worst of these fellers when they get on, they forget their old pals—"

"How long did you know him?" interrupted Dick.

"About four days," said the other calmly, "but that's quite long enough for me. I'm a quick friend-maker. No," he went on, "all the tropic dreams, as the poet says, have gone west. There's no pickings from Derrick. By all accounts his father was a miser. It takes a long time to breed out a vice from a horse, and men are worse. At the same time "—he looked past Dick stolidly—"I might make a bit out of him on the side. The world, as W. Shakespeare said, is my oyster."

Dick smiled unpleasantly, called the waiter, and paid for the tea—Mr. Brown protesting. As they walked out of the shop, he turned to his disreputable companion:

"The man who opens oysters in this town is opening the door to Cell 94. You might remember that, Brown."

"I forget nothing," said Lordy Brown, in no wise abashed by the threat.

CHAPTER VIII

Dick went back to the house soon after this, and interviewed Larkin, the caretaker, on Derrick's doorstep.

"No, sir, nothing to report; nobody's been here."

"You haven't had a telephone message telling you to go to Timbuctoo?" asked Dick.

The man smiled.

"That won't happen again, sir. Mr. Derrick has arranged a code word. I don't take any orders unless that is used."

"A most admirable idea," said Dick—"I suggested it."

Staines noticed that from time to time the man glanced apprehensively over his shoulder into the house.

"Is the ghost walking?"

"No, sir; I'm a bit nervous, that's all."

Evidently he was not greatly pleased with the prospect of sleeping there another night. Before dinner Dick took out Tommy Weald's little car for a drive, and again admired the mechanism which allowed the door to open automatically.

From the outside, even in daylight, Tommy's garage had a churchy appearance. Some parts of the little building were very old; there was, for example, a Gothic finial above a V-shaped arch that was crumbling with age. He was mildly interested, for Tommy was by no means ecclesiastically minded. The garage was probably in existence before he had bought the house.

The car behaved splendidly. He took it as far as Scotland Yard on the chance of seeing Bourke, and brought it back by a long detour through South London. He was nearing a popular tube station when he saw a girl walking on the near sidewalk, and for a moment thought he recognised her. As he passed he turned his head. Now hi was sure. He put down his brake and brought the car to a standstill. When he looked round she had disappeared; the entrance of the tube station had apparently swallowed her up, though he could have sworn she had passed the station entrance when he saw her.

Mary Dane, and yet not Mary Dane. She was getting on his mind; had become part of an obsession.

He began to take stock of himself. In what respect did this girl differ from a hundred other pretty girls he met or knew? She was no prettier than A, no more intelligent than B. He had to come back again and again to an old and overworked word which he loathed. She was an affinity; they turned to one another, or at least he turned to her. The first time he spoke to her he knew her, and there had been an immediate establishment of sympathy. Was that what people called falling in love? If it were so, it was likely to prove a fatal experience for himself.

When he got back to the house he had an inspiration. He knew where she was staying in Bognor; by good fortune he remembered the name of the landlord. The house was connected by telephone: he had seen a line that led to the house. He put through a call to the Bognor 'Inquiry,' and, after a very short delay, was talking to the supervisor. She told him she would switch him through, and in a minute he heard a man's voice at the other end of the wire, and guessed it was the landlord of the lodging-house.

"Can I speak to Nurse Mary Dane?"

"I don't know whether she's in," said the voice. "I'll send up and inquire."

Dick waited with nervous anxiety, and then:

"Yes...? Do you want to speak to me?"

"Is that Miss Dane?...Inspector Staines speaking," he said eagerly.

The girl at the end of the wire laughed.

"Yes. Are you sure you want me or your friend? If you want him I can call him in. He is sitting outside the house at this moment."

"Tommy?"

"Tommy," she repeated. "He is the most persistent Tommy I have ever met. Did you want to speak to me?"

"Why—yes." Dick hesitated, and floundered a little. "I wanted to ask you if—er—if you were in Town this morning...I thought I saw you," he said mendaciously.

"Oh, Mr. Staines!" The mock reproach in her voice made him grin. "You're always seeing things! What a dull life yours must be!"

And then she hung up on him, and left him feeling like a spanked child. He exchanged a few words with Larkin across the balconies.

The man was almost cheerful.

"I don't think I shall be ringing you up to-night, sir," he said. "These burglars are not coming back."

Most fervently Dick hoped not, for he was a tired man for some unaccountable reason.

He undressed, and was in bed by half-past eleven, after again saying good-night from the balcony to Mr. Derrick's guardian. It was the butler's knock on the door that woke him up. It was broad daylight, and the sun was pouring through the windows.

"Good-morning, sir." The man put down his small tea-tray. "I hope you have had a good night?"

Dick yawned.

"Yes, a very good night," he said.

"The bell didn't ring?" smiled the butler.

Dick had told him the night it was fixed not to be alarmed if he heard this loud-sounding instrument.

"No, we had a very good night indeed, the caretaker and H."

"He's sleeping late. I noticed, when I went to the door to take in the letters, his milk bottle was still in the doorway. Usually he's up by six."

Dick Staines was not tremendously interested in the domestic affairs of caretakers, and found a very simple explanation.

"I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't the first comfortable night's sleep he's had for weeks," he said.

He slipped into his dressing-gown and stepped out on to the balcony. The first thing he saw was the green bell cord—the wires had been carefully separated and neatly cut through.

He went back to his room, dressed hurriedly, and astonished passers-by in the street were thrilled by the spectacle of an athletic man swinging from one balcony to another. He stepped into the converted bedroom. The bed was there, but it had not been slept in. The door was wide open. On a small, nearby table was a large-faced silver watch; evidently the caretaker had put it down before retiring. On the floor, near to where the hand of the sleeper would be, was the revolver.

He went to the door and called the man by name. There was no answer, and his words came echoing up to him. Dick went down the stairs slowly, stopping at each landing to test the doors. They were locked, all except the

front drawing-room, which was wide open. The blinds were drawn; the room was in darkness. Dick drew back the curtains and let the shades run up. He was conscious of a peculiar acrid smell which he could not locate. The room he had seen before: the furniture had been hidden under linen covers. Now somebody had drawn off the sheeting of two chairs, and they faced one another as though they had been occupied by two people engaged in a long and intimate talk. The dust sheets had been thrown negligently near the fireplace, evidently on a rolled-up rug from its shape...a rolled-up rug? Dick looked at it again. He saw the tip of a brown boot...

In two strides he was across the room, and had drawn the sheet clear of the thing it hid. A man lay there, his thin face set in a grin. He was dead and stark. There was blood on his neck and on his waistcoat. The hands folded across the breast were clenched.

"Lordy Brown!" said Dick gently. "How did you get here, you poor devil?"

He drew back the coat, and then he saw something which made him gasp. Skilful hands had tried to bandage that wound: a white piece of sheeting had been drawn tightly round, a pad had been made from the same material, and it had been pinned scientifically; and, in the haste of departure, the little surgical pin case had been left behind-a thin leather folder of surgical needles and a tube of iodine, unbroken. He picked it up and examined it; there was a tiny pocket, and inside a plain white card, on which was scribbled:

"From R. D. to M. D. (Daddy wishes Mary a Happy Christmas. 1923)."

"M. D.?" repeated Dick Staines.

It was a common set of initials...It might not be Mary Dane after all.

There was a telephone in the hall. Dick put through a message to Scotland Yard and found that Bourke had either arrived or hadn't departed.

"I'll be along in a few minutes. You'd better search the rest of the house."

Dick went down to the basement. There was no sign of the caretaker. He had evidently taken an evening meal before he went up to bed; the remains were still on the table. The doors were locked; there was, as he said, neither bolt nor chain fastened on the front door.

By the time he had finished his search, the police car was at the front of the house, and Bourke and three assistants came up to the drawing-room.

"Was he dead when you found him?"

Dick nodded.

"Who bandaged him?"

"That is what I'd like to know."

"Humph!" said Bourke, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "It looks as if he was shot." He sniffed. "I smelt cordite when I came in—didn't you?"

"Of course!—that is what I smelt!" said Dick.

"Until the doctor arrives we shan't be able to tell exactly how he was killed. This is the man Brown, isn't it?"

He made a superficial search of the body, without moving its position. Nothing was revealed, except that Lordy Brown had evidently had several addresses since he came to England. There were no documents to indicate a reason for his presence; no keys or tools by which he might have gained admission.

After the doctor had gone, and whilst the ambulance was waiting at the door, surrounded by curious sightseers, they made a further and a more thorough search. In Lordy's right hip pocket was a fully loaded Browning automatic. The important discovery was when they searched the right hip pocket. Here they found a folded slip of paper on which was scribbled in pencil:

"Hyde Park—maggasine—bridge green light—left—eleven-thirty—quarter to twelve—Mr. Pinkey."

"You're a bit of a mystery merchant, Staines. You ought to read that puzzle as though it were in print!"

Dick read the lines again.

"I'll make a copy and hand the original to the Yard."

He put it in his pocket, and helped to place this poor wreck of a man upon a stretcher which the ambulance men had brought.

"Does Mr. Derrick know about this affair?"

"Not yet," said Dick, shaking his head. "I was going to get through to him, but I thought I'd better wait until you came."

"Tell him," said Bourke laconically, and went upstairs to the caretaker's temporary bedroom.

Dick called a number, when he heard Bourke's voice in his ears.

"It's all right," said the Superintendent. "There's an extension phone in the office up here, and I was just trying it out."

He was still speaking when Derrick's voice was heard.

"Can you come up? It's rather urgent," said Dick. "Do you remember my talking to you about a man called Brown?"

"Lordy Brown—yes. He was about here yesterday, somebody told me. He sent a message in by one of my servants saying he wanted to see me, and why on earth he shouldn't have come to the house I don't know. When I sent out to bring him in he was gone. Is he in any kind of trouble? The impression I got from my man was that he was tight."

"He's out of all his trouble," said Dick quietly. "He's dead."

"Dead?" Derrick's voice was horrified, incredulous. "Has he met with an accident—when did it happen?"

"Last night..." A pause. "In your drawing room."

He heard an exclamation at the other end of the wire.

"You're not joking—did he try to break into the house? You remember, I had my suspicions?"

"I don't know what he tried to do. He was in the house and he was shot."

Another long silence.

"What does the caretaker say? Did he do the shooting? He had a revolver."

"Your caretaker has vanished from the face of the earth," Dick said.

"All right—I'll be up as soon as I possibly can."

"Do you know where the caretaker is likely to be found?"

"I don't. I'm too bewildered even to think of his address."

"Bring Tommy with you," said Dick, but Mr. Derrick had rung off.

Bourke came downstairs at that moment.

"Did you find anything at all in your first search of the room?"

Only for a second did Dick hesitate, and then, putting his hand in his waistcoat pocket, took out the little nursing case.

"Somebody bandaged him up; evidently a trained nurse."

"I noticed that," said Bourke.

He opened the case with an interested frown, put his two fingers in the pocket, but brought out no card. That was the one piece of evidence that Inspector Richard Staines did not pass to his superior. Why he didn't, he could not for the life of him understand. Yet nine men out of ten, and ten women out of ten, could have explained his dereliction of duty in the simplest possible terms.

Dick went back to Weald's house and had a bath and changed, and ate a hasty breakfast. By the time he was presentable, the first clue came in. It was from the caterer of a cab shelter who had been on duty in the early night and was sitting in the entrance of the shelter talking to a cabman when he had seen the caretaker, whom he knew, come hurriedly across the street. The driver of the first cab on the rank was having his supper. He took the second and drove to King's Cross Station. He said he had to catch a midnight train to the north.

The keeper of the shelter knew him to speak to. Apparently, on some nights, Larkin was in the habit of coming over to the shelter for supper and a chat. He was sometimes there for as long as two hours, and was always loth to return to the deserted house.

"Which convicts him of perjury," said Bourke. "He told Mr. Derrick that he never left the building in any circumstances. Has Derrick arrived?"

They were talking in the hall of Weald's house.

"He's just turned up. He's terribly upset—not exactly upset, but he's baffled."

"The difference between him and us, Richard, is that he shows it and we don't."

CHAPTER IX

Dick went into the house, and found Derrick walking up and down the shrouded drawing-room where the tragedy had been discovered. He was in golfing kit, and apparently when Dick had called him he was on his way to the links.

"No, I didn't tell Weald anything, but he's coming up to-day. What is your theory, Staines?" Dick shook his head.

"I have three," he said, "all so ludicrously improbable that I can't risk my reputation for intelligence by telling you one. Nothing has been touched, so far as I can see, but it is evident that more persons than one were in this house last night."

"What makes you say that?" asked Derrick quickly.

Bourke saved his subordinate the necessity for replying.

"Obviously," he said, in his gruff way, "the man who shot Lordy Brown was not the same man who tried to save his life—we found him with a big bandage round his chest."

Derrick looked at him, stupefied.

"Where was he?"

Bourke pointed to the exact spot.

"He had a cushion under his head and he was covered with a dust cloth," he said. "Staines, when he saw him, thought it was a roll of carpet or something of the sort."

"Good God!" Derrick's face was pale and strained, and in his eyes was a great bewilderment.

"I can't understand it," he said jerkily. "More people than one...here! What were they 'doing...? It is awful...I don't know what I'm talking about or what I'm doing. I had a feeling something terrible was going to happen.. I slept badly last night and had dreams. It must have been your talk of ghosts. Has the ghost been recognised? Who was it?" he asked, when he saw Dick's expression.

"According to Larkin, it was your father." Derrick's jaw dropped.

"My father?" He almost squeaked the words. "It is incredible...Who said this—Larkin? Larkin's a fool. The man's full of fears and ridiculous fancies." He wiped his wet face. "Did he describe him—the—er—ghost, I mean?"

"Larkin, you mean? Oh yes, he gave a very lucid and faithful description. He said that he had seen your father many years before, and recognised him instantly—partly, I think, by his limp."

"By his limp," repeated Derrick. And then, quickly: "But anybody could limp. That would make it easier for some brute to impersonate him. How horrible!" And then, in a more angry tone: "Ghost: I'd like to see that ghost. There's nothing living or dead that's ever scared me. Why didn't the fool tell me? I'd have been up and laid that spook for good."

He spun round on Bourke.

"Now what am I to do, Superintendent? How long is this intolerable nuisance to continue? I'm a perfectly law-abiding man. So far as I know, I've done no person the slightest injury. If there's gold in this house that they want to find, by Gad, I'll give them the run of the house if they'll only come forward! Let them find it and have done with it. I'd put an advertisement in the newspaper to that effect," he said with a little laugh, "only I should have Lowndes Square crowded with all the treasure-seekers in the world, and my house torn to ribbons! I don't know what you're going to do, Superintendent, but I know what I shall do. I'm going abroad. I'm withdrawing my caretaker—a cursed lot of use he is to me—and I'm giving the ghosts and the gold-chasers a free hand to walk where they will."

"Do you think Lordy Brown came into either category?" asked Bourke.

The other shook his head.

"I don't know. I have a suspicion that he knew something about these burglaries. From what I remember of him and his record, burglary was not outside his sphere of operations. But I don't know...I'm too confounded to form even a theory. There is the fact: he was found dead in my drawing-room, shot, my caretaker has disappeared!"

The door opened and a detective-sergeant came in quickly.

"The Yard have just phoned me that Larkin has been found in Liverpool. He went there by the midnight train."

"Has he been arrested?" asked Derrick.

"I don't know."

The sergeant lowered his voice and said something to Bourke in an undertone, and the Superintendent nodded.

"This officer says that the story Larkin tells is that you called him up at half-past eleven and told him to catch the midnight train to Liverpool, go to an

hotel and wait for you to arrive in the morning. He said you had a code word."

Derrick nodded.

"That is right—'Peterborough' was the code word. I used it because this sort of telephone trick has been worked before."

"The code word was used, and Larkin went out of the house immediately."

Derrick bit his lip thoughtfully, and his eyes narrowed.

"That's curious. How could they know ?"

"Who knew the code word besides you?" asked Dick.

Derrick shook his head.

I don't know...nobody, unless I've murmured it in my sleep. As I sleep alone "—he shrugged his shoulders—" I'm beat!"

"You did not give these instructions to Larkin?" asked Bourke.

Derrick shook his head.

"Why on earth should I ask this man to go to Liverpool? What business have I there? Obviously, somebody wanted him out of the road, and that somebody was—"

He looked at Dick, and an odd expression came to his face. Dick thought it went a little paler, a little more haggard.

"There was somebody else in the house—you said so. They may have been there all the time; they may have been on the 'phone."

"And," said Bourke slowly, "they could easily have telephoned from the ground floor instrument and called up Larkin on the extension. Now, Mr. Derrick, I wonder if you'd give me a few seconds with Staines?"

"Have the whole house, my good fellow," said Derrick, once more his genial self.

There was a little table standing in the middle of the drawing-room. Dick seemed to remember that when he first came in it was uncovered; when he returned after Bourke's inspection he had found a light cloth laid over it and the empty flower vase, which had stood there, removed.

"Take a look at this." Bourke lifted the cloth gently. "Drop your head sideways against the light—now. Do you see it?"

Dick saw it very distinctly: a thumb-print—a thumb-print he knew by heart. The print of the Slough murderer!

CHAPTER X

Dick personally undertook the investigation into Lordy Brown's movements. He had been living at an hotel in Norfolk Street, occupying one of the cheapest bedrooms at the top of the house. The night porter, with whom Brown had worked up some kind of friendship—he was in the habit of sitting on the steps in the early hours of the morning smoking a cigar and discussing his adventures—told the detective very little about the man that he did not already know.

Brown liked to describe his hairbreadth escapes from death, his tremendous travels, and the wonderful mines he had discovered and out of which he had been cheated.

"He told you nothing about his friends?"

"No, sir; he told me that he once saved a gentleman who was being eaten by lions. He told me that the night before last. He said he was going to be a very rich man and he'd take me as his valet—not that I paid much attention because I've heard that sort of thing before. When a gentleman gets a little drink in him, the first thing he seems to think about is to give me a job as valet and take me round the world. But he was a very pleasant man, and some of his adventures were very interesting. He had met a few tough cases, too, according to him."

"What time did he go out last night?"

"About ten, sir—maybe a little after. He slopped to speak to me in the hall as he went out."

"Had he a visitor?"

The porter shook his head.

"No, sir; he had a long telephone talk with somebody about half-past nine. It was from a call office—I happen to know that because I answered the 'phone."

"Was it a man or woman who called him up?"

"A man, sir. He had rather a common voice. He said he wanted to speak to Mr. Brown very urgently. It must have been something important, because Mr. Brown came out and asked me to lend him a sheet of paper and a pencil. I saw him through the glass window of the booth writing something down."

Dick took from his note-case the paper which had been found in Lordy Brown's pocket.

"Is this it?" he asked.

The man examined and felt the texture of the paper.

"That's it, sir. It's half a sheet of the hotel notepaper. I took it from the writing table."

This document which Lordy had scribbled was obviously written in a hurry, and was as obviously a telephone conversation. He read it again.

"Hyde Park—maggasine—bridge green light—left—eleven-thirty—quarter to twelve—Mr. Pinkey."

Brown had to meet the unknown in Hyde Park near to the bridge, probably between these two. The writer would come along in a car and would show a green light to identify himself between the hours of 11.30 and 11.45. Mr. Pinkey? Who was Mr. Pinkey? It might mean anything; it might mean the name by which the unknown would reveal himself—or herself.

Dick made a very careful search of the bedroom which the dead man had occupied. One of the things that had puzzled him was that no money had been found in Brown's pocket, except a few shillings and a crumpled ten-shilling note. The packet of bank-notes that Dick had seen at the cafe had not been found. There was a bare possibility it was in the room, though it seemed very unlikely that Brown would leave a large sum of money so insecure. But unless he had banked the money, this was the only place, for the cashier who received guests' valuables for safe custody had nothing at all in the strong-room belonging to Lordy Brown.

The room was a small one, comfortably furnished. Dick stripped the bed, turned over the mattress, and searched first the drawers and then the battered Gladstone bag which constituted Lordy's luggage, without finding either the notes or any document which would give a clue to its disposal.

He did discover an old notebook which the man had used for a variety of purposes. Here were addresses, mostly in Africa, odd scraps of memoranda that one might find in an engagement book, a few notes about particulars of a prospector's certificate, and a reference to what seemed to be the contents of a shop, possibly the result of a burglary, for at the bottom was written:

'Worth £2,800. J. paid 120.' J. was likely enough the unknown receiver.

Dick's examination of the book could only be a hurried and casual one. He put it in his pocket and continued' his search for the money. He found a long-barrelled Colt revolver, the lock of which was broken, and a third-class return ticket from Capetown to Wynberg, which was rather surprising, for in the Cape only the poorest of whites and the native people travel third-class.

There was a cardboard folder at the bottom of the bag, on which was printed the name of the Union Castle Company. It was the sort of thing that is given to passengers to carry their tickets. Inside he found the tattered half of a letter which was written in a woman's illiterate handwriting. It was complaining about the difficulty of getting money and the 'disgrace.' What the disgrace was the writer did not particularise.

"You always say you don't remember the children's birthday. That's like you. You never remember anything except what you want yourself. If I'd only kept to my shop work I'd have been better off. Try and not forget next time. The children expect to hear from you, and I'm tired of telling them that you're up country when you're doing time or God know's what. Mabel's birthday is the 14th of April, Jinny's is the 7th of July, and little Freddie's is the 13th of December. I hope you won't forget. I meant to tell you that that girl de Villiers—"

The letter ended here. Evidently there had been another sheet, which Brown had destroyed, retaining this as a memorandum of his children's birthdays. "That girl de Villiers...?"

The first time they had met, Lordy Brown had mistaken Mary for her.

He turned the cardboard cover inside out, hoping to find the rest of the letter which would tell him just what part that girl de Villiers played in his tempestuous life.

The brief reference alone suggested an antagonism to the mysterious Miss de Villiers.

There was nothing else of any moment. Most of the clothing was new, and from the bills he found Lordy Brown must have made extensive purchases on the strength of his 'dividends.' The scrap of letter, which he took away with him, unfortunately bore no address or date, and only the letters 'C. T.' at the start indicated its origin. He did not even know under what pseudonym Mrs. Lordy Brown lived. A slender foundation, all this, for further inquiries. Here were the facts that he brought to Bourke.

"Lordy Brown received a telephone message between nine and ten o'clock the previous evening from a London call office, and evidently the caller had made an appointment. He was to be picked up in Hyde Park." How did he come to be in Derrick's house? Was it some mysterious person, some enemy of Derrick's, one of the gold-seeking gang, who was using him as a cat's-paw? And was the object of the meeting to employ his services?

Lordy Brown was an expert burglar, amongst other things. He had been concerned in a bank robbery in Pretoria, and the answer to an inquiry which had been sent to the South African police had stated explicitly 'expert safe-breaker.'

"There is, of course, a possibility, which we can't overlook, that Brown accepted the commission either to break into Derrick's house, or, if he didn't break in—and there seems to be no sign that he did—to open this mythical safe of his," said Bourke. And when Dick opened his lips to speak: "Don't tell me that they hadn't found the safe, and that they'd hardly employ an expert 'buster' to punch holes in a safe they couldn't locate—I know that. The question is, did they expect that night to uncover old Derrick's hiding-place? If they did, and if Brown was employed for the purpose, you have to remember that he was also a blackmailer. The chances are 'that he used his position to try to make a little more money out of them than they had offered him, in which case the shooting may be a logical consequence. One thing is certain: there's a way into that house which nobody has discovered."

"I'll try to find it," said Dick.

"Find the people who are using it," suggested Bourke.

CHAPTER XI

The first time Dick and Lord Weald were alone together was that evening. Tommy came up that afternoon without waiting for the breathing space he had promised. He travelled up at such a speed that he left behind him a trail of police summonses for exceeding the speed limit, but that was a normal experience of Tommy's. He was bursting with news.

"My dear old thing, whom do you think I saw this morning? That dear little soul! Dick, she's marvellous! Going by car to London, and the jolly old pram strapped on to the top. Perfectly beautiful, old boy!"

"I gather you're talking about Mary Dane?"

"And the old codger. I'm afraid he'll soon be popping off, poor old bird!" Tommy shook his head with affected melancholy. "Perfectly ghastly for that poor little woman looking after a one-footer."

"A what-er?" said Dick, puzzled.

"One-footer. You know, old boy—one in the silent tomb and one on the daisies. She stopped the car. You wouldn't think it possible, old boy; she was most kind and gracious—recognised me in an instant. Didn't mention you, by the way," he dug Dick in the ribs playfully. "That's got your nanny goat! Didn't ask one single demnition question about Richard Staines! She's probably forgotten you. Girls do that sort of thing. But she remembered me all right, old boy. I had quite a long chat. The old gentleman was very talkative, too. I suppose I'm the greatest living authority upon his digestion! I'm seeing them all to-night." He avoided the stern gaze which was turned upon him.

"You're never going down there pursuing that unhappy girl with your inane attentions? Why, you'll bleat her to death."

Tommy's smile was very superior.

"Green-eyed monster, old boy. Besides, I want a change."

"I thought you were going to stay up here and be a little detective?"

Tommy was a little uncomfortable at this.

"Ah, yes," he said awkwardly. "Of course I did say something of the sort; but you can get on without me. Anything happened?"

"Nothing but a murder, and that wouldn't interest you."

"A what?" squeaked Tommy, and asked the inevitable question.

"I don't know who did it, my dear fellow," said Dick wearily. "If I did, I should be something more than a mind-reader."

"But where...how? In this house, or Derrick's? By Jove! In his drawing-room, eh? That'll wipe the smile from his healthy old face! I wish I'd come up last night. I've never seen anybody murdered."

"I'll get you a front seat for the next one," said Dick sourly. And then, realising the absurdity of the attitude, he laughed. "Do you know I'm frightfully jealous?"

"I know you are, old boy." Tommy brushed an invisible speck of dust from his immaculate coat. "But all's fair—"

"If you say 'in love and war' I'll brain you," said Dick.

Tommy was momentarily embarrassed.

"Well, to tell you the truth, old boy, I went back to Bognor the night after you left—I dare say you'll think it was taking a low-down advantage, but I simply got bored with dear old Derrick—I hate billiards—and I popped over to get a breath of fresh air, and I had the best of luck. There she was sitting at an upstairs window of one of those ghastly boarding-houses, sewing...knew me in a minute, old boy, and waved her hand. I'm not so sure she didn't kiss it, but it was a little dark and I don't want to flatter myself. Modesty's my long suit. I asked her to come down."

"By semaphore?" demanded Dick.

"Signs, old boy," said Tommy calmly. "It's very easy if you know the way. I just pointed to the bandstand, and beckoned her with my finger—you know what I mean?"

"And how did the populace of Bognor enjoy this exhibition?" asked Dick pityingly.

Tommy ignored the insult.

"Anyway, she couldn't come. So I just hung around where she could see me; got a chair, sat on the front with my back to the sea—I sort of felt that she was comforted, if you understand, old boy. It's very nice to have a man around."

Dick's heart was beating a little faster.

"What time did you leave Bognor?" he asked carelessly.

Tommy looked up at the ceiling.

"About eleven o'clock. Well, as soon as she pulled the blinds down. I didn't exactly leave, I waited for an hour after that. You know, I thought she might possibly come out for a breather, old boy. The way they treat these nurses is simply abominable. They're slaves simply. When she didn't come out—that was about twelve—I toddled off, and she saw me. I spotted the blind being pulled back and she waved her hand to me. What do you think of that?"

Dick drew a long breath.

"Thank God for that!" he said.

Tommy seized him by the hand, his face shining with gratitude.

"You're pleased about it, old boy? No ill feeling? I mean, I'd hate to cut you out, but in love, Dicky—"

"Don't give me your views on love or I shall be sick. Let us have a drink."

Twelve o'clock...she could not have reached London before two. The murder must have been committed, according to the doctor's view, not much after midnight, at the latest one o'clock.

"Phew!" he said.

"Very few," said Tommy, "not like her, old boy, anyway. Here's luck!"

At Tommy's request, and to satisfy his morbid curiosity, he took him over the Derrick household. Walter had gone back to Keyley before the arrival of Tommy Weald, and was unaware that his guest had left him.

"I expect he will be terribly cut up," said Dick. "I should be. After all, you don't gut a cheery devil round the house very often."

Into the drawing-room Tommy could only just peep, for there were men very busy inside.

"What are those photographers doing?" he asked.

"Taking photographs," said Dick, and, rather unnecessarily as it happened, he pointed out a spot on the landing. "That's where the ghost was," he said.

Tommy jumped.

"Ghost?" he said uneasily. "I say, old man, not a ghost?"

"There's nothing to be scared about; it's not your ghost and not your house," said Dick.

"It's next door," protested Tommy. "And, my dear old chap, if you have ever read anything about ghosts, you know they can walk through a brick wall just as easy as a baby can fall out of bed."

He stared uneasily up the gloomy stairs.

"I don't think I want to go any farther, old boy. Let's get back into the bright light of day." He tugged out his watch.

By Jingo! I've got half an hour to catch that train to Clacton."

"You're never going?" said Dick accusatively. "I must, old boy. Stern sense of what-not. I've got an aunt there."

"You've got no aunt in the Eastern Counties. Only a week ago you were thanking God for the fact."

"She's moved there," said Tommy, rapidly and glibly. "Aunt Arabella. Terribly fussy old lady, pots of money, frightfully deaf, and all that sort of thing."

He flew down the stairs, followed at a more leisurely rate by his companion. By the time Dick reached the house Tommy was on the point of leaving.

He had, with great thoughtfulness, telephoned to his servant, asking him to pack certain linen.

"But why go by train? You've got a car."

"I'm having the car sent down. I like a train journey now and again, it breaks the monotony. You meet such fearfully interesting people. Besides which, it's democratic. If you go barging all over the country in a Rolls you never meet the Real People."

With a limp shake of the hand, he followed his man to the waiting cab and was gone. Dick guessed that Miss Mary Dane was also a passenger by the two-something from Liverpool Street and that she had confided that fact to Tommy.

Towards evening he had a conversation with Bourke in the latter's office at Scotland Yard.

"I have marked you for this duty indefinitely, and I think you'd better stay on at Lord Weald's place—if he doesn't object. We're particularly interested in that ghost. What time does Larkin get back from Liverpool?"

"Seven o'clock to-night," said Dick. "I've asked him to report to me. After he's through I'll send him on to you."

"The thing I can't understand," said Bourke, "is why they cut the bell wire."

Dick understood, he thought.

"They were afraid Larkin might come back to the room and attract my attention by ringing the bell. You will probably find, when you ask him, that he did try to wake me up to tell me that he was going to Liverpool, but got no answer. If he did that! Why, of course! He must have heard the telephone bell ring and gone downstairs, not knowing that he could get through from the room in which he was sleeping. That was when the wire was cut, or soon afterwards."

"In which case," said Bourke, "the fake summons must have come from his own room. There's a lot of queer little things about this case that I don't understand. How did Lordy Brown get into the house, in the first place? We found no tools of any kind, no keys, no doors or windows were forced. If I got my ideas of police work out of novels, I should think there was a secret passage."

"And there is," said Dick promptly; and when Bourke stared at him, "I'm telling you, Super, that there's a secret passage of some kind in that house! Old man Derrick, who rebuilt it, had all sorts of odd workmen, and he himself was a builder. The walls are so thick that it is possible. Another point: he was scared of fire. That is one of the reasons that the walls are so thick."

"But why?" demanded Bourke. "Derrick was a mean old devil, but so far as one knows he kept within the law. He was not a receiver; he was in no fear of the police—why medieval secret passages, I ask you?"

"He was afraid of fire; he was afraid of burglars; and for the last year of his life he was afraid of assassination," said Dick quietly. "That is the sort of mania which seizes very rich men who have lived meanly all their lives. It is quite possible that he had some way of escape in case he was attacked—though why anybody should attack him heaven only knows!"

"I can give you one explanation," said Bourke after a moment's thought, "and it isn't complimentary to his memory. But I don't want to start you off on side trails. If you find a secret passage, then you'll find a reason for it. Consult Inspector Endred in your neighbourhood. He knows that house backwards."

Dick Staines arranged to stay at Weald's house for (as Bourke put it) 'an indefinite period.' He went to his own flat to collect a few belongings and returned to Lowndes Square just before eight o'clock. The butler told him that Larkin had been to the house and wanted to see him.

"Is he next door?"

"No, sir. I believe, but I am not sure, that Mr. Derrick has given him the sack," said the butler.

"Rather unfair," said Dick. "Send him up to me when he arrives."

He had hardly spoken the words when he heard the front door bell ring, and a few minutes later the butler ushered in the crestfallen caretaker.

There was in the butler's attitude a vast and brotherly sympathy. Mr. Minns was a well-built man, inclined to be plump. He gave Dick the impression that he was very much interested in everybody's affairs except his own.

"This is very terrible news, sir, that Mr. Bourke tells me," he said. "I saw something on the newspaper bills about a man being murdered in the West End, but I never dreamt it was in our house."

Minns, it seems, was wrong when he said that the man had been dismissed. He had been told to call at Lord Weald's house for a message, and the message, apparently, was more in the nature of a warning than an actual dismissal.

"The only thing I haven't got to do, sir, is to sleep there at nights," he said with satisfaction. "I've to stay on duty till six at night. After that I lock up and I'm finished. Mr. Derrick is going abroad. You told him about the ghost, didn't you, sir?" He shook his head. "I wish you hadn't. I think the beer I drunk that night must have made me see wrong."

Dick had not been idle since he arrived at the house. He had had a carpenter who had sawn off two lengths of thick planking and had fitted them so that they afforded a bridge between the two balconies. These were securely fixed by nightfall, and as he explained to Bourke, who came to dinner with him, he was not taking unnecessary risks. He confessed that he had never swung from balcony to balcony without feeling a sense of physical nausea.

"If you live here long enough they'll let you put a gate there," said Bourke, and held his glass to the light. "Your lordly friend stocks a good port."

"And the tragic thing is he doesn't know it from gooseberry wine," sighed Dick, and the sigh was not so much for Lord Weald's execrable taste in alcohol as to his juxtaposition to Nurse Mary Dane at that moment.

After Bourke had gone he spent some little time adjusting the portable bell. The wires had been repaired, and now he stripped the bell-push and replaced it with two thin plates of copper shaped like a thin V. He waited till it was dark, and then he climbed into the next house and, lifting the carpet, placed his improvised detector near the door. There was a slight bulge in the carpet, but this would not be noticed in the dark. Satisfied with his work, he returned to his room. The night was cold, with occasional showers, but he

made provision against rain. There was above each window a large sunblind, he discovered, and one of these he had lowered as soon as it was dark. The edge of it came down within a few inches of the balcony parapet, and turning off the lights in his room, he wrapped himself in an overcoat and settled down to his vigil.

It was not a difficult house to watch. Behind was a high-walled courtyard containing a garage which had been built by Walter, but between the garage and the house there was no communication. From where he sat he commanded, too, an uninterrupted view of one side of the square. No car could pull up at or near the house without his seeing the passengers alight. By leaning over the edge of the balcony he could see Derrick's front door and the deep area beyond. The back of the house he left to chance, seeing no advantage in posting a man there.

At half-past ten Minns came tip-toeing into his bedroom with hot coffee and sandwiches, and Dick thought he might for a moment forgo his watch. He returned to the room and, drawing the curtains, put on the light.

"You don't know how glad the servants are, sir, that you're here," said the butler gratefully. "If this was a basement house you'd never get any of the girls to stay."

"Isn't it a basement house?" said Dick in surprise.

"No, sir. The ground floor is the bottom floor."

"Has it no cellars?"

The man shook his head.

"No, Mr. Staines; the wine is kept in an outhouse leading off the kitchen. I rather wonder old Derrick didn't put a cellar here. It used to be his house, you know."

"I didn't know," said Dick, interested.

"Oh yes; his lordship's father bought it from him. Both these houses were under repair together and—"

The bell at Dick's foot rang shrilly.

He dropped the cup and saucer on to the table, leapt through the curtain, and in two strides was over and into the next house. He pushed open the window, and as he did so he saw a shadowy figure confronting him. Before he could flash his hand-lamp the door slammed violently, and he heard a key turned. He threw his weight against the door, but it was held by the jamb.

Running out on to the balcony again, he flew through his own room down the stairs. When he reached the street the door was closed. The man had left Dick the key; he thrust it into the keyhole and turned, but the door did not budge...

Bolted on the inside!

Larkin could not have done that when he let himself out. Obviously, the intruders had taken the precaution.

He whistled to a policeman whom he saw on the corner, and the man sauntered over in his leisurely way: a little ruffled, for policemen resent being whistled at.

"Stand here. If anybody tries to get away, take your stick to 'em."

The officer recognised him and saluted.

"Somebody in the house, sir?

"I'll tell you in a minute."

He ran down the stairs to the area. That door was closed, too. He tried the window, failed to move the sash, and, drawing his rubber truncheon from his pocket, he smashed a pane of glass, dropped the sash, and climbed inside to a room which was normally used as a servants' hall.

The door was open, but the light that had burnt in the passage when he was there before had been extinguished. He groped along the wall to find the switch, felt it at last and turned it down, but no light came. He had again recourse to his electric lamp.

Before going any further, however, he unlocked the kitchen door and called down the policeman.

"Stand inside the doorway and close the door behind you, or they'll see you," he whispered.

"How many are there?" the policeman asked in the same tone.

"Does it matter?" asked Dick irritably. The policeman admitted that it didn't:

Dick was wearing crêpe-soled shoes; he had worn them that night with a purpose, and now, extinguishing his hand-lamp, he crept forward, feeling along the wall with his hand. He found the foot of the stairs that led to the hall, and crept up stealthily. There was no sound of any kind. He continued his way up the dark staircase; the stairs were well made; not so much as a creak betrayed his movements.

The first landing drew blank. Softly he turned the handle of the drawing-room and sidled in. There was light enough coming through the windows to show him that the room was empty. They must have heard the smashing of the glass, whoever they were.

He crept up the second flight, stopping now and again to listen, and reached the landing outside the locked door. He felt for the key; it was not there. But somebody was in the room. He heard a sibilant whisper, and struck heavily against the panel with his truncheon. At that startling noise he heard a quick 'Oh!' and again the fierce whisper.

A woman was there—no hardened burglar would say Oh!'

Dick stepped back to the edge of the landing and, taking one jump, hurled his shoulder against the door. With a deafening crack it burst open and he was in the room...it was empty!

He knew the position of the light switch and turned it, but without result. And then, for no reason that he could assign, a cold shiver ran down his spine and his hair lifted. He had a feeling that he was being watched, that mocking eyes were staring at him from some invisible and unknown point of observation. So real was the illusion that he turned round, and for the first time in many years did that which no English police officer does except in moments of extraordinary peril: he took an automatic pistol from his pocket and pulled back the jacket.

He heard a voice downstairs, and jumped. It was the policeman.

"Do you want any help, sir?"

Dick hesitated a moment.

"Come up," he said. "Have your stick ready—there's somebody in the house."

"Somebody in the house!" came the low, mocking echo of his words, as though somebody had repeated them in a fit of amusement.

He spun round; there was no sign of anything human. Nothing moved. The sweat was standing on his forehead. And then he began to laugh softly to himself, and put back his pistol. He had passed the saturation point of terror, and his sense of humour was asserting itself.

The constable came, lent his broad-beamed light to Dick's, and they searched the wall for some secret hiding-place. There was none that could be detected. Dick opened the cupboard where he had found the vacuum pump, but that was too shallow for a hiding-place, and he pushed the door to shut it.

Something in the slow swing of the door aroused his curiosity. It was very heavy. He tapped it with his truncheon and it rang: the cupboard was of steel, its edge fitted into the jamb of the cupboard as truly as a safe door might. At the back of the cupboard were four wooden pegs screwed into the plaster wall; the wall was apparently solid enough.

"'This beats me,' as Mr. Derrick would say."

He went to examine his little bell detector. Somebody else had found it: it had been kicked out from beneath the carpet; the wire was cut.

"Do you smell anything, sir?" asked the policeman suddenly.

Tony sniffed. Not cordite this time, but a subtle fragrance which he had probably noticed before but had not registered in his mind.

"Like ladies' scent, sir," said the policeman. "Do you know what it is, sir?"

"I'm not very well acquainted with perfumes, constable. It smells like any other to me."

He could not see, but he guessed that the policeman was smiling in the darkness.

"It's what they call 'Sans a tout,'" he said, proud of his knowledge.

"How the devil did you know that?" asked the staggered Dick.

The policeman explained. He had a young lady who worked in a perfume shop—a refined and ladylike occupation, and she had once introduced him to the misty fragrance of "Sans a tout."

"According to my young lady it costs four pounds an ounce. You can't mistake it, sir—a sort of mixture of roses and cedar wood."

"You fascinate me," said the irritated Dick. "Now will you use your nose and see if you can smell a cold-blooded murderer?"

His blood turned to ice. From somewhere in the room came a thin, quiet, low gurgle of laughter.

"Is that you?"

"Me, sir?" said the constable. "I couldn't laugh like that, not if you paid me. I think it was outside on the landing."

Dick did not share this view, but he went on to the landing. He found nothing. When he returned he had the feeling for the first time that he and

the policeman were the only two in the room. That invisible presence had withdrawn.

"Sounded like a ghost to me," said the police officer.

Dick turned on him, too full of laughter to snarl. "Have you ever heard a ghost laugh, you poor—fellow?"

"No, sir, but it's the sort of laugh that I should expect a ghost to give," said the policeman with dignity.

"It is surprising," Dick told Bourke later, "how difficult it is to get a uniformed policeman rattled. There's something inhuman about—"

There was a silence now, which the policeman broke.

"What would you like me to do, sir? I shall have to report this, of course, sir."

"Certainly report. Say that I called you in, and—"

At this moment all the lights in the room came on. Dick had turned the switch, hoping to get some sort of illumination, and had forgotten to turn it back. In some part of the house the mysterious prowlers had pulled over the main switch. There was no light on the landing below, but looking over the stairs Dick saw the reflection of the lamp he had turned on the kitchen stairway.

He made another and probably his twentieth survey of the room, opened the cupboard again, and again hammered at the wall with his truncheon. It was solid plaster and brick. Even when he kicked against it there was not the slightest tremor or movement. The floor was not only firm, but had been covered with some material like asphalt.

And now the scent of

"What's the name of that perfume?"

"Sans a tout, sir," said the constable, with the air of one who was passing on a morsel, of education.

Dick sniffed and sniffed. It was strong in the cupboard...cedar and roses. He closed the door, turned the handle which fastened it, and followed the constable down the stairs. As he expected, the front door had been bolted and chained. He made a mental note to have these moved on the morrow.

It was nearly one o'clock before he went to bed, and was well assured that he would not be disturbed again—nor was he.

He heard the tap on the door panel that announced the coming of his morning tea, and bade a drowsy "Come in."

"Do you want this bottle on your table, sir?"

"Bottle?" Dick sat up in bed.

It was a small, beautifully designed little bottle, glass-stoppered and be-ribboned. He picked it up and stared at it. Across the grey and green label, in quaint silver lettering, were the words "Sans Atout." It was half empty.

"Who put that there?" asked Dick huskily. Minns shook his head.

"Thank you," said Dick, and, when the man had gone, he got up and walked on to the balcony and, craning his head round, stared into the mysterious room.

"You've got a nerve!" he addressed the daring unknown.

Dick was eating a very thoughtful and solemn breakfast in what he had flippantly called the baronial hall, which was Tommy's dining-room, when the owner of the house walked in. It was the sort of crazily unexpected appearance that Tommy loved to make.

"For the love of Mike, what's the matter with Clacton?"

Tommy's face was long and lugubrious.

"I'm finished, old thing. I've made a most fearful faux pas—committed the most terrible sole—you know the word, old boy; it's highbrow, and means 'blotted my copybook.'"

"Solecism is the word you want. That is the best news I've heard for a long time. Sit down at your own mahogany. Does this mean," he asked in a tone of alarm, "that I'm to be inflicted with your presence?"

"No, it doesn't," snapped Tommy. "It's all off with Mary and me, old boy, that's all. It's pretty ghastly."

"It's pretty ghastly for you, I expect," said Dick cheerfully, "but probably a great happiness for her. By Mary, do you mean Miss Mary Dane?"

Tommy nodded.

"I had a perfectly lovely evening with her, walking up and down that promenade, looking down on the band. Happy as a sandboy, old lad. Poor. old Cornfort in a state of coma. He went to bed at nine, bless his old heart I She said she'd come and stroll along the front, and she did, too, and then, like an idiot, when we were sitting down on one of the beastly hard seats, I

slipped a little present for her into her bag. It was open at the time—the bag I mean. I bought it in London—cost a fortune, old boy. If I hadn't taken the cork out it'd have been all right. I didn't know it was going to leak all over her beastly bag, did I, old boy?"

Dick was on his feet.

"What was your present?" he asked breathlessly.

"A little bottle of scent...all the go just now—stuff they call Sans Atout. I always thought it was a game of cards, but there you are, you live and learn," said Tommy miserably. "She was fearfully peeved—not at all the gentle Mary. She said she hated that kind of stuff, scent and all that junk, but I noticed she stuck to it."

All the colour had left Dick Staines' face. "Feeling ill?" asked Tommy anxiously.

Dick shook his head.

"No; go on with this—ridiculous story. I suppose she left you?"

"No, she didn't," snapped Tommy. "I left her. In fact, old boy, it was a lovers' tiff."

"A what?" asked Dick, his stern eye on his friend.

"Well, a tiff. She made me fearfully annoyed and I got up and walked away. I came back in time to see her going into the house."

"What time was that?"

"It must have been ten—possibly it wasn't ten. Nearer nine, I think. I never know what time any time is," said Tommy in the deeps of gloom.

"You didn't see her again?"

"Of course I saw her again." Tommy could be very testy. "You don't suppose a fellow like me would allow himself to be so ungentlemanly without apologising? I called her up from the hotel."

"That isn't seeing her."

"It's as good as seeing her, isn't it? I asked her to come out to give me a chance of undoing, as it were, the mischief I had done."

Dick waited. He dared not ask a question.

"And she did come out! We strolled up and down in front of the house. She told me she was a bit worried. She said that there was a girl in England exactly like her in appearance. She'd seen her that day in Clacton."

"You saw her, you swear you saw her?" interrupted Dick eagerly. "It was Mary Dane?"

Tommy looked at him in some concern.

"Not feeling well, old boy?" he asked solicitously.

"I'm well enough," said Dick. "I only want to know, are you perfectly sure that the girl you were with last night between eleven and what time?"

"Must have been twelve," said Tommy. "Yes, it was Mary Dane. Who the dickens do you think it was?"

Dick covered his face with his hands and groaned.

"That girl's given me more heart attacks than any human being I've ever known," he said. Then he looked up. "What is the idea of your coming up?"

"I've come up"—Tommy was very deliberate and important—"to get you to help about this charming young creature's double. You may not have heard of such a thing—"

"Oh, Lord!" Dick raised both hands to the ceiling. "Never heard about her double!"

"She told me," Tommy went on, unperturbed, "that all sorts of people, including this feller who was killed in old Derrick's house, had mistaken her for somebody else, so I thought to myself 'There's only one bird who can solve this mystery, and that's the Dicky-bird.' And you're it!"

Dick looked at him in wonder.

"Do you mean to tell me that you've come all the way from Clacton-on-Sea, that' bourgeois but pleasant resort, to ask me to take up the case of Mary Dane's double, you poor, gibbering fish? I repeat, so that it may sink into the shallows of your mind, that Mary Dane's double has given Scotland Yard—which for the nonce is me—more anxiety than—than—"

"Anything," suggested Tommy helpfully.

He left soon after ten, and Dick could not but believe that there was a very special reason other than that Tommy had advanced for his sudden return to Town. He had a letter from Derrick in the afternoon, asking him to meet him the next day at his club. He was going, not to France, as he had

intended, but to Scotland, or, as he put it himself, he intended taking the car and 'drifting north.'

He wanted to know whether he would be required for the inquest on Lordy Brown, but this, Dick had been advised, was unnecessary. Brown's presence in the house was unaccountable, but not beyond explanation. He had a conviction for burglary, had otherwise a very bad character, and it was quite within the bounds of reason that he should choose the house of an old acquaintance, who was notoriously rich, for the exercise of his illicit craft. The man had so changed since Walter Derrick had seen him last that he wasn't even able to identify him.

Dick could not accept the invitation, and Derrick came to see him.

"My nerves are going as the result of this infernal business," he said, "and I thought I'd just drift about the country and eventually fetch up on the north of the Tweed. I may get bored and run back to Town; if I do I will let you know."

In the social columns of the newspaper the following morning Dick read that Mr. Walter Derrick had gone north and was making a motor tour through Scotland and would be absent for a month. On another page was a reference to the Lowndes Square mystery, which, thanks to a more sensational crime occupying the attention of the public, had not received the prominence it would ordinarily have attracted.

Dick Staines was on his mettle now. He spent one morning, being of a mechanical turn of mind, preparing numerous little gadgets which he hoped would limit his search. He procured a surveyor's plan of the immediate neighbourhood within a hundred and fifty years. Behind the two houses ran a mews. On one side of this narrow thoroughfare were the garages and other premises attached to the houses that ran left Lord Weald's. On the opposite side of the mews there were only two buildings, one of which was a garage and the other a stable. Between these two, which were situated at either end of the mews, ran a high wall, punctured at regular intervals with garden gates. Beyond this showed the rear part of the houses that faced on Coyling Street, which were distinguished in the sense that they each possessed a veritable garden path, very narrow and confined between walls, but with sufficient space, as Dick discovered, for the inhabitants of the houses to form quite pleasant flower-gardens.

He took a survey of Coyling Street, and found that it consisted of well-built Cubitt buildings, all of which were occupied save Number Seven. This house had a deserted, neglected appearance. At the windows hung dusty, sagging curtains, which seemed to have been there for years; the front forecourt looked tidy enough, since it was paved. He made inquiries: the house was neither for sale nor offered to rent. It was just a derelict property belonging to somebody—nobody knew whom. He continued his investigations, and eventually found that the house was the property of Mr. Walter Derrick.

Apparently the Borough Engineer had ordered certain alterations before the house could be occupied, and Walter, in a fit of pique, had entirely disagreed with the surveyor or engineer, and had allowed the house to remain empty. He offered the house for sale, but apparently the neglect had been so great that the cost of repairing would be so high that he jibbed at the expense.

The last occupant had been a lady, who died there—a Miss Belfer. That was in the lifetime of old Mr. Derrick, and since her death and the disposal of her belongings it had stood unoccupied.

This, then, was one of the undesirable house properties with which, Walter had said, his father had saddled him.

It had a broad front, and he discovered without inquiry that it had once been, in the fifties, the home of some esoteric religious Order which had so prospered in the early part of the nineteenth century that before the Order smashed and dissolved, they owned a very large number of houses in the neighbourhood, where their wealthy novitiates were lodged. The property fell into the hands of old Derrick—one of the bargains on which he had founded his fortune. Even now the house bore the name 'St. Anna's,' the last remnant of its once ecclesiastical dignity. They had had a chapel of their own, he learnt, and when they pointed out Tommy Weald's garage he could trace through the renovation the old Gothic lines of this edifice.

He was rather shocked at this. In some respects Dick Staines was old-fashioned. His Methodist upbringing still made him feel uncomfortable if he touched a playing card on a Sunday, and a chapel or church converted to base uses invariably made him squirm.

It was his third quiet night, and he came back to the house wondering whether he would hear from Tommy. He had had no letter since that worthy young man had disappeared into the wilds of Clacton. That morning there had been an inquest on Lordy Brown, which had been adjourned for a month at the request of the police. No further evidence was forthcoming, no new clue had been discovered; the theory generally accepted was that Brown and a companion had secured an entrance to the house, that the two men had quarrelled, and that the unfortunate Lordy had been shot dead by an automatic pistol. It was obvious that some sort of silencer must have been used, for no sound had been heard either by Dick or any of the servants in the house. A pistol shot would have penetrated even the thick party-wall that separated the two dwellings.

It was growing dark when he came up the steps of the house which he was almost beginning to regard as his own, and Minns met him at the door.

"There's a lady to see you, sir. I've put her in the drawing-room."

"A lady?" His heart leapt. "What—er—sort of a lady?"

"I don't know, sir, but she says you know her. Miss Dane."

He pushed past the butler and strode into the drawing-room. She was sitting in a chair, turning the leaves of a book which she had taken up from the table, and greeted him with a smile that made his head reel.

"Have I really given you all that trouble?" she asked, a quiet smile in those grave, beautiful eyes.

"All what trouble?—Oh, Tommy's been talking!"

"Tommy has indeed been talking," she agreed solemnly. "But then, Tommy never does anything else, if you mean Lord Weald. Can't you bring him to London?"

"Where is he now?"

"We went to Margate yesterday—my patient always comes to Margate eventually. I'm giving up nursing soon."

For some indefinable reason he accepted this as good news.

"I'm jolly glad."

"Why?" she asked, open-eyed.

"Well, it doesn't seem—I'm not keen on your—it's a pretty heavy job," he finished lamely.

"Yes, but there are heavier. You have a pretty heavy job, too, Mr. Staines. I can imagine no work more exacting than yours."

"I thrive on it," he said. "I'm getting a bad reputation on it, too."

She looked up at him quickly.

"About this ?" She nodded towards

Derrick's house.

"Brown, yes. I suppose you read the account?"

"I read and I heard," she said quietly. "You forget, your Tommy is haunting me."

"I don't know why," he said. It was an inane remark, and she underlined its futility.

"Of course you know why!" she scoffed. "He's terribly in love with me. Isn't that a pretty good reason?"

Dick sniffed.

"Tommy's the kind of man who's terribly in love with anybody he really notices."

"He's rather a dear, and you're rather rude! I feel an awful pig about him."

Dick laughed. He was singularly light-hearted, could laugh very easily, could have made himself a fool with equal facility.

"Have you been a vampire to him?"

"Yes," she said surprisingly. "If you mean, have I encouraged him to be terribly attentive. It wasn't nice of me—I hate myself sometimes."

She said this so vehemently that he was startled, and for a moment his heart sank. He had always regarded Tommy's attentions to this girl as something rather amusing that meant really nothing—he could not imagine Tommy marrying, for example.

He was a philandering butterfly that flitted from flower to flower, hurt no petal on which he lighted, and carried away no sweet poison from the honey he sipped.

"You sound almost as if you've had a very serious affair with Tommy."

He thought she was a little angry at this, but she laughed.

"How absurd!"

She looked round the pretty drawing-room.

"Are you staying here for long?"

"Why do you ask?"

She stared at him.

"That question is in the best manner of Scotland Yard!"

"Why do you ask?" he persisted gruffly.

"I'll tell you why I ask, sergeant, inspector, or superintendent—because I want to know! Does it occur to you that you're only staying here while Tommy's out of Town? Which is a polite way of asking you how long Tommy will be hanging over our fence—or our fences: we have a new one every day."

She did not wait for his reply.

"You're very lonely, too; you've an empty house next door, Tommy says. There's another lonely bachelor, poor soul!"

"You mean Derrick?"

She nodded.

"I see he has gone to Scotland—how inhuman I And left you to look after his haunted house?"

"Who told you it was haunted?"

She raised her solemn eyes to his.

"It's the scandal of the neighbourhood," she said soberly, and then her lips twitched. "You don't know why I've come here; I really don't know myself. It was such a wonderful opportunity of playing lady to your gentleman, calling on you and asking after your health—by the way, you should have asked me if I would like a cup of tea...you needn't bother...you can call me a taxi in a few minutes. Mr.. Staines, who is the woman who is so like me? Do you know her? Or is Tommy exaggerating—he's a fearful liar in a perfectly innocent way. It's part of his vanity complex—I think Tommy's unveracity is his most endearing quality. Now tell me, who is she?"

Dick shook his head.

"I'd give a lot of money to know."

"I have a double, then?"

He nodded.

"What is she like?" She was laughing at him; he thought she did not believe him.

"She is rather pretty, with beautiful grey eyes and a mouth—well, just the kind of mouth that magazine artists draw and so few women have."

For a second she dropped her eyes, but raised them again immediately.

"She seems to have made an impression on you. And, of course, I ought to be very coy and say, 'But surely that's a description of me?' But I won't. I think you have been very rude, Mr. Richard Staines; but, of course, I asked for it and I really haven't any right to complain. The only point is (I don't want her various physical qualities emphasised or described), but she is like me?"

He nodded.

"Ah!" That was all she said.

She looked at him very intently for a time. "I'd like to know your mind."

"I'd rather like to know yours," he countered. "Perhaps I'll tell you one day."

She picked up her bag and her umbrella.

"Are you going to be a perfect little gentleman and escort me to Victoria?"

He hesitated. At this hour he usually went to his rooms. There had been nobody in Derrick's house for three days. After all, he was not supposed to be on duty all the time.

"Yes, I'll drive you or I'll walk," he said.

He left word with the butler, and followed her into the street. She was in no great hurry apparently, for she walked very slowly.

"I'm a pig," she said at last. "You will never say anything as offensive about me as I shall say about myself."

"What is the reason for all this self-deprecation?"

She shook her head.

"I can't tell you. Something that has just occurred to me. Tommy is in it, of course—poor Tommy At this moment he's sitting on a bench outside my Cliftonville house, waiting for me to come out. It's probably raining. It must be rather wonderful to be romantic, as Tommy is."

"I'd rather we didn't talk about Tommy," he said naturally enough.

"Isn't he a friend of yours?" she asked in feigned surprise.

"A very dear friend. I'm fond of Tommy. I'm stupidly fond of other people, too."

"But don't carry your stupidity too far," she said quickly. "You haven't asked me why I'm leaving the nursing profession and what I'm going to do for a living. I wish you'd be as interested in me as you are in my double I Happy lady I Do you dream about her?"

"Don't be silly. Mary, I want to ask you something—"

He heard her soft laugh.

"Will you start by asking me how comparative strangers address me? If you do, I shall say 'Miss Dane.'"

"But I'm not a comparative stranger."

They were walking now through the park, and he took her arm and slipped it through his. For a little while she let it rest, and then suddenly jerked it away.

"No, no." He heard the catch of her breath. "Please! I want to retain just a little of my self-respect, if you don't mind."

Her reply piqued and hurt him.

"Don't be angry with me, please," she challenged him after a few minutes' silence. "I really was being rather nice—as nice as I know how. I called Tommy a liar just now—I've never got it out of my head that I once told you the most awful, deliberate lie."

"What was it?" he asked.

"If I told you that, the lie would have been doubly wasted! No, I'll stick it out and suffer my martyrdom. But I want you to know and believe that that lie has hurt me more than it's hurt you."

Without warning she quickened her pace.

"Do you ever get very sick of things—heart sick, I mean? Don't you sometimes loathe all you're doing—your work, your daily routine—everything? I get that way sometimes. I'm that way to-night, I think."

"You don't like nursing?" he asked.

She did not answer for a second or two, and then in one word, emphatically:

"No."

Her train left something after nine. It was a very slow train. She confessed that she had had no dinner. He took her into the station restaurant, but she was content with the lightest of meals.

"Do you know why I came to Town to-day? Ask me before my train leaves."

They had ten minutes to wait after they left the restaurant, and as they strolled down the platform he reminded her.

"I'll tell you why before the train leaves."

He found her a ladies' carriage which she had to herself. The guard had given the preliminary warning, and the signal light had glowed from red to green, when she leaned out of the window.

"To mortify myself," she said in a low voice; "to walk on hot shares and carry a candle barefooted in the snow!"

He could only look at her in bewilderment. The train began to move and he walked alongside.

"I'll tell you the maddest thing you've ever heard." She was speaking with extraordinary rapidity, as though she were trying to compress all her thoughts into the little time she had. "And I'm trusting you never to remind me of this large lunacy."

"What is it?" he asked, increasing his pace to keep up with the slowly moving train.

She bent down till her lips almost brushed his cheek.

"I love you very dearly—I don't know why."

It was just a whisper, and she was gone. She did not even look back or wave her hand in farewell, and Dick Staines stood on the platform, petrified, stunned. He was still staring long after the red tail-light of the train had vanished round the mysterious corner out of sight.

'He walked back to the house, treading on air. When he came to the house in Lowndes Square he found an agitated Minns in the doorway, and, suspecting that something was wrong, increased his pace and went up the three steps in a stride.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, sir...I didn't know whether I ought to tell the police."

The man shut the door; his face was troubled and anxious.

"That bell's been ringing off and on for half an hour. I haven't dared go in...I thought perhaps you might have come. I didn't know what to do."

Dick turned on his heel and ran out into the street, pulling out his key as he ran. He expected to find the door bolted and chained, for he had not yet had time to remove these. The door, however, yielded to the key. When he turned the switch the lights came on. There was no sign of an intruder until he came to the drawing-room. He stood in the doorway and gasped. The furniture had been moved. A secretaire against the wall had been lifted into the centre of the room. The wall itself had been wrecked by small electric drills—on the floor was one such that had evidently gone out of order. It was attached by a flex to a lamp-holder, and fully eighteen inches of the solid

wall had been scooped out. The floor was a litter of brickwork, and every piece of furniture in the room was covered with dust.

He picked up the drill and examined it with professional interest. He had seen such a tool used before, but never for housebreaking purposes, and literally that is what the intruders had been doing. Either they had been disturbed in their work or else they had decided that they had picked upon the wrong place. It must have been evident to them that there was no hiding-place here, but they had not abandoned their search until they had cut very deep into and revealed the width and strength of the wall.

He heard a sound behind him and spun round, dropping his hand to his hip pocket. A man was standing in the room, staring with comical amazement at the scene of wreckage.

It was Walter Derrick.

"What's this?" he said, and as he realised he grew redder and redder in the face.

"When was this done?" His voice was sharp, his anger was pardonable. "My God! Who did this?"

He looked from the shattered wall to Dick and repeated his question.

"I would give a lot to know," said the detective. "Scotland Yard is most anxious to meet the man, whoever he is. We have been wanting him for the past ten years."

Derrick looked at him quickly.

"Do you know who it is?"

"His identity, no. That remains as much a mystery as it was when he committed the murder which brought him to our attention."

"Murder...when he committed a murder? What kind of murder?"

"About ten years ago, Mr. Derrick, the cashier of a factory at Slough was shot dead and robbed on the main Bath Road."

He paused.

"Yes?" said Derrick. "What has that to do with "—he waved his hand round the room—"all this, eh? What has that to do with this?" His voice was very shrill—evidently the sight of his ruined drawing-room had unnerved him.

"The murderer left behind him a thumb-print on an automatic pistol. You probably know all about that: it is one of the standard cases. The other day,

I came into your house after it had been burgled and we found that print on a drinking glass."

"You found that print on a drinking glass...the murderer's print, the man who shot the cashier?" Mr. Derrick was horrified.

"We found it again on the morning we discovered the body of Lordy Brown—it was on this table."

Mr. Derrick stared at the table, fascinated.

"A murderer," he said huskily "...his thumbprint on that table! My God!...And on the glass, you say? You photographed it, I suppose? I don't know what one does with these things. There is no mistake?"

Dick shook his head.

"No mistake, only there was a curious circumstance which is puzzling the Yard and is puzzling me. Both on the glass and on the table we found only the thumb-print—no finger-print at all. That was amazing, particularly as regards the glass. A man cannot pick up a tumbler with his thumb. And he would hardly get only his thumb upon the surface of the table. I'm telling you a little more than Superintendent Bourke would like me to tell you. I have my own theory, but for the moment I should not—"

He was staring at the wall, the smooth, polished wall and just above the big hole that had been dug by the ruthless intruders. Slowly he walked across and pointed.

"There's the print again," he said.

It was unmistakably there, a black smudge of a thing, yet every line distinct.

The eyes of the two men met, and in a flash Dick's theory had become a certainty. He knew just why that thumb-print was there, and the manner in which it had come.

A few inches below the impression was a tiny black spot. He touched it with the end of his finger. It was still wet.

Superintendent Bourke was on the point of going to bed when he received the summons. He arrived after Mr. Derrick had gone to an hotel. Derrick had had to return to London to attend an extraordinary general meeting of some company with which he was associated. He explained to Dick without the detective being any the wiser, for the ways of finance were holy mysteries to him.

Bourke came bustling into the drawing-room, and took one glance at the damaged wall.

"Did you hear them doing this?"

"No," said Dick, "I was out."

He did not think it was necessary to tell the Superintendent what business had taken him abroad, and Bourke evinced no curiosity.

"These people have the nerve of the devil," he said admiringly. "That's the thumb-print, eh?"

He fixed his pince-nez and examined it closely.

"Yes, I've got used to that old thumb-print now. I could almost tell it bare-eyed. That's the ink, eh?" He touched the little spot, which was now nearly dry. "You say it was placed there—"

"With a rubber stamp," said Dick promptly.

"So was the print on the glass and the print on the table. They didn't use ink; a moist hand was all they wanted for the table and the glass. You see, sir, when you come to think of it, it was a very simple matter to have a stamp made. The Slough murderer's thumb-print appears in at least three works of reference. All they had to do was to re-photograph the place; I could undertake to make a stamp like that in two hours."

"The idea being to blind us? Humph! It's curious, I never suspected that. Did you fix up your alarm bells and things? Anyway, they wouldn't be of much use if you were out."

Dick explained that the butler heard the alarm but didn't know what to do.

"He should have sent for the police—what apes these people are! Well, they were lucky to get you out of the way—I suppose you weren't fooled into leaving?"

Dick did not reply.

"They are clever people who are working this racket, and naturally they'd stop at nothing to get a clear run, and they must have known you were on duty in the next house. But you're not the kind of fellow who would fall for a pretty face or accept a little invitation to walk around the park and admire the moonlight on the lake."

Bourke was examining the torn brickwork as he spoke, and he did not see his subordinate's face. Dick had gone cold as he realised that the possibilities which Bourke had examined and rejected were no less or more than the truth. He had been lured out of the house...even the detail about the park was exact. And he remembered the things she said—that she hated

herself; she had drawn her arm from his with such vehemence that she had startled him. He remembered a dozen things that she had said: her self-reproach, her last wild words when the train had drawn from the station.

He was overcome with the sickening suspicion that Bourke had implanted. His suspicion? It was something more than that.

"Hullo!"

Bourke had turned and was staring at him.

"Have you seen the family ghost? You look as sick as pup!"

"I feel as sick as three pups," said Dick, steadying his voice with difficulty.

Mr. Bourke fondled his double chin.

"I think the best thing for you to do is to sleep in this house. I'll give you a man to keep you company—"

Dick shook his head.

"I suggested that to Derrick, but he wouldn't have it. He says he's going to shut up the house entirely. He even suggested that it was unnecessary I should stay with Tommy any longer."

"What he does with his own house is his business. I'd like you to stay on at Lord Weald's so long as he'll have you," said Bourke. "I'm accepting that idea about the rubber stamp, but that thumb-print wasn't chosen at haphazard. There's something very definite behind it, and I want to know what it is. I'm sure of one thing—. it isn't entirely intended to put suspicion on the Slough murderer, who may or may not be in England. And I'll tell you something else; Lordy Brown was killed by the same hand as killed the Slough cashier; it was the same low, upward shot, a trick of a certain type of gunfighter. We don't get much of that sort of thing here, but I've seen a few gruesome photographs and diagrams that have been sent to me from time to time from the other side of the Atlantic. Hang on to' Weald; maybe he'll be hanging on to the biggest case we've had in London since the Chief Commissioner put me into blue breeches!"

CHAPTER XII

Dick Staines took a sudden resolve: he would go and see the girl, tell her frankly the position, and demand from her some explanation for her inexplicable conduct. Never once did he dream that she had been guilty of the death of Lordy Brown. If ever he had seen honesty, that quality shone from her eyes.

He thought and he thought, turning over in his mind every possibility, but in the end he was as much baffled as he was when he began to reason. Only she could throw a light upon the dark places of his mind. Supporting him in his resolution was his faith in her last words to him. She meant that, every word of it. He thrilled at the memory. Here At least was a solid foundation on which faith might be built.

He slept over his resolution and left for Margate by the first train. He had no idea where she was staying, or that she was at Margate at all. Mr. Cornfort moved eccentrically. Here also might be a key to the mystery. This old man, who slumbered in a chair all the time, what part did he play, or was he an innocent blind to cover the operations of the gang whose victim Mary Dane was?

Always he found excuses for her. She was in toils from which she could not escape; she was as much of a cat's paw as the invalid old man who served to cover up the operations of the gang. Or had she a veritable double? He was still convinced that she had; that somewhere in England was a woman so like her that they might not be distinguished apart. Poor Lordy Brown had talked of a Miss de Villiers; he once had an idea of cabling to Capetown, but at the office of the High Commissioner he found a local directory of Capetown and three pages of de Villiers! In the circumstances this avenue of investigation promised to be a cul-de-sac.' He cursed himself that he had not questioned Lordy more closely about the girl whom he thought he had seen that night in Bloomsbury Square. He had asked him something and had received the vaguest of answers, but had he persevered:

"Had I done that, had I done this, So might I gain, so might I miss. Had she loved me, who can tell, She might have hated just as well."

Browning's lines came to his mind. They seemed singularly appropriate.

Dick Staines had many little mannerisms that bordered upon childishness. He invariably tested the state of his mind by one simple phenomenon: when he was very worried and baffled he always sighed through his nose. He caught himself in the act and laughed dismally.

The journey to Margate seemed interminable. He might meet her on the beach; he would certainly learn from Tommy Weald, who had established himself at a Cliftonville hotel, just where she was to be found.

Tommy's infatuation had ceased to be either interesting or amusing. In a sense Dick was regarding him with great kindness—he was such a comfortable alibi for this girl. He wondered whether, when she had referred to Tommy as a liar, she had these alibis in her mind? Suspicion, doubt, fear, and confidence alternated in his mind as the train crawled along that dreary foreshore from Whitstable to Westgate, from Westgate in a more lively atmosphere to Margate. Here he met a Detective Rees who had travelled down in the same train and gave him instructions—and he hated himself for giving them.

He did not intend staying more than a day, and had come without baggage; but his first call was at the red hotel that was perched on the cliffs.

"Yes, sir, Lord Weald is staying here, but I think he's out just now," said the porter.

A waiting bath chairman at the door volunteered husky information.

"His lordship's down on the beach with that yaller chair."

Dick had forgotten the colour of the vehicle and how easy it was to identify from a host of others less conspicuously painted or he might have saved himself the journey to Cliftonville.

He walked down the slope back towards Margate, keeping his eyes on the crowded beach below. So absorbed was he in his search that he actually collided with the sober and silent chairman.

"Hullo, old boy!" It was Tommy's voice.

Dick looked up and met the eyes of Mary Dane, steady, unwavering eyes. They were searching his face, and her gravity gave to her a new breath-catching loveliness.

"Good-morning," he said awkwardly, and could think of nothing else to say.

"What are you down here for?" demanded Tommy.

There was a certain amount of resentment in his tone with which Dick could sympathise. The bath chair had moved on a few paces and had stopped; the chairman stood motionless. Mr. Cornfort was asleep. Dick found his courage oozing under her silent scrutiny.

"I came down to see Miss Dane," he said, "on—er—a little matter I discussed with her the other night."

Tommy was not satisfied.

"What other night?" he asked truculently. "My dear old fellow, why didn't you tell us you were coming?" But at one glance from the girl's eyes his tone changed. "When I say 'us,' I mean 'me.' Naturally, it's frightfully' startling to see you barging into the poor old chairman. Miss Dane doesn't like it, I don't like it, I'm sure poor old Mr. Cornfort doesn't like it. He's got a weak heart," he added.

"Will you go on, Tommy?" she said. Tommy gaped at her.

"Go on? How?"

"On your feet," she said, with just the faint ghost of a smile in her eyes.

The chair was moving. Lord Weald blinked from one to the other, turned with a sulky shrug and trudged after it.

"I can't see you for any length of time until after lunch," she said quickly. "Mr. Cornfort sleeps in the afternoon. Will you drive over to Westgate and I will come to you—just in front of the hotel? I will meet you there at three o'clock. Is that too late?" she said quickly. "Or two? Either time."

"Two would be better because there is a train at three, and I have to get back to town." He was a little stiff in his manner. The easy familiarity of that 'Tommy' had chilled him.

"Have you come on business?" Her eyes were questioning.

He nodded.

"Private business, yes."

He was in terror lest she should find occasion to retract the words she had spoken to him on the platform at Victoria. Yet somehow he knew that she would not now refer to that amazing moment, and that she did not expect him to speak of it either.

Unsmilingly she nodded and turned, walking quickly after her little party. Dick stood, leaning against the rails, watching her. Presently he saw her catch up with her charge, talk for a moment to Tommy, who, rather reluctantly it seemed, turned back.

"I'm terribly sorry, old boy "—Tommy really was almost humble—"being so fearfully haughty and all that; but, you know, this young damsel rattles me—she does really! I'm fearfully and absolutely in love with her. In the evening she's perfectly divine and charming when I see her; in the morning she gives me the frozen eye, my dear old boy, as our Transatlantic cousins say—I really don't believe they say anything so darn' silly—my life's simply torn two ways, old boy. I'm getting a perfect wreck...can't sleep at nights, Dicky. Phew!" He mopped his forehead.

"That's bad news, Tommy." Dick Staines was rather concerned.

"I knew you'd understand." Tommy smiled wanly. "And she's perfectly awful about it—hard, old boy, hard as nails in an iron door! When I told her I'd only slept for seven hours she laughed at me."

"For the love of Mike, how long do you sleep as a rule?" demanded his indignant friend.

"Ten," said Tommy simply. "Doctor says I've got the kind of brain that requires a great deal of recuperation."

"That I can well believe," said Dick, "but I shouldn't tell any of your friends that, because it's not exactly complimentary. So you're in love with Mary Dane?"

Tommy hitched up his trousers, dusted a public seat with a pocket-handkerchief, and sat down.

"Desperately," he said, "in the evenings. In the mornings—I'll be perfectly frank with you, old boy—I'm not in love with her. She exasperates me, she annoys me, she loses all her gentleness and loving-kindness, and when I try to hold her hand, she gives me the sort of look that you'd get if you tried to borrow a match in a gunpowder factory. I did that once," he said reminiscently, "and from what the fellows told me, people never smoke in gunpowder factories. One of the customs of the trade."

"Are you in the habit of holding her hand?" Dick meant the question to be put in the most careless and indifferent tone. Tommy regarded the question in quite another way.

"Don't get peeved, old boy. Naturally I've held her hand. That's the sort of thing a feller does who's in love."

"And she didn't call for the police?" asked Dick, annoyed.

"No, old boy, never mentioned you." Tommy was convulsed with his own merry jest.

"Women have queer tastes," said Dick. Inwardly he was thinking of nothing so trite.

He was puzzled; he was always being puzzled by Mary Dane. He wished he wasn't. It was so unlike her, so inconceivable that she could have sat for hours holding the moist paw of his very amiable but uninspiring friend. It gave him a new angle, viewed from which he was seeing a woman so completely strange to him that he could not recognise her. Mary had said that Tommy was rather a prevaricator. It was certainly true, as Dick knew,

that he was given to romancing and, not to put too fine a point upon it, to boasting. He was one of those who go through life with the pleasant illusion that they have been endowed by nature with qualities especially attractive to women.

"I'd like to bet you've never held her hand."

"You'd lose, my boy." Tommy's calmness, his superior amusement, rather suggested that he had been speaking the truth. "I've asked her to marry me," he said. He made the confession quite calmly.

"And she was overwhelmed?"

"No good being ironical with me, old boy. That's the word, isn't it, ironical? She wasn't exactly overwhelmed, but she said she'd like nothing better. In fact, old boy, she accepted me with certain reservations."

Dick turned in his seat and looked at his friend open-mouthed. Bobby was smiling smugly.

"With reservations," he said. "As soon as this old boy pops off she's going to give up nursing, and there you are! And then—there'll be a new Countess of Weald in the land. And topping she will look in a dinky little coronet—I saw one at Grays the other day—perfectly ripping!"

He was speaking the truth, he was not boasting. These truths came home to Dick.

"But—but—"

"You needn't start butting: there it is. She's the dearest thing on earth, old boy, and fearfully sensible. When I brought her a diamond ring she wouldn't wear it—said it looked too flash...well, she didn't say it was 'too flash,' but you know what I mean—something ladylike that meant the same thing. So I bought the other one: didn't you notice she was wearing it?"

The town and promenade of Margate were wobbling up and down before Dick's disordered eyes. His head reeled. Was this a very bad dream or a very bad joke? He sought information as the latter.

"No joke at all." Tommy settled himself more comfortably in his seat. "I mean even peers of the realm get married. There's nothing comic about that. If they didn't get married," he added, as the brilliant thought occurred to him, "I shouldn't have been here, old boy. How does that strike you?"

Dick Staines was stunned. All that he had come to ask had gone from his mind. Here was the tragic, incredible fact to occupy his brain to the exclusion of every other thought: Mary Dane was engaged! What was she—coquette? What kind of coquette was she who could tell him...

He took a tight hold of himself.

"I heartily congratulate you, Tommy."

"Thanks," said Tommy.

His complacency was such that Dick could have thrown him over the cliff without compunction.

"Jane and I—"

"Jane? You mean Mary?"

"Her name is Jane Mary. I call her Mary Jane. As a matter of fact, her people call her Jane or did call her Jane. It's a funny thing how everybody has a different name at home to what they have in public. My gov'nor used to call me 'Dogeyes'—sort of term of affection. Anyway, she asked me to call her Jane when we were alone—when I say she asked me, I mean she allows me. It's a fearful privilege, old boy," he added hastily, "and given only to her best friends. You're a very good friend of hers—"

"I shall not call her Jane," said Dick with emphasis.

He did not know whether to laugh or cry; there was no further interest for him in the interview which she had promised, and he would have returned by the first train, unmindful of his mission, but for his promise. He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. It would not be a very painful interview; it might be a little disconcerting, but by that time he would be, he hoped, as calm and as cold-blooded as she, who, engaged to another man, had dared say what she had. A coquette...Then he had a mental picture of her eyes, very steady, very honest. He looked at Tommy Weald; his lordship's head was nodding, his rather large mouth was open, and his eyes were closed. It was the title...Again he saw her eyes. In his imagination he saw them pained and hurt.

"I can't understand it," he said aloud. Tommy woke up with a start.

"It's the sun—I always get drowsy in the morning. As a matter of fact, it's the air. Of course it's the air—comes straight down from the North Pole, old boy, fearfully bracing!"

"When do you expect to get married?" Tommy spread out his plump palms to indicate his uncertainty.

"I don't know. St. George's, Hanover Square, of course, old boy, with full choral service and all my aunts—no, I think it had better be a registrar's office. The aunts will be fearfully peeved, especially the three with the

daughters. But I don't believe in intermarrying with one's own family, old boy. It's quite wrong, and I'm naturally hygienic."

The last words were murmured; his chin sank again, his hands were clasped across his well-developed figure. His chin sank lower and lower. Dick looked at the chosen of Mary Dane, and was neither amused nor contemptuous; he loved him for the goodness of his heart and the genial effervescence of his character. He was a good friend; would certainly be a good husband.

"Oh, God!" said Dick Staines, and left the sleeper to finish his nap.

Punctually to the minute, a Margate taxi turned from the main road and came slowly along the crowded front of Westgate, and the girl got out. She was not wearing her nurse's costume, but a grey dress which gave her complexion a darker and richer tint. He had always thought it was pale before; now he could value her delicate colouring.

"You don't want to go on the beach, do you? Do you mind walking up towards Margate?"

He fell in by her side, and they paced in silence along an endless road of small and large villas, each designed apparently by an architect who had lost his reason, until they came to a clear stretch of grass and soil, where only a few nursemaids were visible.

"Let us sit on the grass," she said. "People will think that we're an engaged couple down for the day, but you'll survive that."

He had an idea that she made that provocative statement deliberately. He was not prepared to accept the challenge.

"Well? What do you want to see me about?"

"Why did you ask me to see you to the station the other night?"

She was plucking at the grass and did not look up.

"Was that an unusual request? I mean, isn't it an ordinary thing—why do you think I asked you?" she said, raising her eyes.

"During my absence somebody got into Derrick's house and hammered down a part of the wall, evidently searching for gold which is believed to be hidden—they were the same people who were there before, with one exception. The woman whose dress reeked of 'Sans Atout' did not seem to be amongst those present."

She smiled at the flippancy.

"Me? And are you suggesting that I lured you away from the house in order that these—impossible friends of mine—burglar friends, that is to say—should destroy Mr. Derrick's wall?"

He was silent.

"Is that your suggestion she asked.

"I'm not suggesting anything." He knew how lame and weak he was being. "I am just asking you whether—"

"So far you've only expressed a desire to know why I asked you to take me to the station. I think that has the most natural explanation."

"I'm going a little farther."

He was desperate, and, to his dismay, out of breath. Why he should be, knowing that this girl was the fiancee of another man, was astounding to him.

"I'm constantly meeting you or your double in London and elsewhere—I have a suspicion—and when I say 'suspicion' I mean the word—that you are in some way mixed up with the crowd—I don't know for what reason, for what purpose, but I might help you. Mary "—he laid his hand on hers and she let it lie—"I haven't come to collect information as a police officer; I've come to offer my help as a friend. If in any of these mad adventures of yours—"

"Or my double," she interrupted.

"Or your double—you are arrested, I can do nothing. But I can do something now; I can make all your risks unnecessary. Won't you give me a little confidence?"

She shook her head half-heartedly, looked away over the blue sea, and then suddenly brought her eyes back to him.

"I have less right to give any confidence than you have to ask it," she said, and the formality of her little speech struck him cold.

And then his eyes fell upon her hand and the little circle of emeralds on her engagement finger. He hadn't seen it before, and he looked and looked, until she drew her hand quickly away and put it behind her.

"Tommy told me," he said. "He's a good fellow, an awfully good fellow."

"Is he rich?"

So cold-blooded was the question, which momentarily struck him dumb.

"Yes, he is rather rich, and will be richer when some of his well-advertised aunts have crossed over.

"You thought that was a terribly brutal question to ask, didn't you?" she said quietly. "Does it strike you that, if he is rich and I am engaged to him, I must be the worst kind of fool to risk—everything for the sake of a stupid adventure, as you called it—an adventure which so far has done nothing worse than dig holes in Mr. Derrick's wall?"

"And kill a man," he added.

He saw her stiffen.

"Do you add that to my infamy? How absurd of you!"

She lifted her hand and looked at the engagement ring furiously.

"Do you think I'm terribly self-controlled? I am really. You've had proof." She was smiling, a little sadly.

"I've had several proofs," he agreed, as he rose and helped her to her feet.

"But this is the supreme proof," she said quietly, "that I haven't thrown this ring over the edge of the cliff! Remember that in my favour."

She patted his arm.

Everything she did was unexpected and in some extraordinary way vital. She, more than any other person in the world, had the trick of making him feel a fool.

"Now you can catch your train—it stops at Westgate. My taxi is waiting. Tommy is getting an extravagant wife in me," she said evenly, and then suddenly caught his arm in her hands and squeezed it. "I've told you one big lie, Dick Staines, but I've told you one big truth, and it's such a big truth that I hadn't got myself back to normal when I reached Margate that night. And I'm not normal yet. Hold on to the truth, my dear."

He saw her into her cab. It was an unconscious trick of hers, apparently, to reserve her most tremendous pronouncement to the very last, when she was beyond questioning. As she drew her hand from his, and the car was moving, she said:

"I'm in such a terrible, terrible mess, Dick, dear." And then she was gone.

Before the cab was out of sight he remembered that he had set a man to watch her: the memory of his disloyalty took him back to town in a sour mood.

CHAPTER XIII

Back in town, and raining. It was always raining in London, he complained savagely, as he swung aboard a convenient bus. He had left London under blue skies, with the parks all green and gold and filled with thousands and thousands of children being busily happy. He came back to find the roads mirrors, and every tree dripping melancholy drops. If he had come back to find Town basking in sunlight he would have had a complaint against that also. All sorts of things annoyed him. Mr. Minns, Tommy's butler, had gone out, taken the afternoon off under the impression, it seemed, that the visitor would not return. Also there was a long document from Scotland Yard, the depositions in a case wholly forgotten by Dick, though he had been instrumental in bringing the man to justice, and this he had to read through because some half-witted lifer in Peterhead Prison had confessed to the crime for which Dick's victim was suffering, and justly suffering.

And yet he was glad of the occupation: it kept quite a lot off his mind.

He had dinner alone, and in the midst of this Minns, who had returned very diffident and rather flustered, came in to say that Larkin would like to see him.

"He says it isn't anything very important, sir. He's waiting in the hall. I'll tell him to wait."

"Bring him in," said Dick, pushing aside the typewritten document he had been reading in the course of the meal.

Larkin merely came to say that he had been over the house and had nothing unusual to report.

"You remember that iron cupboard, sir, that you showed me—the one up in the office? I tried to open it this afternoon—you didn't lock it, did you?"

"No," said Dick. "I think it fastens with a spring catch. You heard nothing suspicious inside the cupboard?" he smiled.

"No, sir. I don't mind the house in the daytime, but I tell you straight, sir, that I wouldn't stay there another night not if I lost me job for refusing!"

"Larkin, do you remember the night I found you drugged on the floor, and somebody searching your pockets?"

"I don't remember much about it, sir, but I know it happened," said the man ruefully.

"What were they looking for—do you know? Had you any keys? That matter was never cleared up to my satisfaction."

"I can't understand what they were looking for, sir. The only thing I had were the keys of the wine-cellar."

"Which they took?" suggested Dick.

Mr. Larkin shook his head.

"No, they didn't take both of 'em. That's the curious thing: only one of them. Mr. Derrick gave me charge of them before he, went away. I might say," he said with some pride, "that I've been trusted with more valuable things than wine."

"Have you the key they left?"

The man hesitated.

"I don't know whether I ought to give it to you, sir, but I suppose it's all right."

"I'd like to see your wine-cellar," said Dick, his eyes twinkling; "and you may be sure, Larkin, that my reputation for honesty is almost as good as yours. Mr. Derrick will find all his choice vintages undisturbed when he comes to take stock."

"There's one thing I wanted to tell you, sir," said the man as he prepared to go. "Mr. Derrick gave me strict orders to fasten up all the windows. I don't know whether he told you, but he said he was not going to risk any man's life in the house until the mystery was cleared up."

Dick laughed.

"That doesn't matter a great deal, if you're not sleeping there," he said. "Besides, I've got a key to the front door."

He thought Larkin looked a little uncomfortable.

"I didn't tell Mr. Derrick that: he's anxious about you, sir—he mentioned you several times. Mr. Derrick likes you. He said a life like yours was worth more than any gold that the burglars could find."

"That's the kind of talk I like to hear," said Dick.

He put the key in his pocket. When Larkin had gone he folded away the depositions, wrote the comments that were expected of him, and posted them to Scotland Yard. The night was his own. He might put to the test quite a number of suspicions which were beginning to form in his mind.

They were suspicions which, viewed cold-bloodedly, had the fantastical qualities of bad dreams. He had serious thoughts of asking Bourke to

release him from the case. His mental outlook was so coloured by Mary's association with the mystery that his judgment was probably at fault.

Derrick's solicitude for his safety was very charming, but it was wholly irrelevant. A murder had been committed in that house in the past few days, and naturally the police could come and go as they wished. He had not insisted upon this step to Mr. Derrick, but when he met him again it would be a simple matter to obtain a modification of his instructions.

He looked at his watch: it was nearly ten o'clock, and he should be hearing from Rees. He hated the thought of spying on the girl, he who had spied on so many people, men and women. But he must be sure as a police officer, however much he might be wounded as a man.

He walked out into the street to take a survey of Derrick's house. There was no evidence of anything in the slightest degree suspicious. Bareheaded, he went round the block as far as the mews, and came back and wiped the rain from his hair.

It took him some time to settle down with a book to wait for the detective's report. It came just after eleven.

"Sorry I couldn't get through before, sir. I'm 'phoning from the hotel. I have been keeping observation; I've seen the young lady twice."

"Is it raining?" asked Dick.

"No, sir, it's a very nice night. She's walking up and down the road with his lordship. It has been easy to keep watch without being seen, because it's a pretty dark road."

"Oh, indeed!" said Dick grimly.

It was not a particularly pleasing picture he conjured up—Mary and the love-sick Weald strolling together in a 'pretty dark road.'

"She was holding his lordship's hand," the unfortunate Detective Rees went on; "sort of swinging hands like children..."

"I hope it didn't make you feel ill?" snarled Dick. "Get on with the essentials. What time was this?"

"I've just left them, sir."

Dick hung up the receiver and went slowly upstairs to his room. Mary was an enigma, not to be solved by his wit. How could she—the inconsistency of it, the heartlessness! How could she? Since time began men had asked themselves such questions about women and had found no answer

satisfactory to their intelligence. Dick sighed. His hand went up to loosen his tie.

"Brr-r-r!"

On the table near his bed he had arranged three little alarms. They had been fixed all unknown to Larkin. This tiny buzzer which held his attention had been connected almost under the eyes of the caretaker and led from the basement of Derrick's house along the ground floor and through a back window. Even the sharp-eyed Minns had not seen the threadlike wire. At the other end it had so pegged that whosoever set his foot upon the lower stairs leading to the kitchen was certain to break the connection.

He went to the telephone and gave a number.

"Inspector Staines speaking. All reserves to Lowndes Square; surround Derrick's house. Allow nobody to leave."

He put down the receiver and went back to his room. He lifted his overcoat from a cupboard, drew a pistol from the pocket, and thumbed back the safety catch.

As he was doing this the butler came in to ask if he wanted anything further for the night. His face fell at the sight of the pistol.

"Are they in there again, sir?" he asked, going pale.

"Yes. Don't let the servants know—if they're still up. You stay here. There's nothing to be afraid of. I shall have fifty policemen round the house in five minutes."

He went outside to Derrick's front door and silently inserted the key.

As he did so, and before he could turn it, he heard the soft thud of bolts on the other side of the door being shot home. He was just the second too late. He flew back past the alarmed butler, taking the stairs two at a time, and came to the top floor. His lantern showed him the skylight fire-escape and, reaching up, he pulled down, the ladder. By this time the butler' liras at his heels.

"That leads to the roof, sir," he said unnecessarily.

"You astonish me," said Dick, and climbed quickly, and in a second or two was standing on the flat roof.

The drizzle had become a downpour, and he was grateful for the security of his foothold. It was not a night he would like to have been climbing along a sloping slate roof. He made no sound as he moved towards the square frame over Derrick's roof. It did not so much as creak as he lifted it. Before he went

down he listened intently, thrusting his head into the opening, but heard nothing. Swiftly he descended to the floor, and as the ladder swung silently back to its place, the skylight closed.

There was no need to use his lantern; a faint light came down from the glass frame. Ahead of him, as he knew, were the two flights of narrow stairs that would bring him down to the 'office' floor.

Again he stopped, holding his breath, his ears strained for the slightest sound, and then he began cautiously to feel his way down the stairs. Before he came to the tiny landing where the stairs turned, he realised that there was a light burning on the lower landing, and he remembered that on his advice Larkin had fixed a low-powered night globe which gave just sufficient illumination to enable the caretaker to move about. These had been fixed on all the landings, and evidently before he had left, Larkin had either forgotten to turn them out or had deliberately left them burning.

Very cautiously he approached the sharp bend in the stairs and peeped round.

As he looked, a cold shiver ran down his spine. The door of the room in which Larkin had slept was opening slowly, wider and wider it came, and as he saw the intruder his blood turned to ice.

A girl dressed in black stood in the doorway, her head bent as though she were listening. He could not see her face. About her neck was a dark-coloured and flimsy scarf. Presently she raised her face, and he had all his work to check the exclamation of amazement.

It was Mary Dane!

He could swear to her, though he had never seen her in black. He could see the slow rise and fall of her bosom, almost hear her breathing. With one hand she held a glazed and folded paper—he thought it looked like an architect's plan—in the other she gripped a small electric torch. Slowly she moved on to the landing, closing the door behind her, and came forward to the head of the stairs.

There were two doors here—that at right angles to the 'office' led to the back room—and now Dick saw the second door moving. Her back was turned to this, but the watching detective expected nothing more than the arrival of a confederate. Presently he came into view, a tall man in a long, dark rain-coat that reached to his heels. His face was invisible; over his head was drawn a black silk stocking with two holes cut on a level with his eyes. Dick gaped at him. Never in all his detective experience had he seen a masked man!

Why did the girl expose her face whilst the man was masked? And then, horrified, he saw the mask come behind the girl and, jerking out his two

hands, grip her by the throat. He heard the strangled scream, saw the look of wild terror in her face as she turned and fought desperately for life.

"Got you!"

The fierce, exultant whisper came to Dick. He saw the man lift her bodily and drag her back to the open door of the room from whence he had emerged, saw her face grow distorted and pinched in that fierce grip, and then:

"Drop her or I'll shoot!"

The mask raised his head to the stairway. Dick saw the two malignant eyes gleaming at him; and then, as the detective leapt, the masked man released his grip and flew down the stairs. Dick Staines would have followed, but the girl lay in a heap, apparently dead.

He lifted her bodily and carried her back into the office room and laid her on the caretaker's bed. When he tried to turn on the lights he discovered that all the globes had been removed by somebody. He had perforce to depend, upon the dim light afforded by the lantern. He could see her face distinctly.

"Mary!" he said gently.

She opened her eyes and stared at him. He felt tenderly at her throat. He could not see the marks of those cruel fingers; they were hidden in the disorder of her scarf.

"What are you doing here?"

She did not answer; her wide-open eyes were without expression. They were looking beyond him. He had the same uncanny feeling as he had had that night when she had stared up at him.

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. Her hand was still at her throat. And then she whispered:

"Get me a drink of water."

He remembered there was a bathroom on the next floor; he went down, found a porcelain tumbler and filled it with water. When he came back the bed was empty.

The double had disappeared.

There was a knock on the front door below—the reserves had arrived, and he went downstairs to admit a uniformed inspector. Outside he saw five

police cars parked bonnet to tail; the streets was alive with policemen in uniform and plain-clothes men.

"Have you seen anybody?"

"No, sir; we have only just arrived."

Dick made a quick search of the house and found that the kitchen door to the area was wide open. A cabman, who had been drawn up by the side of the gardens nearly opposite, had seen a man run out just before the first police squad had come into sight. While Dick was interrogating the cabman, Minns came on the scene.

"There's a 'phone message through from Margate," he said, and Dick went quickly into the house.

It was the watching detective.

"His lordship's gone back to his hotel, and the young lady's gone into her house, sir. Are there any further orders?"

"Yes," said Dick. "Watch the house all night and report to me in the morning who goes in and at what hour."

Dick heard the long-suffering detective groan. He had already been on duty all day.

"I know it is cruelty to animals, but I've got to do it, Rees. Do this for me and I'll get you two extra days' leave."

"Very good, sir. I suppose I can have some supper?"

Dick pardoned his sarcasm and grinned.

"All right." He called the butler. "I want some electric globes," he said.

These he carried to the office room and had them fixed. He had noticed when he came in that the cupboard door was open, and after the disappearance of the mysterious girl it was closed.

"I'm going to do a little bit of housebreaking myself. I want a crowbar from somewhere."

He pulled the door of the cupboard; ordinarily a tug at the knob brought it open, for it was fastened with a two-way spring catch. It no half an hour before a crowbar was procurable, and during that time he made an inspection and saw that it was going to be a difficult job, for the door and its steel post fitted so perfectly that it was impossible to put a sheet of paper

between them. And then, to his surprise, as he was fiddling with the knob, the door opened quite easily.

Dick examined the edge of it very carefully, and found, as he had expected, two oblong, sunken strips of copper flush with the surface. Corresponding to these, he found in the doorpost two similar pieces inlaid in the steel surface.

"There's an electric control here," he told the inspector. "What a fool I am not to have seen it before There are the other connections!"

It required very sharp eyes to detect the two studs near the hinges through which the locking current flowed. Dick attacked the back of the wall with the crowbar. He hadn't gone far before he realised that this energy of his would show no results. He tried the side, and found that also of steel. And then a thought occurred to him, and he sent a man down to turn over the main switch and extinguish all the lights in the house. There was no result.

"Turn it on again. The power may work from a heating circuit. There are power plugs in all the rooms."

The detective whom he sent was absent for some time after the lights came on again, and Dick grew impatient. He stood, leaning against the side of the cupboard, talking to the old uniformed inspector, when suddenly, he felt the surface on which his hand rested fall away from him. The side of the cupboard swung open like a door. Two minutes later the man he sent returned.

"You found it, I know," said Dick.

He took out his lamp and flashed it into the dark opening. The stone stairs that led straight downwards were unusually steep, and so narrow that a stout man would have found it difficult to use them. As it was, Dick had to walk sideways, feeling for every step, and keeping his head bent, since the sloping brick roofing was low.

He had gone down four steps when, looking to the right, he saw a horizontal slit in the wall, and realised that he was looking under the fireplace into the room. It was from here, then, that the mocking laughter had come so inexplicably.

He was bewildered by his discovery. Modern houses in London do not have secret passages, and these stairs had the appearance of great age. The treads had been hollowed by much use.

"Have you seen anything like this before?" he asked the inspector over his shoulder.

"Never," was the reply, "but I've seen these steps before!"

Dick was so startled that he stopped.

"Where?"

"They used to be on the outside of the house thirty or forty years ago. A sort of stone fire-escape. They were put up by the Brothers of St. Anna when they used this place as a sort of headquarters. I've often wondered what old Derrick had done with them when he rebuilt. He must have enclosed them with another wall."

"Where did they end?"

The old inspector thought.

"I believe in the courtyard."

This information did not entirely dispel Dick Staines' amazement. Why should old Derrick, a law-abiding man, spend money on this whim of his, fitting electric doors, building secret stairways?

A third of the way down he saw a depression in the wall on the right, and what appeared to be another wicket. He tapped it, and it sounded hollow. When he tried to find a handle or a switch that would open it he was unsuccessful.

"There were doors on all the floors," said the inspector. "Perhaps this one isn't working. The old man was crazy about fire danger. He used to have a patent cradle on the roof so that he could let himself down to the ground, hand over hand, and on the top floor he had ropes hanging on pegs at all the windows."

They came at last to the bottom, and a door which yielded to the touch. Apparently the old man had induced the engineers to reverse the usual procedure. Ordinarily to cut off the current would be to keep the doors immovably closed. There was a switch here, as there was at the top of the stairs, but there were no lights and Dick found himself in complete darkness. Sending the rays of his lamp around, he saw that the walls were covered with steel shelves, and every shelf was filled with bottles lying on their side. This was the wine-cellar. He put his hand in his pocket; Larkin's key was still there, and, taking it out, he unlocked the heavy iron door. There was no sign of the fugitive girl, nor did he expect to see one.

He illuminated the wine-cellar and made another examination. Three walls were covered with shelves and half the fourth. On the ground was a big, heavy, iron box, in which there were a number of compartments, half of which were occupied by bottles of liqueur. He tried to lift the receptacle to make a further examination of the floor, but it resisted his efforts. Calling to one of the detectives, he pointed to this box.

"Help pull this aside," he said.

The man stooped, gave one tug, and in another second was sprawling on his back; for the steel box was hinged in one corner, and somebody had neglected to fasten the invisible bolt which kept it tight to the wall. In the place of the box was a square aperture and an iron ladder that led down into the darkness.

Dick flashed his lamp down, saw that it was less than six feet deep; saw something else. A little black heap of some flimsy material. He went down the ladder, and picked it up. It was a woman's scarf—the scarf that Mary Dane's double had worn—there was about it a queerly elusive fragrance. He stuffed it in his pocket and took his bearings.

A low-roofed passage ran ahead of him. It was, he found, level for about twenty yards, then began to climb upwards,' and terminated in a square brick cellar about six feet by eight. On his right was another door—ajar. He pushed it wide and stepped out into the open air.

He was in a garden of some sort. Ahead of him loomed the gaunt outlines of a big house.

He looked back at the building from which he had emerged. It was a small, red-brick outhouse, surmounted by a cupola on which were still traces of ancient gilding. Over the door through which he had passed was chiselled on the stone slab that spanned the door:

"Let us descend that we may ascend."

The inspector and two detectives followed him into the garden and Dick pointed out the inscription.

"That's a motto of the old Brothers of St. Anna," said the inspector. "I seem to remember there was some connection between the two houses. They had a chapel, which is now Lord Weald's garage. This is probably the way to it."

The inspector (Dick recalled the fact that Bourke had spoken of him) told him something else that was interesting. He said that old Mr. Derrick had bought this derelict house, in the garden of which they now stood, for a very high price. Nobody understood why such a shrewd dealer should have allowed himself to be robbed. Some other house speculator had got in before him, apparently.

"Obviously the old man knew about this passage. That is why he allowed the house to go to blazes," said Dick. "But why on earth did he do it? He was an honest man. Was this house ever occupied after he bought it?"

"Oh yes," said the inspector, who had an encyclopedic knowledge of the neighbourhood. "A lady lived here. I forget her name; she died about twelve years ago."

"Young?" asked Dick, beginning to understand.

"Middle-aged. She was a very good-looking lady, a Miss Belfer." He laughed. "I dare say Mr. Derrick will tell you all about it: that was what the quarrel was about when he left home."

Dick asked no more. From the garden it was easy to escape: there was the gate leading into the mews, or the weed-grown path that skirted the house and came out by its side.

When he got back to Tommy Weald's dining-room he took out the scarf he had in his pocket and examined it. It was a very dark blue, and he remembered now that she had worn it loosely round her neck. His first step was to get into touch with Walter Derrick. Keyley could give him no exact information; they thought he was 'somewhere in the north,' and were unaware that he had come back to London. There were certain hotels, however, at which he invariably stopped on his way to Scotland, and this list Dick handed over to a detective-sergeant who spent half the night telephoning.

They failed to locate him, however, until the following morning, when he rang up from Stamford to ask for news. Dick was out, but immediately on his return he called up the 'George,' from which 'hostel Mr. Derrick had 'phoned, and gave the silent man a very long and detailed account of what had happened the previous night.

"Did you catch the girl?" interrupted Walter. "And the man—what a brute I can't understand it, can you?"

"I can't understand anything," admitted Dick. "There's another point I want to ask you, Mr. Derrick. Do you know a Miss Belfer?"

"No," was the reply. "Who is she?"

For a moment Dick was too dumbfounded to speak.

"Miss Belfer was a friend of your father's.". There was a long pause.

"I don't know her by that name."

"She occupied that old house of yours."

"Oh yes, yes. Did she? I forget."

Either he could not or would not talk on the matter, for immediately he changed the subject.

"Secret passages, eh? That's in your line, isn't it?"

"It's very much out of my line," said Dick. "Though there's a very simple explanation for it. The two houses were at one time in the possession of a religious Order, and I found this morning that in 1845 they received permission from the Board of Works to tunnel between the two houses. There was no secret about it, only the fact seems to have been forgotten. And there's nothing mysterious, either, about the secret stairway; that is in the borough architect's records. Your father had it made as an additional fire passage."

He had sent two men to make inquiries at Somerset House and to search the local registers, without hoping that he could gain any definite knowledge about Miss Belfer. They did not come back to Lowndes Square, and he found them waiting for him at Scotland Yard when he went there. Their search had produced an important piece of data: no less than the marriage licence at a North London Non-conformist chapel of old man Derrick and 'Martha Ann Belfer.' It had been a secret marriage in every sense of the word. The old man in his selfish way had insisted upon separate establishments, and had maintained his mystery for thirteen years.

Derrick had left the hotel when Dick called up, but two hours later he saw his big yellow car sweep up to the door, and Derrick hoisted himself out of the driver's seat.

"Well, they seem to be using my house as they like! I'm almost inclined to come back. I'm entitled to a little of the fun, as I'm paying most of the damages," he chuckled. "What's the latest news? Has the ghost been seen? Have you found the beautiful young lady, or the masked miscreant? By Gad, it sounds like something out of a thriller!"

"I've found Miss Belfer."

"Now who the devil is Miss Belfer—you mentioned her before?" asked Derrick wonderingly, as Dick led him into the dining-room, where he did most of his work.

"Probably she had some other name. She was the lady over whom you quarrelled with your father—the second Mrs. Derrick."

Derrick's jaw dropped.

"Did he marry her? Are there any children?" he asked quickly.

Dick shook his head.

"None."

"Miss Belfer? That is what she called herself? I used to call her Miss—Constable. Queer he married her...have you got all the—er—proofs?"

Dick had them on the table, and showed him the copies of the certificate. He read them intently, marking each word he deciphered, with a quick downward jerk of his eyelids.

"Well, well...the old dog...so he married her!"

He had said this three or four times.

"And no children." He drew a long breath. "That's queer. Of course, I knew all about it, but imagined that it was just—friendship. I had rather a row with him about it—and money, and a few things like that. You're sure there are no children?"

Dick laughed.

"As far as it is humanly possible to judge, there were none. There is no record in the register, and a local inspector who knew your lather—"

"Who is he?" asked Derrick, and when Dick told him: "Yes, I seem to remember the name. He said there were no children either, eh? Well, well Mystery on mystery!"

He was speaking quickly, like a man who was thinking of something entirely different.

"What happened last night? Who was that girl? You didn't catch her? I should have thought you'd have managed to put a stop to her activities at any rate."

"She went down the wall-stairway."

Derrick nodded.

"I've come to look at that. I shan't be able to sleep in the house again. Where's your idiotic pal?" That grated a little.

"The number of my idiotic friends is rather limited, and I ought to recognise him instantly. Whom do you mean?"

"I mean Tommy Weald. He's running after a nurse, they tell me. Stupid fool! Married to-day and divorced to-morrow."

And then, without a change of tone or the slightest pause to indicate that he turned the subject:

"Constable—that's what I used to call her—Miss Constable. Not an unfamiliar name to a policeman, eh?"

Dick said nothing, and presently Derrick was discussing his future plans.

"I really am going abroad, and I'm giving these devils permission to find the gold if they can! I think I'll leave a notice in the house that so long as they leave me ten per cent. of their findings they can get away with the rest! That's a sporting offer that would make my poor old father turn in his grave. Gold! The only gold in that house is on the picture-frames!"

"You were in South Africa for some time; did you ever meet a Miss de Villiers?"

Derrick pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"I don't know...there are lots of de Villiers scattered up and down the colony. I wasn't there very long. I broke north along the Tuli river, then north again to Victoria, and east towards Tanganyika. Any more thumb-prints?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

Dick shook his head.

"I don't think there will be any more. At any rate we're not giving them very much attention. Bourke and I have agreed that the thumb-prints were put there by means of a stamp—a senseless sort of scheme—"

"A stamp? A rubber stamp?"

Derrick drew a long breath.

"How damned ingenious! A rubber stamp, eh? I wonder if it is anything to do with my father's collection? That idea just struck me. Perhaps our friend thinks that there are still a number of fingerprints in the house, including his. That may be what they're searching for, and not the gold."

Dick shook his head.

"In that case," he said dryly, "they would not be advertising the fact by leaving the Slough murderer's thumb-print behind. Have you had any burglaries at Keyley?"

"None," said Derrick. "When I am away from this infernal house I am not troubled."

He went off to look at the staircase and came back rather disappointed.

"It isn't half as spooky as I thought it was," he said. "Of course, you will have a policeman in the garden or block up the tunnel?"

"Naturally," said Dick, "our little visitor will not come that way again. Hullo I Where have you sprung from?"

Derrick turned round as Tommy Weald came violently into the room. Tommy did everything in a great hurry, and gave the impression that he had less than two minutes to spare.

"Shirts, old boy," he said rapidly. "I'm not staying to lunch. Hope you're comfortable. Hullo, Derrick! They tell me your pals have been giving your house a good look-over!"

"How is the fiancee?" asked Derrick blandly. Tommy had the grace to blush.

"Well," he said awkwardly, "Miss—er—Dane is very well indeed. Extraordinarily well considering the weather. Thank you very kindly for inquiring."

He coughed embarrassedly, shot a sideways glance at Dick, and asked:

"Where did you hear the joyful tidings?"

"I read it in the newspaper," said Derrick, to Dick Staines' astonishment.

"Have you announced it?" he asked so fiercely that Tommy shrank back.

"Of course I have!" he said defiantly. "And why the dickens shouldn't I? Mary doesn't mind, I don't mind, and my aunts are delighted."

Dick could only look at him in pained wonder.

"Then it is fixed?" he said, a little huskily.

"On the fourth of September, old boy. We're going to Bellagio, wherever that may be, for our honeymoon. The wedding will be quiet."

"Which means that they won't allow you to talk," said Dick savagely.

He was confounded, too confounded to be polite. All his world was going topsy-turvy. Here was one of his best friends marrying the girl who was, or might be, a member of a most dangerous criminal organisation, and yet he could not warn him without being disloyal to his own ideal. It was the most incredible situation that the crazy mind of a lunatic could conceive.

"I give it up," he said.

"Give what up, old boy? Don't be rash." Tommy raised an imploring hand. "You're going to be best man."

"And I'll send you a wedding present," said Derrick heartily, and slapped the happy man upon the back.

When he had gone, Derrick and Tommy left the room together, Derrick to lunch, Tommy, with the help of his butler, to search for shirts. And Dick was left alone to work out this mad combination of fate. When Mary Dane had told him that she loved him, she was speaking the truth. He would not even question that. And yet—here was the unbelievable fact: she was marrying Tommy Weald, an almost chance acquaintance. He would not believe that Tommy's position, his undoubted wealth, were factors in the step she was taking. That was impossible. There must be some other explanation.

Tommy came down to give him an opportunity, all unconsciously, of hearing from her own lips the reason for the step 'she was taking.

"What about a trot down to Eastbourne, old boy—yes, we've moved to Eastbourne—terribly nice place—Beachy Head and everything."

Tommy had attached himself to this queer entourage with staggering facility.

"We went there this morning. Old boy, I'm getting so well acquainted with English watering-places that I'll soon know all the landladies in England by sight!"

"How long would it take us?"

Tommy considered.

"If the chauffeur drives, about a couple of hours," he said. "If I drive, an hour and a half."

Dick hesitated.

"She was talking about you last night," Tommy went on, "saying what a brilliant man you were and how' much she liked you."

"Thank you, said Dick.

"Needn't be sarcastic, old boy. I'm just passing on a few remarks. Be generous, Dicky! I've cut you out, old boy, but I bear you no ill will."

"You haven't cut me out at all," said Dick hotly; "and I do bear you a great deal of ill will I And if you please, I'd rather you did not discuss me with Mary or anybody else."

"Don't be girlish," said Tommy severely, and Dick had to admit that the adjective was rather applicable. He was being infantile in his jealousy.

He 'phoned Bourke, and told him he was going to Eastbourne to spend the night.

"I think it's a good idea. What's the attraction at Eastbourne?"

"Weald," said Dick.

The chauffeur drove them, which was comforting in one way and distressing in another; for now Tommy could give him all his attention and tell him in detail just the provision he was making for his future bride, and what his aunt had written from Cromer and another aunt had wired from Derby, and what an unhappy life a man lived unless he had the intelligence to marry.

"Let's talk about dog-racing," said Dick.

"I don't know anything about dog-racing," replied Tommy.

"I should still prefer to hear you on the subject," snapped Dick.

Tommy was in so exalted a mood that he was not even offended.

They went by way of Lewes, and stopped to tea in that ancient town. As the car drew up to the principal hostelry Dick caught a glimpse of a big yellow Rolls in the stable yard.

"That's old Derrick's," said Tommy, who had also seen the car. "Funny old devil! Do you know what he asked me when we went out of the room together? If I'd like to sell my pictures! Have you ever heard of such a perfectly ghastly idea?"

"Which pictures?"

Tommy looked at him reproachfully.

"Didn't you see them in the dining-room, old boy? Where is your artistic eye?"

Dick was conscious that there were four large pictures in the room, but that they were landscapes which did not particularly interest him.

"Four of the best Constables in England," said Tommy impressively.

"Eh? Constables? I didn't know that. Have they by chance any titles on the frames?"

"My dear fellow," said Tommy wearily, "the artist's name is on a small plate on every frame, and unless your poor old peepers are going wrong you would have seen them—just the word 'Constable.'"

"I see," said Dick slowly, "just the word 'Constable,' eh?"

Was it h coincidence that Derrick had called his father's wife 'Miss Constable'? He remembered that the millionaire had been looking round the room as he had put the question to him about Miss Belfer, and it was then that he had recalled the lady whom he said he had known by another name.

Dick did remember the pictures and the titles: he had noticed them subconsciously, as he had noticed the other furnishings of the room.

"That's certainly very odd."

"What's very odd?" asked Tommy, who was leading the way to the lounge.
"The pictures? You're wrong, old boy—they're all the same size."

He had a trick of stopping suddenly, so that people who followed at his heels had either to fall over him or move round him. He stopped to give his views on the difficulty of matching frames. Dick pushed him on.

The lounge was crowded at this hour with people taking tea. It was the first of the two days' race meeting at Lewes, and they had arrived almost simultaneously with a large number of sportsmen from the course. But there was no sign of Mr. Derrick. When they had finished their tea and gone out, Dick had a look into the stable yard and found that the yellow Rolls had gone.

The yard man, who still retained the archaic title of 'hostler,' said the gentleman had gone on to Brighton.

"I resent Derrick fearfully," said Tommy. "Why on earth?" asked Dick.

"Because, old boy, he nearly killed the future Lady Weald. When I think of the possibilities of that beastly yellow motor-car—I can imagine nothing worse than being popped off by a yellow motor-car—arid how it might have—phew! Good Lord! it doesn't bear thinking about."

Dick tried to work up an interest in his friend's astonishing marriage. He found himself putting questions that he had asked before.

"On the fourth of September. I keep telling you, my dear boy. For heaven's sake keep that day free!"

"Does Mary know I'm coming down? No, not to the wedding, you ass! To-day?"

Tommy shook his head.

"No. I didn't see her this morning before I left. Poor old Cornfort had been awake since three o'clock. Whatever is going to happen to him after Mary goes?"—he shook his head sadly.

"There are other nurses in the world," said Dick brutally. "Now for the menagerie!"

Tommy gave him the look of a dying fawn.

"Don't call it a menagerie, dear old thing," said Tommy, hurt. "It isn't in the best of taste, old boy."

"I'm sorry," said Dick.

They drove straight to the private hotel where Mr. Cornfort's party was staying.

Mary and her charge were out. They found her near a shelter overlooking the beach. She greeted the visitor from London very coolly. Dick's eyes were all for her throat: she wore a nurse's low-necked dress which concealed nothing—there was apparently nothing to conceal. If she were the girl who was in Derrick's house on the previous night, her throat would at least have been bruised—though her scarf might have protected her. He put his hand mechanically into his pocket and touched the soft thing, and hated himself for his suspicion.

He thought she was looking rather tired and ill, and was alarmed, though why he should be alarmed when her burbling fiance was at hand to share any of her burdens, he could not explain.

He was very unhappy; wished he hadn't come. He had to face the certainty of an evening spent in the company of these young lovers—for himself he felt immeasurably old—and that was not a very pleasant prospect.

"Are you taking a holiday, Mr. Staines, or are you here on business?" she asked.

"I'm taking a holiday—that is almost official." He tried to be flippant and failed dismally.

He could not fathom her or read any significance in her attitude, except that his presence made her feel uncomfortable.

"Mr. Cornfort is going back to the house soon. Won't' you take me somewhere to tea?" she asked.

He looked at Tommy instinctively. He at any rate was a good interpreter.

"Tommy needn't come," she said.

"I say!" said the indignant Tommy.

Yet it struck Dick as a curious circumstance that Tommy's protest lacked heartiness; and later, when they were walking together, Tommy gave him a hint as to the reason.

"She's a darling, but in the daytime she's terribly practical, old boy. She gives me the shivers—awfully sharp on me. And she's fierce on canoodling—
"

"On what?" asked Dick.

"You know what I mean: you've been in love yourself, old boy. I mean to say...we're all human, and she doesn't like canoodling in broad daylight under the eyes of the public."

"What a remarkable girl!"

"Sarcasm is wasted on me," said Tommy, unoffended. "There are lots of quiet little nooks and places where a fellow can sit without a lot of Paul Prys seeing him. But she won't go there in the daytime. I tried to hold her hand this morning and she asked me if I was frightened. I mean to say—!"

Dick had never dreamt that another man's love affair could bore him so intolerably as Tommy's. He schooled himself to hear without listening, and to make appropriate responses, according to the inflection of the other's voice. They followed the bath chair party through the town, and once helped to push that yellow monstrosity up a steep bit of hill. Whilst the hotel porter was assisting the bath chair towards the elevator, Mary gave him the rendezvous. At five o'clock he was sitting in an airy cafe, watching a party of children playing on the beach, when she floated in. She had been very formal and stiff when they had met at first, but now she was in her gayest mood.

"Welcome to our city!" she mocked him. "Now show me how a police officer behaves when he's off duty. First of all, are there any questions you want to ask me about my criminal antecedents? And, by the way, have you seen my double? Poor darling! she must be the busiest woman in London."

"Is this yours?"

He took out the scarf and put it on the table. She picked it up calmly without a word and examined it curiously.

"That certainly looks like mine. I bought one in town last time I was there."

"Is it yours?" he asked again.

She opened the bag she carried, put in her hand and took out the exact replica and unfolded it.

"My double?" she asked, the light of laughter in her eyes. "Even my scarf has one!"

Dick was pushing the silk scarf back in his pocket when she stopped him.

"Let me take that, unless I'm removing very important clues."

He tossed it across to her.

"Add it to your collection," he said.

"Poor man!" She patted his hand softly. "Tommy's been telling me what a dreadful time you've had with those wretched visitors to Mr. Derrick's house. Tommy told me they pulled down one of the walls; is that true?"

"Tommy talks a great deal too much."

"He doesn't tell me half enough," she said, "although I admit he talks too much."

"You remember Lordy Brown, don't you?"

She nodded, and the smile left her face.

"The man who was killed? Yes. He was the same man who stopped me in Bloomsbury Square and thought he recognised me. Poor soul!"

"Are you sorry for him?" It was an inane question.

"Yes, aren't you? Terribly, terribly sorry. And his poor little wife."

He looked up quickly.

"What do you know about his wife?"

For a moment she did not answer.

"I can't think of a lie," she said very lightly. "So I'll ask you to excuse me answering that question. I know he has a wife, who is, or was, in a pretty bad way. She has two or three children."

"Then you knew him?"

"Yes, I had a short conversation with him."

"When?"

She pushed herself back from the table, her eyes twinkling.

"You're being a police officer," she accused him. "I suppose it's difficult to get out of the habit. I saw him subsequent to our meeting in Bloomsbury Square. Does that satisfy you?"

"You didn't tell me."

"You never asked me. Besides, I didn't think you were interested in Lordy Brown—oh yes, I did. But I didn't tell you because—well, it would have been rather embarrassing."

"You're an amazing girl," he said.

"I used to think so," she answered, and sighed.

"I don't think so any more; I think I'm rather—"

"What?"

"Rather a failure. Conceit has been my ruin." He made an obvious retort.

"Tommy will do nothing to cure it."

She gave him one reproachful glance.

"You deserve to be smacked for that," she said. "Poor Tommy!"

"I really can't understand you, Mary. Why are you marrying Weald?"

"Call him 'Tommy'; it's so much more like him. I always imagined earls were terribly ruddy-faced creatures with fists like shoulders of mutton. Why am I marrying him? Who said I was marrying him?"

"Why, it's been announced in the newspapers," he said indignantly. "Why do you quibble?"

"Don't let us quarrel," she said, as the waitress approached with a tray piled high with cups and plates and a dazzling array of confectionery. "Now, imagine I'm a wicked vamp trying to charm secret information from you. Have you found anything really startling? Tommy said you found something in an old box."

"Why I told Tommy I don't know. Anyway, it was nothing—a sort of vacuum pump, or as we called it when we were young, a 'sucker.' It's for lifting or pulling things with a smooth surface."

He raised his eyes from the little cake he was dissecting and was struck dumb by the expression on her face. She was staring at him, her eyes open wide, her lips parted.

"What on earth is the matter?"

For a second she had lost control. Now she was regaining her equilibrium with difficulty.

"Matter?" she stammered. "Nothing...only I've just remembered that I've forgotten to give Mr. Cornfort his—his medicine."

"What was the matter?" he asked again. "It had nothing whatever to do with Mr. Cornfort's medicine. Besides, he doesn't take medicine. You told me that yourself."

"Tell me about that vacuum pump; what shape was it? I won't pretend I'm not interested."

He described it briefly, cursing Tommy for his loquacity. Not that he attached any especial importance to that commonplace tool.

She looked up at the ceiling and her eyes narrowed. He guessed that she was thinking, and thinking very quickly.

"Can you remember any more about that pump?"

In spite of his annoyance he laughed.

"Yes, I can. I could describe it so faithfully that you could make one yourself. It is not like any other vacuum, because in the middle it has a small long steel needle. We only discovered that when we were examining it the other day. There's a tiny little screw near the handle and the needle extends itself down beyond the cup. My superintendent thinks that it was used to lift some circular object, and the needle was employed to find the centre. That's all I can tell you, and I have told you too much." And then she came back to the present.

"Can you stay till to-morrow night?"

He had to leave in the morning, he told her, some time about lunch. Earlier if there was trouble in Derrick's house. He had left two men there without consulting that gentleman.

"I don't think there'll be trouble," she said, when they were strolling along the picturesque front. "Can you guarantee that?"

She shook her head.

"I can't be responsible for my double. Tommy says they found the finger-print of the Slough murderer."

"What do you know about the Slough murderer?" he demanded.

"I know very little, except that the man who committed the murder was named Herman Lavinski, a naturalised Russian. And there's Tommy looking positively radiant. I told him to fetch me."

"Wait a moment."

In his agitation he gripped her arm. "What was his name, do you say—"

"Herman Lavinski."

"But how do you know?"

She looked at him for a moment, a smile in her eyes.

"My double told me," she said.

Dick was on the telephone to the record office at Scotland Yard within half an hour. If she was fooling him—well, she had done her work well. But he had a feeling that when she gave that name, she was in deadly earnest.

He gave the office time to look up their data and then he called London again.

"No, sir, he's never been through our hands, but we had him on Supplementary List A some years ago."

'Supplementary List A' was that in which were tabulated foreign wrongdoers who were expected to be in the country.

"Read his description," he ordered, and, when this was done: "No finger-prints?"

"No, sir. He may have had a conviction abroad. I will put through an inquiry to Paris. I'm not so sure they keep finger-prints."

Dick wasn't sure either.

This fact was patent: there was a man called Lavinski, and the description that had been read to him tallied with that ten-year-old description that had been handed down to the archives of Scotland Yard. It was no invention of Mary Dane's; he would have been surprised if it had been.

It always gave him a pang to see Tommy and the girl together, and he rejoined them on the beach with no great pleasure. Mr. Cornfort was asleep. He saw the unshaven chairman sitting on a public bench, smoking a clay pipe and at peace with the world.

"What is the name of that beast of burden of yours?"

"If you mean our chairman, you're being very disrespectful," she said severely. "His name is Henry."

"Does he ever speak?"

"He has been known to ask for his dinner," she said. And then: "Mr. Staines, I want you to talk to Tommy. He's being difficult."

Tommy was sulky, sitting cross-legged like a naughty boy and throwing all the stones within his reach towards the incoming sea.

"I really don't think that we want to discuss the matter, Mary," he said testily. "I mean to say, it's perfectly private between you and me."

"But it isn't perfectly private between you and me," she said. "It's perfectly public—at least, you wanted to make it so."

He rose with dignity.

"I'm going back to Town," he said.

She drew off the little emerald circlet from her finger.

"Take this with you."

He wilted under the implied threat.

"Don't be perfectly ghastly," he said. "Put it on, put it on!" Then suddenly he bent down and seized her hand. "I told you that ring didn't fit you. I'll have it tightened up to-morrow, old lady."

"Don't call me old lady,' Tommy," she said wearily. "You know, you make me feel all curls and crinolines."

Tommy looked at his watch rather importantly. He had risen from the depth of gloom to the height of confidence in the course of a minute.

"I'll dash up to the hotel—you won't come to dinner?"

"I'm dining with Mr. Staines," she said. Tommy winced at that.

"Oh, well, all right." He went away making incoherent noises.

"What's the trouble?" asked Dick.

"Tommy wants to be affectionate—I don't think he ever had a mother's care. And, by the way, you needn't dress to-night. Mr. Cornfort is sleeping and he expressed a desire to go out in the evening after dark. You shall join the caravan with me."

They talked idly and aimlessly. Dick mentioned casually that he had seen Walter Derrick's car at Lewes.

"Do you like him?" she asked.

"Yes, I do rather. Don't you?"

"I'm rather prejudiced. You see, I haven't forgotten my narrow escape."

"You didn't go on as if it were a narrow escape. I thought you were the coolest person I had ever met."

"That was sheer—what's the word?—swank, I think. Yes, I was terrified. Ever so much more frightened than when poor Lordy Brown discovered in me his mortal enemy. You've inquired about Lavinski, of course?"

He nodded.

"Well?" she asked. "Is there any such person?"

He nodded again.

"Are you surprised?"

"I should have been surprised if there wasn't," he said, "after you had told me."

She laughed softly.

"That implies a very touching faith in me I Do you like the idea of my marrying Tommy?"

He drew a long breath.

"I think it's horrible. Not that Tommy isn't a very good fellow," he said guardedly, "but—"

"Why is it horrible?" She looked at him so intently that he almost forgot that he sat there in view of thousands of children and nursemaids, mothers and papas, to say nothing of itinerant photographers.

"Because I love you."

It didn't sound like his voice speaking that. She did not move her eyes from his; they were very searching, eager eyes. He had seen pain in them, and that made them more precious.

"When did you discover this—at Victoria? Have I provoked you into this declaration?"

He shook his head.

"I think I loved you at Brighton, and realised it in Lowndes Square. I really don't know why I love you at all."

The ghost of a smile trembled on her lips.

"It sounds rather a sententious thing to say. Does anybody know why anybody loves anybody?"

"I don't know why I love you," he repeated doggedly, "especially as I'm full of suspicion about you. Even now I can't get rid, of it. There's no other woman in the world like you. I know your eyes, your mouth, I know every line of you. I saw you in Derrick's house last night—in the hands of a masked man who was trying to strangle you. I've been looking for the bruises all the day."

"Have you?"

And then she did a surprising thing. She wetted the tip of her finger and brought it down her neck, and under his eyes there came into view a blue oval bruise.

"Like that?" she said.

He was incapable of reply.

She took a little gold box from her bag, opened it, looked in the mirrored lid, smoothed a pad down her throat; when it had passed, the bruise had disappeared.

"I saw you looking." She was half smiling, very serious. "You were peeping at my throat when you met me this afternoon."

"Then it was you?" he said in a low voice. She nodded.

"Yes, it was I."

He could only shake his head helplessly.

"For God's sake, why? Yet it couldn't have been you—Tommy was with you all yesterday evening."

She touched his hand—that little petting trick of hers that she had, how sweet it was!

"You're the most impossible man, Dick Staines," she said. "Having proved that I was being slowly strangled to death, that I was the wicked housebreaker, you are now trying to prove an alibi. Now I'll show you the greatest trick of all."

Again she took out her little box, again wiped the bruise into view. Then she wet the corner of her handkerchief with the tip of her tongue and drew it down her throat, and lo! the bruise had disappeared.

"Now are you satisfied?"

"But—but—" he stammered.

"There isn't a bruise," she said, "but I hated to disappoint you. I thought I'd make a dramatic revelation of it at tea. It occurred to me this morning that you would expect to see it and my ingenious mind got to work: I first painted the bruise and then I covered it up with a special kind of damp powder. What else would you like me to do? I'm full of tricks to-day!"

He reached out and took her hand.

"I should like to marry you," he said simply. She looked away.

"I wonder." Then, with a sigh, she got up. "Come along. I'm going to change again. Life's one darned dress after another! Dinner at half-past seven, and don't keep me waiting in the vestibule, or I shall be terribly dignified and distant!"

After she had gone he climbed up to Beachy Head and stood for so long admiring the view that he almost qualified for her displeasure. He had five minutes to tidy himself; she was waiting for him in the hotel lounge, absorbed in an evening newspaper. He saw the page she was reading and was a little surprised.

"Are you interested in the stock markets?"

She looked up quickly and threw down the paper. "Yes, a little," she said. "I have some African stocks that jump up and down; they afford a little excitement in life. They're constantly jumping up and down. At the moment they're down."

"I didn't know you were a rich woman."

"I wouldn't call myself rich. I have ten or twenty thousand pounds."

He was taken aback.

"I'm sorry. Did that hurt your feelings?" she asked.

"Why on earth are you a nurse?"

"I love my profession," she said solemnly. "No, seriously, I used to be terribly keen on it. I was the youngest qualified nurse in my hospital. Then I got rather tired of it, and Daddy wanted me at home."

"Have you a daddy?" He apologised for the crudity of the question, but it was unnecessary. "Of course I have, and a very clever daddy." She did not speak of him again. Always she returned banteringly to what she called the haunted house.

"I'd love to know what you think about it all," she said. "Tommy says you're very bright, and that's the highest praise Tommy gives to anybody!"

He rather wished she wouldn't drag Tommy into the conversation. He was not quite sure how he and Tommy would meet that evening. If he were in Tommy's place he thought he would be rather annoyed. He tried to bring the conversation to her wedding. She side-tracked his effort with consummate skill, and when he returned again by a vague reference to a wedding present, she said:

"I wish you wouldn't talk about it. I'm not marrying Tommy. How could I?"

"But surely—"

Between her emphatic announcement and his sense of loyalty to his absent friend he made an unconvincing glowing.

"Is it really fair to Tommy to let him think—"

"I wish you wouldn't discuss Tommy," she said, "just leave it—laissez. You've no idea how things work out: Nature and Providence and Fate perform miracles."

"But Tommy ought to be told; one can't make a fool of him."

Her voice changed.

"I shall not make a fool of Tommy. You're very rude to suggest that I should. At the right time I shall explain things, and Tommy will be just as happy and more."

After dinner she left him, telling him where they were to meet, halfway down the sea front, near the road. Mr. Cornfort did not like going on the actual front: he was a very nervous man, besides which he attracted a lot of attention; and he was a very sensitive man: he didn't like the noise that pierrots and bands made, because he was a very weary man.

Tommy was waiting near the bandstand when Dick came up, and apparently he was in his usually amiable mood.

"Wonderful girl, isn't she, Dicky?" he said enthusiastically. "Such strength of mind and character, old boy! Took no notice of my tantrums—off she went to dinner with my best pal and left me flat. Would any other girl do that?"

"Would any other fiance stand it?" thought Dick.

"I like character in a woman," Tommy went on, "though there are times when Mary shows just a little bit too much of it. We've had our little tiffs, old boy—lovers' quarrels and all that sort of thing." He dusted his knees complacently. "But she's always given in or I have. The point is, one of us usually 'fesses up that we're in the wrong. I might say it's always me who's in the wrong, but we take it in turns to admit it."

"Why on earth did you tell her about that vacuum pump?"

Tommy opened his blue eyes wide.

"Did I, old boy? I don't see why I shouldn't."

"But who told you?"

"My butler told me, and I suppose Larkin told him.. And who told Larkin? You!" He pointed an accusing finger, and Dick was so staggered at having the war carried into his own country that he did not protest.

"She's marvellous," Tommy went on. "She's knitting me a tie with my old school colours."

Tommy was an old Etonian: it was the only thing he had ever done in life and he liked to tell the world about it through the medium of his neckwear.

"And sew, my boy! She showed me some work the other night that you couldn't buy in a shop."

His rhapsody was interrupted by the arrival of the inseparable three: Henry tugged at the handle, and kept up a regular, if funereal, pace; Mary walked by the side and a little behind the yellow chair; and Mr. Comfort alternately dozed and stared. They followed the path that runs parallel a few feet from the road. It was getting quite dark, for though the night was warm it was cloudy.

But it was very pleasant walking at her side, talking for the main part nonsense, hearing her low, sweet laughter. They were nearing the end of the long green strip which separates the beach from the road. Here pedestrians were few. Beyond lay the Crumbles.

"I think we'll turn, Henry," said Mary.

The bath chair came round at a leisured pace. Henry was bending to the pull when from nowhere appeared a small car, coming towards them at a furious pace: a black car with dim lamps; there was just enough light to distinguish its shape and make.

"He's taking a risk, on the wrong side of the road."

The driver's face was hidden behind monstrous motoring goggles. As Dick was speaking he slowed. Then the detective saw his hand come up and shoot forward. Something hurtled through the air, some black, swirling body that Dick with a thrill of horror instantly recognised. He leapt forward and up, fielded the missile, and, spinning round, with one motion he flung the thing into the sea.

"What—" began Mary.

Just before the object touched water there was a terrific explosion. Something whizzed past with an angry burr; from behind them came the smash of breaking glass.

And then a surprising thing happened. Henry, the bent chairman, straightened himself. Dick saw his hand stiffen upward. There was a staccato rattle of shots, and the car swerved dangerously, almost capsizing as it turned, and fled down a side road at an increasing pace.

"I think I got him!" said Henry in a very calm and gentle voice.

There was commotion enough on the beach; people were running; a mounted policeman came flying along towards them; Dick saw another policeman sprinting in their direction.

"What's the trouble? What was that explosion?"

"A man threw a bomb from a car," Dick explained quickly. He said nothing about Henry's strange behaviour.

"I thought I heard pistol shots, too. Which way did he go?"

They pointed up the road where the car had vanished, and the mounted man went galloping after it.

In a few minutes they were the centre of a large crowd. It was typical of Mr. Cornfort that he only opened his eyes to note the fact that he was an object of interest, and then fell into a deep sleep.

The first sergeant of police who arrived Dick took on one side and revealed his profession.

"It's a surprising thing, Inspector. You're sure it wasn't a firework?"

"Not it," said Dick shaking his head. "You may find a casualty in one of these houses. I heard a window smash. No, it was a Mills bomb, and it was beautifully placed." He calculated that it would have fallen into Mr. Cornfort's lap, in which case Mr. Cornfort would have been asleep permanently.

At last the crowd fell away and they moved on. Mary said nothing, but he saw in the failing light that her face was very pale.

"It was splendid of you not to tell about Henry," she said in a low voice.

Henry was the amazing feature of the evening to Dick; that silent and preoccupied man had been revealed as an expert gunman. Dick knew what pistol shooting was. This man was an adept.

"Henry's rather like that. I think he must have been a soldier some time."

"And do soldiers shoot at motorists?" he demanded.

"If they don't like them," she replied gently. They were talking under cover of Lord Weald's conversation, addressed indiscriminately to Henry and to the slumbering Mr. Cornfort. It was a conversation sprinkled with 'By Gads!' and it was made up with suggestions for the punishment of people who threw Mills bombs at invalids. Tommy was happy in that he needed neither the stimulation of agreement nor the provocation of dispute. His was one of those radiant natures that emit vocal energy unceasingly. The peculiar thing was that he had not seen Henry shoot, and as Henry was his chief audience, Tommy unwittingly deprived himself of a great deal of subject-matter.

There was Henry pulling at the bath chair, slow and self-absorbed, an unshaven figure of a man—who could suspect a 48-calibre automatic hitting his leg with every stride he took?

"Are you frightened?" asked Dick.

"I was—after. I didn't realise at the time. It almost seemed as if he knew I'd told you."

Dick stopped dead.

"Who?"

"Herman Lavinski."

"Do you mean—" he began.

"Don't stop, please, or Tommy will come back to us. I know it was Lavinski. That was his first recorded offence—throwing a bomb into a jeweller's shop. Not a fearfully dangerous one, but enough to scare everybody under the counter, during which he cleared out the window."

"You know a lot about him," said Dick suspiciously.

"I'm a great student," she replied demurely; "and since I have known you, naturally I have taken a tremendous interest in crime."

"If you laugh at me I shall—"

"Not in public," she said, in the same low voice. "Tommy will tell you that I'm rather a fanatic on the subject. Poor Henry!"

"Why poor Henry?"

"Because he'll get no sleep to-night, poor dear! He'll be sitting on the doorstep waiting for developments. Henry is a great optimist."

"You're a puzzling lot of people," said Dick in despair.

They had turned the corner of the road and the bath chair and Tommy were out of sight. They were in the darkest part of the promenade and nearly alone. As if by common agreement, their pace slackened to its slowest.

"You'd better go now," she said softly, and put up her face to his.

For a second he held her in his arms, his lips against hers, then gently she drew clear of him.

"That's for not telling on Henry," she said breathlessly, and was gone.

CHAPTER XIV

Happiness can keep a man awake as readily as trouble. It was past three o'clock before Dick Staines fell asleep, and he woke so light of heart that in the midst of his shaving there was a knock on the door and the chambermaid came in.

"The gentleman next door says would you please stop singing, sir? He's suffering from nerves."

Dick's roar of laughter was probably as disturbing as his song.

He saw the girl only for a few minutes; a telephone message from Bourke urged him to come back to town at the earliest opportunity. Tommy came with him to the station, and Tommy's exuberance brought the first pang.

"Everything's all right, old boy," said the jubilant young man. "We've made it up."

"Made what up?" asked Dick. "I didn't know you'd quarrelled."

"Oh, you weren't there!" said Tommy, remembering. "It was just before she went in with the dear old wreck. I asked her...well, you know what I mean. I mean, it's quite the natural thing for a feller to do, and she gave me a perfectly frozen face and went inside without saying good-night. I toddled up and down broken-hearted, old boy."

"Toddled up and down who?"

"I mean outside the house," explained Tommy. "Then she came out into the garden. Old boy, she was divine!"

If Tommy had struck him, Dick could not have had a greater and more hurtful shock.

"What do you mean by divine? Did you—kiss her?" he said desperately.

"Naturally," said Tommy.

"I give it up," groaned Dick.

"You're always giving things up, old boy."

Dick got into a first-class carriage by himself; his scowl terrified the only fellow-passenger that offered. It was so unpleasant that the gentleman dropped the handle as if it was something hot and scurried off down the train looking for a more agreeable companion.

All the way to Town he was trying to reconcile the two Mary Danes he knew. Her double was more like her than she. How could she treat Tommy as she did? He remembered that she was almost rude when she snatched her hand away...what was Tommy saying? Oh yes, her ring didn't fit her...

His power of volitionary thought ended here, paralysed by a revelation...She had snatched her hand away...the ring...from some pigeon-hole in his mind came forth the recollection of something she said to him on the way to Victoria that night: "I told you a lie." He fell back in the corner of the carriage and gasped. For he knew the lie! All that was inexplicable was now plainly and understandably written.

Bourke was waiting for him when he got to Scotland Yard, and the stout Superintendent had before him a whole sheaf of documents.

"How did you get on to Lavinski?" was the first question he asked.

"Oh, they told you, did they?" laughed Dick. "I really didn't get on to him at all, but a young friend of mine offered the suggestion that that was the name of the Slough murderer."

"How did she know?"

"For the matter of that, how do you know it was a she?" challenged Dick, changing colour.

"A little bird told me," said the Superintendent. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I suppose you asked and the reply wasn't satisfactory. We'll leave it at that for the moment. The point is—here's the point."

He turned over the documents and took out a square card covered with thumb-prints. The language, Dick saw, was German.

"Convicted in Munich, 1911, Lavinski alias Stein, alias Griedlovitz, alias Paul Stammen. Speaks German and Russian with a broken accent; believed to be of English extraction."

Bourke read German as easily as he read English. "Look at that thumb-print."

Dick hadn't to look twice.

"It's our man," he said. "How did you get it?"

Very fortunately, the police department attached to the German Embassy had a record of a number of English nationals who had been convicted in Germany.

"The other embassies have the same, and I was intelligent enough to send round a memorandum asking if they'd give us particulars of Lavinski. I was hoping to get a photograph. By the way, the German description makes him a much thinner man, but he was very much younger then. It was for the same type of offence that he got time in Germany—shooting up a cashier and getting away with the pay-roll. We've got a later description of him, but the finger-print is the thing. If it hadn't been for the disorganisation of the embassy following the war, we'd have had this man—as it is, I've written across to the German Minister of Justice asking him to let us have a photograph. He may not be in England—"

"I think he is, sir," said Dick. "If I were a betting man, that would be the certainty I should back."

"Anyway we are using the Press," said the Superintendent. "I've circulated this description."

He pushed the slip of paper across and Dick read from:

"Wanted by the police in connection with a number of offences. Herman Lavinski..." through all his aliases, to the end of the paragraph.

"It will be in the last edition of the evening newspapers. I'm expecting that we shall have the usual crowd of reporters down, but nothing is to be said to connect this man with the Slough murder."

When Dick reached Tommy Weald's house he saw two workmen coming through Mr. Derrick's open doorway. He had lost no time in repairing the damage that had been done to his wall, apparently. To his surprise, Derrick himself followed the workmen.

"I am blocking up the secret passages of this fine old medieval castle," he said cheerily. "Either I do that or I shall sell the house."

"And leave the gold for somebody else to find," said Dick.

Derrick smiled.

"I've told you before, and I tell you again, the only gold in this house is on the picture-frames. Have you been out of Town?"

"Yes. I thought you were in Brighton—I saw your car at Lewes. The hostler told me you had gone on there."

Mr. Derrick nodded.

"I'd stayed the night at Brighton, but the place was terribly full..."

When a Brighton habitue starts to talk about Brighton, there is no room for any other subject of conversation.

"The one good thing this business has done," Derrick went on, "is to show me how deuced uncomfortable this house is. I'm having it refurnished from top to bottom. Where are you dining tonight?"

Dick pointed to Tommy Weald's residence. "At home," he said.

Derrick laughed.

"It must be almost like a home to you by now. Will you dine with me or shall I invite myself to dine with you?"

Dick was glad enough to extend the invitation.

Although he made light of these extraordinary happenings that had so distressed him, it was obvious to Dick that the strain was telling on Derrick. Behind his joviality was a hint of nervousness and apprehension. Over the dinner table he confided the astonishing fact that the one thing which really 'rattled' him was the ghost.

"I can't understand that spook. Larkin is a very nice fellow, but has no imagination at all—he could not have invented it. Are you afraid of ghosts?"

Dick smiled. He might have confessed, but did not, that he had been scared of more substantial things than ghosts in that house.

"Not very, eh? Well, I am," confessed the owner heartily. "I'm so scared that I dare not spend a night there to catch him—Larkin says he comes regularly. And he's more frightened than I am!"

"Why don't you allow me the free run of the place?"

The other smiled good-humouredly.

"It seems you people have taken it. When I came here this morning I found two detectives inside and chased them out. But if you do hear or see anything, I'll tell Larkin to unfasten the upstairs window and leave the lights on the landing. Oh, by the way "—he took an evening newspaper out of his pocket—"who is this Lavinski? What is he wanted for?"

"Quite a number of offences, including murder." Derrick looked at the sheet again and read the paragraph slowly.

"It doesn't say murder. I suppose that's a little dodge of yours? By the way, Larkin says that the 'ghost' always appears from half-past eleven to twelve. So if you want to be thrilled to death, you might step in round about then."

He was going to an hotel in Weybridge, a beautiful house, in a wooded park, which had the advantage of a private golf course.

Dick spent the evening with a book. He was feeling tired. Once he went up to his own room, stepped on to the balcony, and saw that Mr. Derrick had been as good as his word and that the French windows were fastened by a catch which he could easily open from the outside.

He came downstairs, read a little, scribbled a little, and thought much. He wondered if Mary would call him up. Hitherto he had been suspicious of these long-distance calls, but now—he smiled at his secret thought. By the evening post he had an intimation to the effect that his flat was available for his use, his tenants having decided to spend the rest of the period abroad. Ordinarily he would have been glad to have this news, but now he didn't very much care one way or the other. He had made himself very much at home in Tommy's best room. Poor old Tommy! How would be take it? he wondered. Or would he ever know? Yes, Dick thought he would know, and be very pleased. After all, this cheerful man had his moments of doubt concerning Mary. Without confiding as much, he had revealed something of his apprehension unconsciously. There were moments when Mary terrified him. Yes, Tommy would accept the situation in a good spirit.

He looked up at the clock; it was twenty minutes to twelve and the ghost was due! He really did not take that ghost very seriously. At the same time, many things that he had not taken seriously had proved tragically disturbing.

As he rose to go upstairs the 'phone bell rang.

"Take this call from Margate," said a voice, and Dick purred inwardly.

He waited an interminable time. Somebody else was talking on the line—a thin, high, woman's voice, speaking at a tremendous rate as though she realised the full value of a three-minute conversation and was anxious to crowd in every syllable. And then:

"Is that you, Dick?"

It was Mary's voice, hard with anxiety. Dick, is that you?"

"Yes, my dear."

"You haven't gone into Derrick's house, have you? Dick, I don't want you to go. I want you to promise me..."

The gabble of the other woman's voice grew faster and faster, drowning all other sounds but the soft undercurrent of the humming wires.

"Dick...can you hear me, darling? I don't want you to go into—"

Click! He was cut off. Again he heard the gabble, and that too died as suddenly. He jerked the hook savagely, called the local exchange.

"I was cut off," he said. "Get me through at once."

"What number, sir?"

He did not know the number.

"Hang up your receiver," came the monotonous instruction. "They will call you."

He waited five minutes, but no call came through. Why was she anxious that he should not go into the house next door? The old ghost of suspicion rose in his mind—and a resolution also. He waited another four minutes, but the bell did not ring, and, running up the stairs, he passed through his room on to the balcony and swung across. With his finger he lifted the latch and pushed open the window. There was no sound. The door was wide open. He turned the switch; the lights had been cut off at the main, probably by Derrick's orders.

He took a step forward, and for the second time in that room he was seized with an unaccountable terror, and in an instant was bathed in a cold perspiration. What was it? Danger of some kind...that animal instinct of his was calling to him urgently, loudly, yet he could not interpret the message.

He took one step on the landing. As he did so he felt the lightest of obstructions against his ankle. He was wearing silk socks, which was what may have saved his life—that and the cautiousness of his advance. It was a thread across the door. He drew back quickly and retreated to the balcony. And then he heard a man calling in an agitated voice; it was Minns.

"Mr. Staines...don't go into this house...the young lady says there's 'a spring gun set on the stairs!"

"Bring me my lamp," said Dick after a pause. "I left it by the side of my bed."

The butler came back.

"For God's sake be careful, sir."

In spite of his preoccupation, Dick was amazed to hear the distress in the man's voice. For the first time this butler of Tommy's had shown himself human.

Dick took the lamp from his hand and went back flashing a powerful beam ahead. There was the gun, so artfully concealed on the top stair that he might not have noticed it even if it had been light. He stepped delicately

across the silken thread, keeping out of the way of that deadly muzzle, and, stooping, removed the cap and gently let down the trigger. It was old-fashioned, painfully so. The broad muzzle would have belched death at him, tearing his flesh to ribbons at so short a range.

"Miss Dane is still on the 'phone, sir." It was the butler calling from the balcony.

Dick went back and, going downstairs, took the last two minutes of the call.

"Dick, is that you? Oh, Dick, did you go in? Oh, thank God you're safe! Did you see it?"

"The gun? Yes, I jolly nearly found it. If I had had the sense to wait until you called up again."

"Darling, I've nearly died at the end of this phone. Why did you go?"

"How did you know it was there?"

"I guessed—I swear I didn't know. I just guessed, from something I'd been told. Was it a gun?"

Dick described it. He heard the quick intake of her breath.

"I said 'spring gun,' but I wasn't sure. I knew it was something very, very deadly. Dick, you'll not go into that house again—will you promise me that?"

And then he said a bold thing.

"Will you promise me that you won't go in?" A long pause; an operator's voice intruded itself.

"Your three minutes is up."

"I promise," Mary spoke quickly, "not without you."

Then they were cut off.

CHAPTER XV

Tommy Weald sat down in his hotel sitting-room to take stock of himself. There were quite a number of people in the world who regarded this fresh-faced, young, irresponsible man of thirty as an easy mark. But Tommy Weald was no fool, and, if proof were necessary, his bailiff could have revealed quite a number of interesting facts. Contrary to the general belief the late Lord Weald was not a very rich man—he was certainly a careless one. He had left his estate in some confusion, and it had been Tommy who had shored up the tottering fortune of his house and most shrewdly rebuilt its foundation.

Perhaps his patent innocence helped him. He had been 'let in' by acquaintances on the Stock Exchange to several good things. They expected him to speculate gently, and leave the fat pickings of the market to themselves; they were pardonably indignant when they found their novitiate gambling with the sang-froid of a hardened jobber, and, what is more, skimming the cream of the market.

Tommy was no born manager of estates, but he had the knack of choosing the right men. He had found his reputation for innocence something of an asset, and had steered between many dangerous rocks, across many disastrous shoals, avoiding, in the process, a lady who was popularly believed to have a million of money but no personal attractions, at least two cousins, a charming widow or two, and divers detached and distantly related females.

He ran his fingers through his untidy hair and stared solemnly at his reflection in the mirror—Tommy always sat before a looking-glass when he was alone and if there was one available, for he was a gregarious creature and loved company.

And here was the fact that the Earl of Weald had to face: for the first time in his life he was desperately in love with a girl who, from self-consciousness or some other cause, treated him, in his own words, like a beastly poodle by day and by night was to him the most adorable and most loving of women.

Tommy had none of the uncomfortable thoughts which usually beset a man in his position. He had no relations to please or displease, for his aunts, if the truth be told, were so many pegs on which he could hang timely excuses. They were timorous old ladies very much in awe of their nephew. He had money. The woman he loved, so far as he could judge by voice and manner, was a lady (he never even speculated upon this) and, except for her unfortunate shyness or awkwardness or whatever was the disturbing quality which made her so impossible in daytime, adored him.

An aunt had rather diffidently raised the only objection in the course of a letter which was filled with reserved congratulation:

"One, of course, must know her people. Many modern young girls have the most presentable manners and are indistinguishable from ladies and members of a good family until one meets their relations..."

Tommy replied to that, hotly.

He was marrying Mary and not her relations, but he was quite prepared to discover that they earned a precarious livelihood in the ancient and honourable profession of rag-pickers, he said romantically.

Nevertheless, he had his uneasy moments. There were a few gritting the slides of life, even now.

He had not dressed for dinner, and sat watching the slow minute hand of the clock on the mantelpiece move imperceptibly towards the hour of his rendezvous—it was not remarkable that he should be waiting outside the charmed house a quarter of an hour too soon.

There was a diversion to occupy his mind. He had passed, at the corner of the road, a very inebriated gentleman who sang, as he staggered, a song about love. Tommy watched him reel through the drizzle, and long after he had passed out of sight his melancholy cadences were yet audible. He saw a movement near the house, and a dim figure melted out of the bushes near the doorway and came towards him.

"Oh, Tommy, I didn't know it was raining," she said, her voice full of self-reproach as she opened the gate and led him on to the dark lawn. "How mean of me I could have come out before."

"Nothing, dear old thing, nothing," said Tommy briskly. "If I waited till it stopped raining, I should never see you. How's that jolly old rascal Cornfort?"

"He has gone to bed," said the girl as she slipped her arm in his. "He's terribly tired."

There was a canvas swing in the garden, and above, a most substantial awning which would have kept out the ultra-violet rays of the sun if the sun had ever shown itself, and did, in point of fact, serve as a protection from the heavy showers of rain, which were not infrequent.

Tommy sat down by his companion's side and put his arm about her shoulder.

"Tommy, you're purring," she said in alarm.

He accepted the accusation as a compliment. Her head sank lower on his shoulder, he drooped his head and her velvet cheek was against his. They

must have looked very silly, but nobody saw them; and two people in such circumstances can never look silly except in one another's eyes.

Presently Tommy straightened up.

"Mary, my darling," he said, "I've got a fearfully important question to ask you."

He heard her sigh.

"Tommy, I hate answering fearfully important questions."

But he was determined.

"Aren't you awfully keen on Dick Staines?" She thought this matter over.

"I like him," she said thoughtfully; "from what I have seen of him he seems rather nice."

"Honestly, Mary "—he cleared his throat, for he was putting a question which, properly and satisfactorily answered, would sweep away a great deal of the unhappiness which clouded his waking moments—"honestly, aren't you in love with him a little bit? I mean, he's a shriekingly good-looking chap, and I know I'm a perfectly ghastly sight—every time I look at a baby it goes blue in the face, it's a fact!—what I mean to say is, don't you think you would be happier with—"

"What nonsense you talk, Tommy!" There was a little touch of petulance in her voice. "I don't know why, but I love you better than anybody in the world. Do you believe that?"

"Believe what?" asked Tommy, who was always cautious at the wrong moment. "That you don't know why?"

She sat bolt upright.

"Of course I don't know why. Does any girl, Tommy? If I am in love with you, which I suppose I am, is it remarkable that I shouldn't know why?"

Here was a problem in psychology which could not readily be solved. Tommy liked a reason for everything—even for falling in love. And it had seemed to him that, in the daytime, at any rate, Mary's attitude was distinctly frigid, especially in Dick Staines' presence.

"That's all right," he said with satisfaction. "The truth is, old darling, I've been fearfully worried. You and old Dicky get on so well together, you have your secret palavers, and there have been moments when I've been frantically jealous."

She squeezed his arm gently.

"Then you've been frantically foolish," she said.

The house where Mr. Cornfort had his lodgings was on the corner of two roads, and the large gardens were flanked by low-cut hedges. From where they sat the front door was obscured by clumps of rhododendrons, which also hid half the tiled path to the gate, which was not only in view in the daylight but even at night. Beyond the pathway the ground sloped down to a sunken garden, so that anybody passing to the gate from the house showed against the 'skyline.'

Tommy's hearing was particularly acute. He heard the front door open and close softly and the faint crunch of feet, and smiled.

"Who is that?" he asked.

She shook free of his arm and sat up.

"What was it?"

Before he could answer the figure of a man came into view. He limped quickly across their line of vision, they heard the squeak of the gate and he disappeared in the darkness of the roadway.

"Jumping snakes!" gasped Tommy. "That's old Cornfort!"

He had seen the thin face, the mop of grey hair, the long, hawk-like nose.

"I thought you said—"

"Nonsense, Tommy!" Her voice was sharp. "Mr. Cornfort's in bed. That was another lodger." He looked round at her slowly.

"Mary," he said, "you lie in your boots, old dear! If that's not the late, or nearly late, Mr. Cornfort, I'll eat my right ear!"

For a second she was too taken aback to answer.

"You're probably right," she said with devastating coolness. "But why shouldn't he take a little exercise now and again?"

Nevertheless, in spite of her calm manner, he detected a tremor of agitation in her voice when she asked this audacious question.

"Wait," she said, and ran across the lawn, disappearing into the house.

Presently she came out, followed by a man whom Tommy recognised as Henry. Henry had been something of a puzzle to Lord Weald. He had never

quite known whether the bath chairman was a permanency; certainly he was unaware until that moment that Henry had lodgings in the house of his employer.

The girl and the man talked together quickly in a low voice, and Tommy thought he heard the chairman say. "Damn!"—which in a bath chairman seemed near to profanity. Henry hurried out into the road and he also disappeared. She waited for a few seconds, looking over the gate, and then came slowly back and sat down by Tommy's side.

"It is really nothing," she said, "Mr. Cornfort has these little fits of energy, but I don't like him to go out alone. He may have a fit of vertigo and fall over a cliff or something."

"Which would give him a nasty taste in his mouth," said Tommy flippantly. "Old Cornfort I Fancy the old blighter being hauled around in a chair all day and trotting about all night on his flat feet!"

"We like to encourage him to walk," said the girl hastily.

He had an idea that she was listening, as all her senses showed, for some sound, he knew not what. When, a few streets away, a motor-cycle backfired incessantly she nearly jumped from her feet.

"What was that?" she gasped. Her voice was agitated.

"Sounds like a motor-bike to me," said Tommy, but when he put his arm around her she was trembling from head to foot.

"I'm a terrible coward"—her voice quavered—"I wish I had the courage—" She stopped short.

"You've got plenty of courage, old dear. It's this beastly job trotting round after the poor old ditherer that gets you rattled," said Tommy.

"And—"

This time there was no question as to the noise. It was the sound of a shot, clear and unmistakable. The girl sprang to her feet.

"Oh, Tommy!" she gasped. "I wish he hadn't!"

And then came the sound of running feet.

"Let me go," said an angry voice.

The gate was flung open and Mr. Cornfort sprawled in as though he had been violently pushed from behind.

Henry followed, closed the gate and leant over. Tommy thought he saw something glitter in the chairman's hand.

"Anything wrong?"

Henry looked round. It seemed that he was only then aware of the visitor's presence.

"No, my lord, nothing's wrong. I shouldn't sit out here if I were you, young lady."

"What is it?" she asked in a low voice.

"Somebody," was the ambiguous reply. Then, to Tommy: "Did you see anybody, my lord, when you came in?"

"There was a fellow at the corner of the street rather tight," said Tommy, remembering the appearance of the inebriated wayfarer.

A policeman came into sight under a street lamp. He crossed the road.

"Did you hear somebody shooting?"

"No, sir." Henry's voice was almost humble. "There's been a motor-cycle exploding round here."

As he spoke, as though by a prearranged signal and to confirm his explanation of the sound, came another back-fire and a quick succession of loud pops from the distance.

"That's what it was, eh?" The policeman teemed relieved. "After that bomb-throwing I've been set to keep an eye on the house. I happened to go round the corner to see my friend on the next beat...I didn't half get a fright!"

He chatted for a few seconds and then walked along the road. Henry came slowly back to where they sat.

"I think I should go now if I were you, sir," He was very respectful and apparently undisturbed by any adventures through which he might have passed.

Before Tommy could reply, a voice called urgently from the door.

"Hurry. Come and get your arm dressed quickly."

It was Cornfort speaking, and for one on the verge of eternity there was considerable vigour in his voice.

"Are you hurt?" The girl's voice was almost a wail.

"Nothing, nothing at all," said Henry, showing his first sign of impatience. "A scratch, my dear, a bush caught my—er—sleeve."

Then it was that Tommy saw he was holding his left arm a little above the wrist.

"Darling, you are hurt!" said the girl, almost tearfully and Tommy nearly dropped.

"Darling?" Was ever bath chairman addressed in such endearing terms?

"Miss Dane, you are entirely mistaken." The chairman's voice was very firm. "Now, Lord Weald, you would greatly oblige me if you went home."

In the confusion of farewell the girl disappeared. Tommy had hardly left the house when he heard her call him back.

"Good-night, Tommy."

He turned to kiss her cold lips.

"I'm awfully frightened to-night. Tommy, I'm so terribly wicked—I was never meant to be..."

Before he could ask for an explanation she had gone.

"Dashed extraordinary!" said Tommy aloud, and strode fiercely back to the hotel. He kept a lookout for the drunken man, but did not see him. Nearing the front, he found himself following a stocky individual who might have been the songbird he had seen earlier in the evening.

He walked more quickly to overtake the suspect, but, as if he knew he was being followed, the man walked faster. They came to the fringe of a carnival party either going to or returning from a dance, and his quarry disappeared before Lord Weald could make his acquaintance.

For a long time that night Tommy sat on the edge of his bed, with folded arms, frowning at the ineffective wallpaper. There were one or two things that the future Lady Weald must be taught—as, for example, the bad, form of addressing bath chairmen in terms of excessive endearment.

CHAPTER XVI

Mr. Walter Derrick confessed to having an equable nature. Few men whose houses were marked by gangs of armed burglars, who had suffered the outrages which had been his, had been subjected to the horror of having murder done in their dining-rooms, would have accepted so philosophically the amazing sequence of events which had punctuated recent weeks.

"My equanimity," he told the reporter of the Post Herald, "is nine-tenths laziness, a sheer disinclination to trouble my head about things I cannot rectify or put right—laziness is my pet vice. My house is an extraordinary house. Something alarming is always happening there. A week ago a man who claimed acquaintance with me during my stay in Africa was found dead there. A few nights later a portion of the wall of my drawing-room was excavated, and certain rumours I have heard, coupled with mysterious inquiries which have come to me from the police, and especially from my friend Inspector Staines, lead me to suppose that yet another outrage was attempted or committed only a couple of nights ago."

"Is the house haunted?"

"One of my servants swears that he has seen the ghost of my father I But that, of course, is a trick, and a particularly cruel trick."

"What do you imagine the burglars are after?" asked the newspaper man.

Mr. Derrick smiled broadly.

"What are we all after?" he demanded. "Money! The theory has been advanced by one of the most brilliant police officers at Scotland Yard that my father hoarded a large sum of money in some secret place. That may, of course, be true. If it is, then it is better that I should find it than my persecutors—I, at least, would pay to the Inland Revenue the additional death duties I I do not, however, imagine for one moment that my father did anything so stupid or so secretive. His death, though he was an invalid, was very sudden, and he had no opportunity of discussing his affairs at the last, but I feel sure that if there had been any money hidden he would have told me during the last years of his life."

Dick Staines read this interview whilst he was still in bed. He had been in a state of wonder that the murder in Lowndes Square and all the peculiar events which had preceded and followed had attracted so little attention. Reporters had called and had received the usual vague statements which police, officers issue on such occasions. But the episode of the spring gun (which had not been reported) had shaken him surprisingly. Neither Larkin nor Walter Derrick could offer him any explanation. Derrick was certain that when he had walked down the stairs five minutes before he left the house, no such trap had been laid. Larkin was equally emphatic. Unless there was another way into the house, as yet undiscovered, how could the gun have

been placed in position and the 'leads' so carefully adjusted? There had been workmen in the house—Dick saw the foreman, who assured him that none of the men had ascended beyond the drawing-room floor. Examined at Scotland Yard, the gun proved to be of a type common enough some years ago in country districts—a muzzle-loaded, big-jawed musket, the barrel sawn off to within a few inches of the lock.

On his return to Town, after giving an interview with the reporters in Lowndes Square, Walter accompanied Dick to Scotland Yard and examined the machine. No sooner did his eyes fall upon it than he uttered an exclamation.

"That is mine," he said.

When he had bought Keyley he had found in the stable, amongst a lot of other rubbish, this old spring gun. He pointed out the half-obliterated crown stamped in the brass butt plate and two notches cut in the grip.

"I haven't seen it for months—years. Oh yes, I have," he corrected himself quickly. "I showed it to Tommy Weald last Sunday week, and he suggested I should send it to a museum."

Which was rather like Tommy—he was very public-spirited with other people's properties.

"There was also an old powder-horn which probably belongs to the set," Walter went on, "but I don't remember seeing any bullets."

He had taken a surprising resolution—at least it was surprising to Dick.

"I am trying to decide to spend a week in my haunted house, and do a little gold-digging myself," he smiled. "I can't persuade my servants at Keyley to come back to Lowndes Square, for the reputation of the house has been quite sufficient to scare them stiff, so I am relying on Larkin to assist."

"If you would care for me to share your watch—" said Dick.

Walter nodded.

"That was my idea. I can't make you as comfortable as Weald does, but I may be able to give you a more exciting time!"

They walked up to the house together, and, just before Derrick went in:

"You were telling me the other day about old Endred, the local inspector. He seems to know a great deal more about my father than I do. I suppose there is no objection to my having a chat with him?"

"Don't you know him?" asked Dick.

Walter shook his head.

"No, I have no recollection of him. So far as I can ascertain, although he knew my father very well, he never met me—I was at school in Northumberland until I was seventeen."

With the aid of Larkin and a couple of charwomen that the caretaker was able to engage, Mr. Derrick had restored something like order and tidiness to his outraged drawing-room. A square of canvas still covered the hole in the wall when old Inspector Endred called that afternoon. He was in mufti, for he was off duty, as he explained.

"I never make any private calls in uniform, Mr. Derrick," said the grim old man. "I am one of those old-fashioned police officers who do not mix business with pleasure."

He looked round the drawing-room curiously.

"It must be fifteen years since I was here as a visitor," he said. "Fifteen years! And it seems like yesterday!"

He pointed to an old grandfather's chair near the fireplace.

"That was your respected father's favourite chair," he said. "I'd like a fiver for every time I've seen him there!"

"Did we ever meet?" asked Walter, interested. The inspector shook his head.

"No, sir, you were at school at the time, if I remember rightly: The only occasion you were down in London I was away on leave, but I knew your father very well, and a very nice man he was. He wasn't popular with some people, but I speak of a man as I find him."

The inspector was a loquacious old gentleman with a fund of reminiscences—the sort of man, Walter supposed, who lived on as well as in the past.

"Yes, I knew him quite well; but I had no idea that he had married again—I suppose you didn't know, either?"

"No," replied Mr. Derrick; "that was news to me."

"It was news to a lot of us," said the inspector, shaking his head, "but I always say that nobody really knows anybody."

"How did you come to be acquainted with my father? He is hardy likely to have been very much interested in police affairs."

The inspector smiled broadly.

"We came into touch over the finger-print business, and after I was shifted to N Division I still used to correspond with him. As a matter of fact, Mr. Derrick, I am of the same opinion as your father. I believe there are duplicates to fingerprints. It stands to reason that the present 'system can't be infallible, when less than a fortieth part of the population can be examined and checked. Do you see what I mean?"

"No, I don't," said Walter frankly.

The inspector was now riding his hobby-horse, and apparently he held views even more drastic than those held by the late Mr. Derrick. It was more than possible that old Derrick had his first lessons in scepticism, and had been started on his hobby, as a result of his acquaintance with this grey-haired police officer.

"Suppose there was a dance on at the Albert Hall," said Endred with relish, "and there were two thousand people present, and a complaint came that a lady had lost a diamond necklace? Do you follow me, Mr. Derrick?"

Walter nodded.

"Suppose I had permission to search the crowd, the whole two thousand, and instead of searching two thousand I searched fifty and gave the others a clean bill. Would that be fair? It is the same with the finger-print system. The only prints we have are criminals'—the law-abiding population never comes under review. And it is any odds that if you were to take the finger-prints of the forty million people in this country, you'd find duplicates, and once you'd found a solitary duplicate, the whole finger-print system would collapse!"

"That was my father's view, too," said Derrick thoughtfully.

"And it was a good view," insisted Inspector Endred emphatically. "That is what your revered father was trying to prove. He had finger-prints by the thousand—by the hundreds of thousands—on criminals, clergymen, bankers—everybody he could get to give him a print."

He was amused at a recollection.

"It's curious how people jibbed at it, though! Even the most innocent people objected to giving themselves away. I must confess," he chuckled, "that when he asked me for my own finger-impressions for the family book, I didn't at all like the idea!"

"The family book?" said Derrick quickly. "What do you mean?"

Endred's eyes were dancing with laughter.

"You've forgotten it, too I forget nothing. I've got a memory like a card index, Mr. Derrick. I remember that book—a little red book with padded leather covers. His finger-print was in it, and yours, and his housekeeper—you wouldn't remember her, she died when you were a child—and Miss Belfer, and his sister—she's dead, too—and his partner, old Carlew. I suppose it was a great honour for him to ask me at all, but I didn't like putting my finger on the pad, and that's the truth."

There was a silence, and then Derrick said slowly:

"Of course! I remember now. His little private book. The family book! I must have been about fifteen when he called me up to his study and asked me to put my finger=print on the page—"

"Four fingers and thumb," nodded Endred. "Just the same as they do it at the police station. The fact is, your father was a fanatic on the subject."

Derrick sighed heavily.

"Yes. A strange man. It is curious how I'd forgotten that little incident! I don't remember having seen the book since."

"It is in the house somewhere, I'll bet," said Endred. "I wonder you don't find it—it would be rather a curiosity, Mr. Derrick."

Derrick was looking out of the window, his attention concentrated upon a horse-drawn milk cart. The horse, unattended, was straying across the road.

"That's very dangerous," he said, pointing, "the way these milkmen allow their horses to wander...A little red book with padded covers—I recall it now. Rather like an autograph album. Do you remember if my Mother's was there?"

The inspector shook his head.

"No, sir, that is hardly likely. He hadn't got the finger-print craze when your respected mother died, but I believe there was an Old aunt, because he pointed the prints out to me and said that the index finger was almost exactly like another print that he had taken of a chimpanzee at the Zoo!"

Mr. Derrick turned the conversation to the neighbourhood, and the old religious Order that had occupied his house, and Mr. Endred plunged immediately into a learned and authoritative dissertation enriched by his recollections of divers eccentric religious bodies he had met with in his time.

As the inspector was leaving the house Dick Staines came from the house next door.

"Hallo, Inspector!" Dick's curiosity was piqued. "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," said the old man genially. "I've just been having a little chat with Mr. Derrick about old times."

"Oh, Lord, yes!" said Dick, remembering. "I gave him your address."

He was going in the same direction as the older man, and they walked away together.

"Calling at the Yard, are you, Mr. Staines? That's curious, so am I. I'm finishing the last thirty-five days of my service, and there's some talk of getting me a testimonial. In principle I am against allowing constables to subscribe to presentations. It is against the best interests of the Service, but—"

"But," smiled Dick, "when a veteran of your record retires, I'm all for producing a silver teapot and a nicely inscribed salver. You've got to surrender your principles, Inspector."

He called a taxi and, Endred protesting, he pushed him in.

"Exercise is a splendid thing, but it can be overdone," he said. "Well, how is Mr. Walter Derrick looking?"

"A fine man that," said Endred solemnly; "a regular chip off the old block. I never met a more good-natured gentleman in my life. I happened to mention about the presentation—"

"And he offered to subscribe a hundred guineas."

Endred gasped.

"Did he tell you?"

"No, I guessed," said Dick, a twinkle in his eye.

"Of course I couldn't allow that—" began Endred.

"I should surrender my principles once more. Anyway, you deserve it. There are no rich prizes for a foot-slogging uniformed inspector, and if the taxpayer who, has helped to starve you all his life wants to make up for his neglect, and give you a little bonus, well, let him!"

Old Endred looked relieved.

"As a matter of fact," he confided, "I've got his cheque in my pocket. That's what I'm seeing the Assistant Commissioner about. I don't want to break any regulations so near to the end of my service, but if he says it's all right!"

Dick knew the old inspector rather well, and guessed that many influential and moneyed people in the neighbourhood had heard the story of his retirement and his objection to presentations on principle, but his willingness, if his superiors agreed, to accept some small honorarium. Probably Derrick was to be a test case, and, if the 'principle' was admitted, Inspector Endred would carry quite a number of handsome little cheques to solace his days of retirement.

"...mostly we discussed finger-prints, which was his old father's hobby, as I've told you before. It's funny what tricks memory plays on a fellow! He didn't even remember the family book."

"What was the family book?" asked Dick, who was hardly listening to the voluble officer's recital.

Inspector Endred told him of the little red book with the padded covers; he described its binding, its shape, and the approximate number of its pages.

"Oh!" Dick sat bolt upright, looking at the old man. "Do you remember it very well?" he asked quickly. "Who else was in the book?"

Endred recited the names he could remember: it was doubtful if he missed one.

"And I think there were no more, unless there were some after mine," he said proudly. "I forget nothing. I've a memory like a card index, as I told Mr. Derrick. I can see the old man sitting down there and writing underneath the print my name, the year I was born, where I lived, and everything! And I remember his limping up and down the room, laying down the law about the system. Endred,' he says to me..."

At that moment Dick signalled the cab to stop. They had turned on to the Thames Embankment and were within a short distance of Scotland Yard.

"I'll go in if you don't mind. The Assistant Commissioner gave me an appointment." Endred looked at his large watch. "Dear me, I've only a minute."

Dick let him go and paid the cabman at his leisure. He walked slowly down towards the entrance of the Yard, and then noticed a man standing on the kerb. His back was towards the detective, but the figure was familiar. Where had he seen him? He walked slowly past and looked at him sideways, and then stopped.

"Why, Henry!" he said in amazement.

It was the unshaven bath chairman who was drawing meditatively at a clay pipe, and his eyes were fixed upon the pageant of the river.

CHAPTER XVII

He was not particularly startled; he was not even surprised. He gave Dick the impression that nothing in the world had ever succeeded in agitating him.

"Good-morning, sir."

His voice was soft and deferential. He had a queer little droop of his head, which was almost like a bow.

"This is a beautiful place. To me the river is even more interesting that the sea. Look at that tug and those barges, like a swan with a number of ugly ducklings! One wonders what sort of a life these bargemen live—"

"When you have finished being philosophical, Henry, will you tell me why you are in London, and what poor Mr. Cornfort is doing in the meantime, to say nothing of Miss Dane?"

The bath chairman looked at him reproachfully.

"Mr. Cornfort is in bed," he said in a hushed voice. "I fear he may never use the bath chair again."

"As bad as that, eh?" said Dick cheerfully.

"Well, you can't live forever."

Henry was pained.

"And Miss Dane?"

Henry shook his head.

"She is in Town, sir, making inquiries about something she lost in London. An inconsiderable trinket, but very precious to her. Young girls have their peculiar fancies, Mr. Staines, and it is difficult to plumb the minds of youth."

Dick was amused, a little irritated, too. He had a feeling that this man was secretly laughing at him.

"And who is looking after Mr. Cornfort?" he demanded.

Henry's face fell.

"Three trained nurses," he said in a hushed voice.

Dick looked round at the arched entrance to Scotland Yard.

"Is she in there?"

"I believe so, sir."

"But that isn't the place she would go to make inquiries about lost property. It is farther along." He pointed.

Henry followed the direction of his finger and seemed interested in the low-roofed building the gesture indicated.

"Is that so, sir?" he asked interestedly. "I'm afraid Miss Dane has only a rudimentary acquaintance with police procedure. I have an idea that her loss was of such importance that she was seeking an interview with the Chief Constable."

Dick gaped at him.

"With the Chief Constable? Bourke?" 'Henry nodded.

"She is a peculiar young lady who invariably makes it her business to go to the fountain head."

Dick examined the man carefully, but the blue eyes met his scrutiny with the least effort at evasion.

"You speak rather nicely for a bath chairman," said Dick. "What were you before you engaged in this profession?"

Henry for a moment looked embarrassed and coughed behind his gloved hand. Dick noticed that, as he raised this hand, his action was stiff and that he winced. He wondered what had happened to his arm.

"In my youth I was a professional prize-fighter," he said, and Dick was staggered. "It is rather difficult to believe that a man of my meagre physique could have ever had any success in such an arduous profession," said Henry, speaking with the greatest precision; "and in order to tone down the shock I would explain to you that I was also a teacher of mathematics at a very honourable university. I found pugilism was more lucrative, though it was somewhat disastrous to my scholastic career."

"A light-weight?" asked Dick, unconvinced.

"A feather-weight," said Henry gravely. "I am the only man who ever knocked out Digger Bill Ferrers. He fell asleep in the thirteenth round, and was never the same man afterwards."

Dick looked at the man suspiciously. Was his leg being pulled by this mild dragger of bath chairs? Before he could ask a question he saw Mary Dane

come into view. She was walking quickly, but checked her pace at the sight of the detective. Henry regarded their meeting with great imperturbability. Dick had the suspicion that he was mildly amused.

"I suppose Henry's told you the news about Mr. Cornfort?"

"Is he dead?" asked Dick brutally, and she looked at him reproachfully.

"How brutal you are! Of course he isn't. The poor old man is in bed."

"And you've come up to Scotland Yard to make an inquiry about a—?"

"Whatever Henry told you it was," she interrupted calmly enough. "Please don't cross-examine me on the King's highway! I think your Mr. Bourke is rather a darling."

"I will convey your views, to him," said Dick. She was looking at him thoughtfully, biting that red nether lip of hers, and then:

"Thank you, Henry, you needn't wait. Mr. Staines is taking me to tea at Sollingers'. Let's walk through the park—I like parks."

"So I understand," said Dick.

He looked back over his shoulder. Henry was still standing where they had left him, his contemplative eye on the river.

"Where's his bath chair?" he demanded. "I should have thought that he would at least have brought that interesting mustard-coloured vehicle to Town—he looks almost naked without it! I should have loved to see you both being held up by a traffic cop!"

"You're being rather unpleasant this afternoon," she said. "I never use bath chairs. I am taking you away from your work, which is selfish of me—but I'm not feeling a bit penitent."

"You are my work," he said, "and my worry."

He did not provoke her to a reply.

They crossed to Whitehall, into the park gates, and their walk slowed to a saunter, which is a pace appropriate to parks.

"How is the ghost?" she asked as they lounged along the edge of the lake.

"Not so well," said Dick. "He has given up his bath chair and has taken to bed."

"You mean Mr. Cornfort? How absurd you are!"

"I meant the gun-laying ghost."

"Did they nearly get you? My dear, I was worried ill that night! I hope you will never feel as I did. It was horrid!"

"What made you think there was a spring gun in the house?"

"Instinct," she said, and he knew that she was speaking the truth. "I suppose when a woman' feels as I do towards a man, her intelligence is sharpened to a point where instinct gets a chance of operating. I thought I would die as I sat by that telephone waiting to hear your voice; Dick, you're not taking any more chances?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

She stopped dead and looked at him, her lips parted, her eyes wide with fear.

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Derrick is coming back to live here, and he has asked me to sleep on the premises."

She said nothing, but slowly resumed her walk. "When do you go in?"

"To-morrow, I think—Tommy hasn't said when he's returning "—and then, as he remembered—"he is probably in Town."

She shook her head.

"No. I told him I was coming back to-night."

"And aren't you?"

She hesitated.

"Henry rather wanted to see a theatre, and I promised him he should." And then she went off at a tangent. "I like your Inspector Bourke—Superintendent, is he?—well, whatever he is I He's a nice, fat darling of a man. He was very severe at first, but we became quite good friends."

"What did you see him about?"

"I lost a bangle," she said. "Why do you make me lie? I saw him about the bomb-throwing. As a matter of fact, he wrote to me and asked me to come to see him. I suppose you know the municipality of Eastbourne has offered a reward of £200?"

Dick nodded. He had seen the announcement in the paper. Moreover, that evening of his in Eastbourne had kept him fully occupied since he came back to Town. Dick tried to question her about several matters in which he was interested, but very skilfully she headed him off, and they reached the great departmental store without his being any the wiser. She had some purchases to make, she told him, and went by the elevator to the fourth floor, and he waited at the entrance of the inquiry bureau.

He knew this department very well. Here letters could be written and received. There were half-a-dozen writing tables for the use of customers, and the room was fairly well filled, mainly by women. He had often speculated upon the value of such a department as this to the criminally minded man or woman. He knew at least one unpleasant case that had its focal point in a pigeon-hole behind the polished mahogany counter. Presently he saw Mary Dane come in and go to one of the girl attendants and ask a question. The attendant shook her head, made a rapid search of a pigeon-hole, and came back with another head-shake. Then Mary saw him, smiled, and waved her hand in greeting.

"How dreadful!" she said, with mock humility when she came up to him. "You have caught me in the act...clandestine correspondence—why do you peep? Is it because you're a detective?"

"I wasn't peeping!" said Dick indignantly. "I happened to be near the entrance, and I saw you."

"I didn't leave you at the entrance," she said severely. "Now, stay here, and don't move. I am going to buy Certain Garments!"

He waited for ten minutes, for a quarter of an hour, but she did not return. Then he made an inquiry of the shop-walker.

"Yes, sir, I remember the lady. She went down to the first floor to the ladies' undergarments."

Dick waited another quarter of an hour. There was no sign of the girl. He was turning to go when he saw coming towards him the counter-attendant of the inquiry bureau.

"Excuse me, you were with Miss Dane, weren't you?"

"Yes," he said, wondering.

"The cable just came through over the phone." She had a slip of paper in her hand. "Will you be seeing Miss Dane?"

"I hope so."

She went back, took an envelope from the counter and slipped the paper in, and handed it to him.

Dick put the message in his pocket and went down in search of the girl. She was not on the floor where he expected to find her, and he ascended again to the place she had left him. He was a patient man, but nobody short of an angel could wait an hour without feeling a sense of irritation. At last, in no pleasant temper, he decided to go. He was passing out of one of the big spring doors on to the street when a commissionaire came running up to him.

"You're Mr. Staines, aren't you? A young lady left a message for you. She said she'd been called away and Mr. Somebody, whose name I've forgotten, is ill."

"Cornfort?" said Dick.

"That's the name, sir," said the commissionaire. "She asked me if I knew you, and of course I do, because you've been here before. On business," he grinned. Dick was not in a smiling temper.

He was annoyed with Mary, more than irritated with himself. She had acquired the habit of making him feel extremely foolish, and he was in a savage mood when he swung into Scotland Yard and collided with the portly figure of Mr. Bourke, who had stopped hazardously at the corner of the corridor to light a cigar.

"You're a little over two hours late," snapped Bourke, as he retrieved his injured Corona. "Don't apologise, for I'd forgotten the appointment. We've arrested a man at Bexhill for throwing the bomb, but he looks like proving an alibi. It was undoubtedly his car, but there seems no doubt that he sold it at junk price the week before last."

"What did Mary Dane want?" blurted Dick.

"Mary Dane?" Bourke scratched his second chin. "Let me see now, what did she want? Oh yes, it was about the bomb-throwing. Rather a nice girl, that, eh?" He looked at Dick shrewdly.

"Clever, too. What a criminal she'd make!"

"Do you think?" began Inspector Staines.

"Never," replied the other promptly. "Too brain-wearing. I'll see you in the morning."

He was gone before Dick could fire in another question. Undoubtedly the Superintendent was peeved, as he had every right to be, for Inspector

Staines was considerably over two hours late for his appointment, and, moreover, he had spoilt a very good cigar.

CHAPTER XVIII

Dick had the room next to the Superintendent's, a small, narrow apartment which was used, at a pinch, to detain suspected criminals brought to the Yard for examination. There were steel bars on the window, and the furniture was of a solid and immovable kind, a necessary precaution since that memorable occasion when 'Lupe' Leggatt almost brained his interrogator with a handy chair. Since that occurrence, the furniture had been of the simplest and the unhandiest kind.

He sat down now in his big writing chair, to read the letters which had accumulated in the past two, days. There was nothing of importance; and he was feeling in his pocket for two letters that had arrived for him at the house and which he had not opened, when he felt the telephone message and brought it out. In a hurry, the clerk had not addressed it, and when Dick turned the envelope over he saw that the flap was open. He turned it over and over. It would be inexpressibly mean to read her private correspondence—it would be inexpressibly foolish not to do so. Besides (here was a salving thought) she might call him on the 'phone, in which case he would be able to communicate the message. He laid the envelope on the table and glowered at it. Suppose it was something that incriminated her...or a private message from some man...He felt a little pang at the thought.

"Rubbish!" he said, and with great resolution drew the slip from the envelope. It was a cable from Capetown, and was addressed—Mary de Villiers!

Mary de Villiers! Then Lordy Brown had made no mistake. The girl he attacked that night was the woman he thought she was—Dick remembered the reference in the letter which he had found in Lordy Brown's pocket about this mysterious Miss de Villiers who—

All the time he was thinking, he was reading mechanically without grasping the sense of the message. Presently he concentrated his mind upon the words before him. It was evidently, from the indicator, a reply-paid message, and ran:

"Thank you, Miss de Villiers, for money which very handy as we're starving. Sorry about Lordy's death, but that was expected. Thank you for the money, Miss de Villiers. MRS. LORDY BROWN."

He read the message over and over again, trying to make head or tail of it, though it was obvious enough. Mary de Villiers had sent money to this woman, and at the same time had sent news of Lordy's death. Then she had known Lordy...But why should she send money? And what money? The solution to that mystery came in a flash. When Brown had left his hotel, he had a pocket full of bank-notes; when his dead body was found, his pockets

were empty. Somebody had taken that money...Mary! And she had cabled the money to Mrs. Brown in Capetown. Why?

Three facts were evident. Mary Dane had been in the house on the night of the murder, had either killed Lordy or found him dying—more likely the latter. Lordy Brown had recognised her again, and had asked her to send the money to his wife. Otherwise she could not have know of the woman's necessity. It was Mary who had bound up his wounds and attended to him; probably had not left the dying man until he had passed.

Then who had killed Brown? Were there two gangs engaged in the bizarre search, and did they sometimes clash?

The telephone bell at his elbow shrilled, and he took down the receiver.

"Is that you, Dick?" It was Mary's voice, tense and fearful.

"Yes," he replied. "Mary, I have opened that cable..."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said impatiently, "from Mrs. Brown? They told me when I went back. Dick, will you do something for me?"

"If I can," he began.

"Don't 'if,' darling." She was terribly in earnest. "You must."

"What do you want me to do?"

He thought he heard a whispered colloquy at the other end of the wire, and then:

"I want you to let me into your house about one o'clock to-morrow morning. You must tell Derrick that you are sleeping at Tommy's. Stand at the door and the moment you hear me scratch at the panel, open and let me in. And keep all the lights out. And I want you to guard me as if—as if you loved me. Don't let me out of your sight: Will you do this? Minns knows that I am coming. Please don't ask any questions, my dear. Will you do it?"

"Yes," he answered, and instantly there was a click and he was rung off. He hung up his receiver with a bewildered frown.

"Minns knows that I am coming!"

Was Minns in the swindle, if swindle it was? Apparently so. Here was a minor confusion that had to be cleared up.

After he had been home for a quarter of an hour, Minns the imperturbable came to his room to announce that dinner had been served.

"I heard from his lordship today, sir. He is returning to Town at the end of the week. You know his lordship is to be married—"

"I am well aware of that, but there are a lot of things I'm not so well informed about," said Dick, watching him. "I think you know Miss Mary Dane?"

If he expected hesitation or embarrassment, he was to be disappointed.

"Yes, sir," said the butler immediately. Dick stared at him in amazement.

"You know Miss Mary Dane—the nurse?"

"Yes, sir. The lady who came here one night—if I remember, sir, you saw her to the station."

Dick had forgotten that episode, which was an excuse, at any rate, for the butler's calmness.

"Have you had any communication from her?"

"'Yes, sir, several." The man did not flinch under his questioning gaze.

"Are you in a sense a confederate of hers?"

Minns smiled his quiet and deferential smile.

"Well, in a sense, I am, sir. I have given her help on several occasions when she has been examining the house next door."

"Good God!" gasped Dick, almost unable to believe his ears. "Do you mean to say that you knew...Miss Dane has been in the habit of burgling the next house?"

"Not burgling, sir," said Minns carefully. "And I am not absolutely sure that it was Miss Dane. I understand the young lady has a double. At any rate the person who called herself Miss Dane has, I know, made several visits to Mr. Derrick's house."

Dick was not dreaming.

Here was an honest, respectable man who had been in the service of Tommy Weald and his father for twenty or thirty years, calmly and brazenly admitting that he had assisted in a series of outrages upon an unoffending neighbour.

"I think we'll go into this question a little later, Minns," he said quietly. "I am not so sure that you haven't got yourself into very serious trouble."

Again the butler smiled.

"At any rate, sir, I once got you out of very serious trouble," he said surprisingly.

When Dick demanded an explanation the butler asked to be excused.

"This is Alice in Wonderland," said Dick after the man had gone. This inoffensive butler—the whole thing was incredible—except when he tested Minns' conduct by his new theory.

Derrick called while Dick was having dinner. He had decided to sleep in the house that night, he said, and would Dick care to share his vigil? It was a proposal that Dick Staines would not have hesitated to agree to but for the promised adventure of the night.

"It doesn't really matter," said Derrick when he saw the other hesitate; "I shall be able to fix you up to-morrow much more comfortably than I could to-night. If you don't mind, I think I'll ask you to put that portable bell of yours into operation—if I'm scared I will cross that rather insecure wooden bridge you have fixed on to your balcony."

This also, in other circumstances, might have been an acceptable proposal. Mr. Derrick was perplexed at his reluctance, and he laughed.

"You don't want your beauty sleep disturbed, eh? Well, if you expect sleepless nights when you're in my house, I don't blame you, but my own view is that in the course of the next few days we're going to lay the ghost or ghosts so effectively that they will never disturb the peace of Lowndes Square again."

He declined Dick's invitation to share a chop. He was dining at his club and would call on his way back.

"I'm in twenty-three minds about that damned house," he said as he rose to go; "I tossed a coin to-day to decide whether I'd have the thing pulled down from roof to basement and a new building put up. If there is any secret place that would be a pretty effective way of finding it?"

He paused at the door.

"I see you were in that bomb affair at Eastbourne. What the dickens do you make of that? Who was he, an anarchist?"

"I do not know the politics of Mr. Herman Lavinski," said Dick quietly; "but I should imagine that there was violence in them."

Walter Derrick's eyebrows met.

"Lavinski? Was that his name? Sounds like a foreigner to me!" He laughed with great heartiness at this banality, and Dick wished for a long time after he'd gone that he hadn't.

He settled himself down to pass away the hours that would intervene before the arrival of Mary on her mysterious errand. He had ceased to be puzzled, ceased to wonder. He had speculated upon Mary's peculiar behaviour until his head reeled. Minns had brought the coffee in and had set the tray solemnly on the table when, for no reason at all beyond the sudden impulse which prompted the question, Dick asked:

"Have you ever been in South Africa, Minns?"

"Yes, sir."

Dick turned in his chair to face the man. "When was this?"

"After his lordship, the late earl, died, sir, when Master Thomas, as we called him, was still a child. I took service in South Africa."

Now there is a peculiar expression, familiar to every experienced police officer, a kind of embarrassment born of uncomfortable self-consciousness, and this dawned and faded in Minns' face. It was only there for the fraction of a second, but long enough to be detected.

"Minns," said Dick softly, "were you ever in trouble in South Africa?"

The man licked his lips.

"Yes, sir," he said huskily. "There was an accusation made against me."

"For stealing?"

Minns had gone very pale.

"Yes, sir. I was perfectly innocent."

"Were you convicted?"

The man shook his head.

"No, sir." Then the ghost of a smile hovered on his lips. "I was one of those innocent men who really was innocent! The court dismissed the case, though I will tell you this much—it was touch and go, until fortunately the real criminal was found, though he was never caught."

"Lordy Brown?" said Dick quickly, and Minns shook his head.

"His name doesn't matter, sir. He obtained a position as footman in the house of a well-known African millionaire and stole a quantity of plate. I could give you all the particulars to-morrow, sir, if you wish. My sister-in-law has the newspaper cuttings. When you've read those I don't think you'll doubt for a moment that I was an innocent party."

"H'm!" said Dick thoughtfully, "You never told me you knew him?"

Minns did not answer.

"Did you meet Miss Dane in South Africa?"

"No, sir. I met her father, but not Miss Dane."

"Miss de Villiers she was called?" suggested

Dick.

"I believe that is so, sir," said Minns. "Is there anything else you require?"

This might possibly be an explanation for the butler's extraordinary attitude. He knew this mysterious family. And then a thought occurred to him. Tommy had a library which was mainly devoted to certain works of reference. He went upstairs and searched the shelves for a long time before he found what he sought. It was a five-year-old volume devoted to boxing records, and he brought it down and searched the pages diligently.

There were short biographies of boxers, dead and alive, and after a while he came upon the name for which he had been looking without any great hope. Henry had spoken the truth. Here it was:

"Ferrers, W. G. (Digger Bill Ferrers), featherweight champion of Australia, featherweight champion of South Africa..."

Here followed a record of his fights. Dick's finger went down the page until it stopped.

"Capetown, July 10th, 1898, knocked out in eleventh round by H. de Villiers, ex-amateur featherweight world champion."

Henry had spoken the truth! De Villiers! Henry had not only spoken the truth, but he had discovered his real name...Mary had told him she had a father. It was Henry!

CHAPTER XIX

He fell back in his chair, staring at the printed page. Interruption came from a totally unexpected source. The door was pushed open violently and Tommy Weald flung in. His hair was dishevelled, his face splashed with mud, and the state of his leather coat and his sodden gloves suggested he had come by road and in some hurry.

"Seen Mary?" His voice was shrill with anxiety; and then, without waiting for a reply, he went on: "Popped off this afternoon, old boy! The whole blooming shoot. Mary, Cornfort—supposed to be dying, old boy—Henry, everybody—no, not everybody, the bath chair's left behind! They didn't even take that I Most extraordinary thing, old boy—not left a word, just popped off! Must have gone this morning, and me walking up and down the front of the house composing poetry, old boy! I tell you, it's too ghastly for words!"

He paused only to take breath, evidently not to listen, because, before Dick could open his mouth to speak, the flow of words continued.

"I'm rattled, old boy!" he said. "Suppose this beastly fellow who threw the whiz-bang has got some fearful grudge against Mary? I stopped in Streatham to get a newspaper, and got pinched by a copper for having no lights, but I simply had to read it. I saw a bill with 'Local Woman Found Murdered in West End'...might have been her, old boy! Can't you do anything, Dicky?" he demanded wildly. "You're the police! You're a pal. I'd search the town for her. They left in a motor-car at twelve o'clock—Henry, Mary, the night nurse, and the poor old invalid—he's practically finished, so it doesn't matter about him—and not so much as a sign of her, old boy. All went off together, left the bath chair—"

"If you'll only shut up," said Dick, "I'll tell you—I've seen Mary."

Tommy's eyes bulged.

"Here! In London?" he screeched.

"Here in London, and Henry, if that's any comfort to you."

"Phew!" Tommy mopped his steaming brow and sat down heavily. "Ring for Minns, old boy, we'll have a bottle on that. She's a naughty, naughty girl. I'm terribly vexed with her. Where are they staying, Dicky?"

Dick could offer no information on this subject, but he told Tommy that the girl was coming there that night. It might be very embarrassing if he did not, especially as Tommy evidently intended sleeping there. But Tommy was to relieve him in his dilemma.

"But where's she staying? Are you likely to hear from her? Will you ring me up if you do?"

"Where are you going?" asked Dick.

"I was going nowhere—I was simply going to stay here, old boy, and cry myself to sleep. But if she's alive...that's all I want to know. I'm toddling down to a dear little place in Surrey...you know!" He tapped his nose with a forefinger slyly.

"I don't know," said Dick wearily; "unless that gesture means that you're going to have your nose reshaped."

"Honeymoon, old boy—everything arranged next week."

"Next week!" Dick almost shouted the words. "You're mad! I mean, you said it was September."

"Next week," said Tommy with great calmness. "We fixed it up the night before last."

Dick quaked inwardly. He was like a man who was being carried across Niagara on a tight-rope by an expert walker. The position might be entirely without peril to himself. On the other hand—"

"Give me your telephone number," he said, with extraordinary sang-froid in the circumstances.

Tommy took off his wet glove, poised a pencil over the table-cloth, but wrote nothing.

"You know what your news has meant to me, old boy? I've been like a raving lunatic. Suicide, going abroad, shooting lions—I thought of everything."

He disappeared as rapidly as he had arrived, and Dick had a vision of a motor-car moving at an unlawful rate down the crowded streets. Not until too late did he realise that he had left no address.

As soon as it got dark Dick went up to his room, and one foot was thrown across the balcony's edge when he remembered his promise to the girl. Yet never since he had come into the case did he have such an overpowering desire to inspect Mr. Derrick's empty house. He contented himself by examining with some curiosity the unlovely façade. Unlovely it was with its glazed brick, an eyesore to the neighbourhood. The stone balconies which jutted out looked ugly and incongruous. The windows, as he saw for the first time, were out of proportion, long and narrow and badly placed. It was curious that he had never noticed that fact before.

He looked down. Below, on the drawing-room floor, the balcony was wider than that which was on his own level. Even the dusk and the kindly lights of the streets did little to veil the distressing ugliness of the house. No great

harm would come if Derrick carried out his threat and razed this monstrosity to the ground. At least he would employ a modern architect and from this drab and dowdy phoenix might well rise a building creditable to the aristocratic neighbourhood.

Derrick was a queer sort of fellow, he mused...Suddenly he stiffened.

The French windows of the office room were open, and from where he stood he had caught in the glass, the momentary reflection of a lamp flash. Derrick had not had time to finish his dinner. Besides, he would have called on his way back as he had promised.

He had his foot raised to the parapet, and again he heard the urgent warning of Mary Dane. Who could have got into the house, and how? Not up those wall-hidden stairs? The window was moving, and he stepped back to the shelter of his room, watching along the edge, and then he saw a gloved hand come round the frame of the half window and a head followed.

In the dark the face would have been indistinguishable, but there was sufficient light from the street below to show the mask that enveloped not only the face but the head of the stranger and to reveal the awkwardly cut holes through which two eyes were glaring.

He waited a second, and then stepped out. "I want you!" he said.

He saw a hand jump up, and dropped like a stone to the inadequate cover of the balcony.

As he did so, something whizzed through his hair. He saw the flash, but heard no other sound than the stunning thud of the explosion. The unknown had him at his mercy, did he but realise and had he the courage, for the narrow stone pillars behind which the detective was crouching afforded no vital cover.

But after the first shot the mask spun round and vanished through the open window. Again Dick's leg was flung across the parapet. Again the memory of Mary Dane called him back.

He went back to his room, took the first flight of stairs at a leap, would have taken the second, but Minns was in, his way. The butler he pushed aside, dashed down the remaining stairs, and flung open the door...

Mr. Derrick was standing on the doorstep, his hand at the bell, and Dick in his hurry almost sent him flying down the three steps that led from the sidewalk to the house.

"For the love of heaven, what's wrong?"

The detective did not reply. He went to Derrick's door and tried it. It was closed.

"Somebody in there?" asked Derrick quickly.

The two doors were side by side, only a low balustrade separated the stone platforms that formed the top step.

"Come over here," said Dick, and Derrick Obeyed with a wondering shake of his head. "Try that door!"

"What is the idea?" asked Derrick as he pushed. "Do you want to get in? I've got the key."

He searched in his pocket and presently found what he sought.

"No, I don't want to go in."

Dick was looking at the broad step. It had been raining and the streets were wet, but the two porticoes and the houses themselves were on the lee-side of the rainstorm and they were bone-dry.

"Do you notice anything?"

Derrick shook his head.

"What has happened?" he asked. There was a note of petulance in his voice. "I'm getting rather tired of all these mysteries."

"No mystery about it. A masked gentleman shot at me from your balcony upstairs."

"Good God!"

And then Derrick looked round. Two men were standing on the edge of the pavement, watching curiously.

"Who are those fellows?" he asked.

"You needn't bother about those," said Dick sharply. "They're Scotland Yard men."

He beckoned one of them.

"Did you see anything?"

"No, sir, I thought I saw a flash from the balcony."

Derrick had turned the key and thrown the door open wide. The hall was in complete darkness, and for this he admitted he was responsible.

"I didn't realise it got dark so soon. Will you, come in?"

Dick signalled the two men.

"These officers will go up with you," he said, and heard Derrick's laugh.

"Are you afraid?" he bantered.

"Terribly," said the detective.

He waited whilst the search was conducted, and after a time one of the men came out with something black in his hand.

"Here is the mask, sir. It looks as if it was cut from a woman's stocking. We found it on the stairs."

"Did you find the gun?"

"No, sir, but we found the silencer. That was In what you call the office room."

Dick examined it casually and slipped it into his pocket.

"No sign of any man?"

"None whatever."

Dick's smile was not pleasant.

"I should have been very much surprised if there was," he said, for the doorstep had told him all that Ire wanted to know.

CHAPTER XX

Derrick followed him into Tommy's dining-room.

"I am almost beginning to feel that this is my house, too," he said jocularly. "Well, what do you make of it? More like a cinema film than a piece of real life!"

And then, as his eyes fell upon the mask in Dick's hand, he laughed.

"You couldn't imagine that, could you? What do you say about changing your mind and spending the night in this ghost house of mine?"

"Or may I make an alternative suggestion," said Dick quietly; "that you let my two men stay there? They won't want to sleep. A chair in the drawing-room will be all they require."

Before he had finished, Derrick was shaking his head.

"I don't think so," he said. "No, I'm all for reducing the risks to a minimum. I'm not staying there myself. To-morrow I'm bringing in a gang of workmen, storing my furniture, and as soon as it is out of the house going to pull it down brick by brick!"

And then he asked a most surprising question. "I wonder if I could see the butler's pantry?" Dick stared at him.

"In Weald's house? I don't see any objection."

He rang for Minns, and that urbane man came.

"Mr. Derrick wishes to see your pantry."

To his amazement he saw the butler's jaw drop and his face change colour.

"My pantry, sir? Certainly. If you don't mind, I'll make it just a bit tidy."

"You needn't bother about that," said Derrick, going to follow Minns from the room.

The man turned in the doorway to face him.

"I'm sorry, sir "—he was his old, dignified self—"while I'm in his lordship's service I'm afraid I can take such orders only from him. I shall be most happy to show you my pantry, but it would not be creditable to his lordship that my room should be untidy when you inspected it."

He went out of the room and closed the door behind him. Mr. Derrick stared after him.

"That was the last thing I expected," said Dick, secretly amused.

Derrick turned on him with a face as black as thunder.

"The old-fashioned servitor, eh? I've read about them in books, but never met them before I don't think I want to see that pantry."

He turned on his heel and left the house.

Dick went out to Mr. Minns' room. He found the butler very placid and rather pleased with himself than otherwise.

"What's the idea about this pantry of yours, Minns?" he asked. "Is it part of the general mystery?"

"There's nothing mysterious about my pantry, sir;" and then, with a note of anxiety in his voice: "Do you mind telling me if Mr. Derrick made any reference to the fact that I was reluctant to show him the room?"

A sharp retort was on Dick's lips, but he checked the inclination.

"Mr. Derrick merely said that he didn't think it necessary now to inspect your room."

He saw the butler's face go grey.

"I'm sorry he said that, sir."

He offered no explanation for his sorrow, but it was evident to Dick that the man was uneasy. He came in at midnight to ask if there was anything further Dick required, and Dick heard him walk along the passage and the click as he turned the key in his lock.

At half-past twelve the detective extinguished all the lights in the passage and went to the front door. The square was apparently deserted, but he knew that in the vicinity and out of sight were a dozen plain-clothes men who had drifted there one by one, and were now cursing the rain and cursing him for this extra duty imposed upon them.

He had already warned the sergeant in charge that it was possible he would have a late visitor. He glanced at his watch. It was half an hour before one. He took down his raincoat and, buttoning it up to his chin, closed the door behind him and made a circuit of the block.

In the mews behind the house he found two of the watchers. Theirs was a difficult task. In the mews there were over a dozen garages, not counting the two that flanked the garden wall. From twelve o'clock onwards cars had

been coming and backing into their garages. Even as he was talking to one of the men another machine glided into the mews.

"It is almost impossible to keep track of people coming and going," said the detective-sergeant, watching the inspection of the chauffeurs and footmen. "Minns was out here a few minutes ago smoking a pipe."

"Minns? I thought he was in bed," said Dick, surprised.

Yet there was nothing remarkable in the butler's appearance. Apparently it was his nightly practice to emerge through the little wicket gate in the garage door and smoke his 'quiet pipe.'

"Whose car is that?"

Dick pointed to an open touring car with blazing head-lamps which stood across the doorway of Tommy's Gothic motor-house. The detective could give no information, except that it had been standing there for an hour.

Dick examined the machine and found it coated with mud. Even the number plate was obscured, but when he wiped this clean he saw that the letters before the number indicated a Sussex origin. It was a big Wengley, one of the most powerful sporting cars on the road. He put his lamp into the interior and discovered nothing more exciting than a waterproof rug designed for the protection of the passengers, and beneath this a couple of fleecy rugs.

"I remember now. It came less than an hour ago," said one of the watchers. "I couldn't see who was in it because the head-light was rather fierce."

"Keep your eye on it," said Dick, and went back to the front of the house.

He stared up at the white front of the mystery house. The windows on the upper balcony had been closed, probably by Derrick. There was nothing to do now but await developments.

He sat in the dining-room trying to read, but every few seconds his eye went to the clock on the mantelpiece. When the hands pointed to five minutes before one he moved quietly into the dark' passage and stood by the door. A pedestrian passed hurriedly. He heard his footsteps die away in the distance, and then the boom of a church clock striking the hour.

There was no other sound, and his hand was on the lock when he heard a faint scratch on the panel. Instantly the door was opened and he saw two figures. They must have been standing close against the doorway, for they nearly fell into the passage.

"Who is it?"

"It is Mary—Dick!" Her voice was breathless.

"Who is with you?"

"A—a friend."

He saw it was a man, but could not distinguish the face.

"Come in," he said, and the girl's companion walked with a distinct limp. "You had better stay in the dining-room."

"No, no." Her voice was terrified. "You promised to take us back to your room—Dick!"

The 'Dick!' came hesitantly, as though she were shy of calling him by name before a third party.

"I want you to do as I asked...My friend, Mr. Jones—"

"Mr. Cornfort, I think," said Dick quietly, and he heard a soft laugh from the man.

"You've got a good memory," he said. It was the cultured voice of a public-school man. Certainly there was nothing in it of age or decrepitude.

The man he had not bargained for. He would not have been surprised if Henry had been the second of the party—but the arrival of Cornfort rather took him aback.

"Before we go any farther," he said, "I want to be taken into your little secret. I realise that something unpleasant is going to happen, but I want to know just how and why."

"I should be surprised if you didn't," said Cornfort's voice. "I'll tell you candidly the position. Mary had no intention that I should be here tonight, but I'm tired of her taking risks on my behalf and I wanted to be near her."

"And I can tell you "—Dick smiled grimly in the darkness—"that Mary is taking no risks, either to-night or any other night!"

Then he turned to the girl.

"Is this the idea? That you want me to help you to get into the house next door? Are you the flanking party? If so, you can count me out. I'm a police officer and I have a duty to perform. As to what my duty is, exactly, I am not perfectly sure. But it certainly isn't my job to help you people towards a premature end!"

"No,"—her voice was almost a whisper—"it was—Henry's idea. He wanted me safe. He was so scared that Lavinski would hit back through me. I wanted to stay in Eastbourne, but after what happened the other night that was impossible. That is the truth, Mr. Dick. They didn't know what to do with me at all. Henry said I ought to be locked up in a police station and that I should be safe then. And he wanted Mr. Cornfort to go to France. Then there came this desperate idea that we should come to you. There's no trick in it—Dick."

Her hand gripped his arm appealingly.

"Really, there isn't! You see, Mr. Cornfort had to be somewhere handy. You'll understand that some day. So at the last moment they decided he should come with me."

Dick groaned.

"My dear girl, I can't understand anything." He thought a moment. "Oh yes, I can, though. Come up to my room."

He slipped his arm about her waist, but she drew clear with a frightened exclamation. It was not unexpected.

"Don't, don't!" And then she stammered: "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm nervous." And then, as though she remembered something: "You're not to leave us in any circumstances—dear." It was a shy 'dear,' and the man she addressed understood why and smiled to himself.

"Come up to my room—darling!" he said, and there was malice in that 'darling.'

He led the way and they followed in silence. At the door she caught his arm again.

"Don't put on the lights, please."

He ushered them into the room. The curtains were not drawn, and even in the half-light he could see how pale she was. Mr. Cornfort, who had not spoken more than a sentence since he had come into the house, walked to the window and was stepping on to the balcony when the girl pulled him back.

"No, no, you mustn't. You remember. Can't we draw the blinds?"

He put his arm in hers. She was trembling from head to foot, and she held her arm stiffly like an automaton.

Then Cornfort spoke.

"If we could be absolutely sure that Mary's theory was right, the thing would be so simple. We could even ask the police to help us, and the matter could be settled in daylight! But we aren't sure, and Henry will not allow us to take a single risk."

"What is the risk?" asked Dick.

There was a silence, and then Cornfort spoke slowly and with great deliberation:

"Life imprisonment for me and imprisonment for Mary."

They heard the whine of a car draw up on the ground below. Dick stepped on to the balcony and, shaking off the agonised grasp of the girl, saw it stop before the house. Somebody was getting out—he did not see who—and that somebody was moving to the front door. He went to the head of the stairs and listened. There was no sound; and then he heard the door slam and Tommy's voice hailed him from below.

"Hullo, where are all the lights?"

"Come up quickly and don't make a row."

"Any trouble?" The voice was eager. "I say, old boy, I forgot to tell you where I was staying. Only occurred to me as I was coming out of the Owls Club."

"Don't make a noise," warned Dick again.

Tommy came up the last flight at a run, stumbled on the last step and raised a din which must have been heard on the other side of the square.

"Sorry, old boy...the ghost walking? By Jove, I'm just in time!"

"Hush!" warned Dick in a low voice. "There's somebody you know in my room!"

"Eh?"

"Mary."

Tommy did not see the grin which accompanied the words.

"Mary!" he squeaked. "In your room? Good God! In your room? What in the name—"

"She is well chaperoned. Mr. Cornfort is there—an invalid and a gentleman," said Dick flippantly.

And then the girl spoke.

"Tommy!" It was not like the timid 'Dick' she had addressed to him. "Tommy, darling, why did you come?"

"Why did I come, by Gad! I think it's about time I did come!" spluttered Tommy. "What the deuce does all this mean, Mary? In old Dicky's room? I mean to say—"

"Mr. Cornfort is here."

"What does all this darkness mean? Where the devil are the lights?"

He groped along for the switch, but two hands held his wrist and drew his arm away.

"Tommy, darling, you mustn't!"

She led the bewildered young man into the room. From somewhere outside came a faint whistle. Dick dashed out on to the balcony. He could see nothing parallel with him, and then he leaned over.

Two people were on the balcony of Derrick's house outside the drawing-room window. They were feeling along the wall. Their sexes it was impossible to determine, so dark, shadowy, and shapeless they were. He saw one reach up and touch the glazed wall, and then a miracle happened. A section of the wall, about two feet square, swung open like a door!

As he looked, fascinated, he saw a third figure appear, and instantly recognised the bulk of it. It was the man who had shot at him earlier in the evening. There was no way of reaching him except one. It involved a swinging leap from the upper balcony to that below. He did not hesitate for the fraction of a second. He was over the parapet, and for a second was hanging by his hands from the stone flooring. Twice he swung his body, and felt his fingers slipping on the bevelled edge...Suddenly he kicked himself forward and leapt!

He missed the stone parapet of the lower balcony by inches, his knees and elbows struck the masked man as he fired, and in an instant the two were rolling over in that narrow space. The man fought furiously. Dick had gripped at the black mask and was tearing it, when he felt two cruel fingers groping for his eyes and released his hold. As quick as lightning the man flung himself clear; there was a crash of glass as his foot smashed through one of the panes of the swinging door, and before the detective could scramble to his knees the mask was in the room. He came up to his feet and was making a dive at the door when somebody gripped him by the collar and threw him back.

"You fool!" hissed a voice in his ear. "Don't you know—"

Ping!

The bullet struck the window-frame. Dick saw the flash of flame from the dark room, and his face smarted with the splinters of a smashed windowpane. Breathless, he allowed himself to be drawn to the cover of the balcony.

Police whistles were blowing now, and he saw officers running from all directions towards the house. Shaking off the man who held him, and oblivious to the danger, he ran into the drawing-room, pulling his automatic as he flew. The door was closed, but not locked. He thought he heard a sound below...

Plop!

This time the explosion was louder. His assailant had abandoned the silencer. Dick shot down into the dark once, twice, and then heard a howl of pain. A door banged below. The man had flown into the basement, but Dick was on his heels. There was no light now, but he could hear the sobbing breath of his quarry: he was making for the wine cellar!

Almost as he realised the destination of his enemy the iron door clanged and he heard the sound of a bolt being shot. There was no way in—and no way out except through the garden, and there he knew a policeman was on duty, but an unarmed policeman...

He ran upstairs, opened the door to admit the crowd of detectives and plain-clothes policemen, and gave them instructions. Now he came back to the drawing-room. Somebody had turned on the lights. Mary, in a long, black raincoat, was waiting for him at the head of the stairs.

"Are you hurt?" Her voice was thin with anxiety. "Oh, Dick, I told you—"

"I'm all right."

He was breathless, his head was reeling, his lacerated face was red with blood. As he walked from the drawing-room he saw Henry come in from the balcony, and in his hand was a little red book.

"I think there's pots of money there, darling—" he began, and then he saw Dick and smiled gently. "Good-morning, Mr. Staines. Now I suppose we're all going to be arrested?"

Dick shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said.

He had seen on the table, where either Henry or the girl had laid it, a replica of that peculiar instrument, the vacuum pump. Evidently it had done its work well.

Henry saw him looking, and smiled broadly.

"Yes, the safe was on the outside of the house," he said, "and a most ingenious idea, because it couldn't very well be burgled. Do you realise that? I thought it might be, when I searched the records of the borough council and found that the late Mr. Derrick had petitioned for a powerful street lamp to be placed opposite his house, and had even offered to defray the cost—which in a gentleman of his peculiar temperament was a remarkable offer."

He still fondled the little red book.

"Have you any idea where Mr. Walter Derrick is to be found?" he asked politely.

Dick gave the name of the hotel.

"It is only right," said Henry, "that we should give an explanation for the liberties we have taken from time to time. By the way, I wonder if the officers would object to our Mr. Cornfort joining us? There is a young lady with him whom I should naturally like to see."

"I have already sent for your daughter and for Mr. Cornfort," said Dick. "I should like that book."

Henry handed over the red-covered autograph book without protest.

"Once the outer wall was moved, the safe presented no difficulty. It was, in fact, unlocked, the lock being "—he took the vacuum pump from the table and showed the steel lever in the centre—"this. That had to be pressed into a microscopic hole—it was terribly difficult to find it in the dark—as far as the screw would allow. The vacuum pump then became a door-handle."

"How did you find the needle hole in the wall?" asked Dick.

Henry was almost apologetic as he explained.

"By telescopic photography—and skilful enlargement. It was very simple. The safe in the outer wall was, as I said, a most ingenious idea. By the way, Mr. Staines, there is a very large quantity of paper money in that—er—receptacle, and I think it would be advisable if your officer removed it to a more secure place."

He was still speaking when Cornfort limped into the room, followed by Tommy and the girl. It was the first time Dick had seen Mary and her sister

together. For his own part, he could never have fallen into the error that was Tommy's.

"You're the night nurse, aren't you?"

The girl nodded.

"Jane de Villiers?"

Jane de Villiers smiled and looked timidly at the gaping young man by her side. Tommy was staring from one girl to the other. The same eyes, the same turn of eyebrows, almost the same colour of hair; Mary de Villiers was, if anything, a little fairer.

"By gosh!" he spluttered. "I mean to say...!"

"You mean to say you're rather astonished, Tommy." There was a smile in Mary's eyes. "For my own part, I'm fearfully disappointed that Detective-Inspector Richard Staines hasn't collapsed on the floor!" She addressed Dick pleadingly. "Don't tell me you knew?"

"Yes, I knew."

"But how?"

In spite of the tenseness of that moment, in a situation that might be fraught with so much danger to herself and those she loved, feminine curiosity was paramount to all other issues.

"You never saw us together—poor Jane has lived a life of terror for months. She never went out except when I was away. How did you know?" she challenged.

Dick was looking at her steadily.

"Do you ask that question seriously?"

She half nodded, as though she were afraid to be told.

"Then I'll tell you—some other time! The only information I can give you now is that, when a woman says things to me on a railway platform, and immediately afterwards I hear she is engaged to somebody else, I believe—-"

"I think we'll discuss that some other time," she said hastily. Her pale face had gone pink. "You know my father?" She nodded to Henry.

He looked at Henry and laughed.

"Yes, I know him pretty well. His name is Henry de Villiers; he is the head of the de Villiers Detective Agency in Capetown."

"And Johannesburg," murmured Henry. "We have also branches at Durban, Pretoria, and Kimberley. Are you going to look at the book? There is somebody here rather interested."

At the sight of the red-covered book Mr. Cornfort had sunk limply into a chair, but now he stood up and extended a shaking hand to take the book from Dick.

He turned the leaves rapidly, and presently stopped. On this page there were four rows of finger-prints, one under the other, and he pointed to the third. In the crabbed, angular handwriting of old Derrick was written:

"My son Walter, born on the 3rd of January, 1897."

"Whose finger-prints are those?" asked Dick.

"Mine," said Cornfort in a voice that was scarcely above a whisper.

CHAPTER XXI

It was at that moment that a police officer burst into the room.

"I think they've settled Minns," he said. Mary uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Daddy...that was the way he went!"

"Where is he?" asked Dick.

"He's in the kitchen next door. I think he's been shot."

In a minute Dick was by the wounded man's side. Minns lay on his back. He was unconscious, and his coat was soddened with blood.

"Let me see, please."

It was Mary. She knelt by the man, removed his coat and vest and made a quick examination of the wound.

"I don't think it is really bad. Will you get one of your people to ring for the ambulance?"

With quick, skilful fingers she bandaged the wound, and Dick, watching her, realised that he was seeing a repetition of the scene that had been enacted on the night Lordy Brown had been found in the room upstairs.

"But how did this happen?"

"If you look at the pantry I think you'll understand," she said in a low voice.

Dick went into the inner room adjoining the kitchen, which, though it was designated with the name of pantry, was, in fact, a small bed-sitting-room. It was plainly furnished, and Dick saw that the bed, which ordinarily must have stood in the corner, was drawn to the centre of the room. The carpet had been rolled away and a small aperture showed in the stone floor. He put down the light of his lamp and saw that the butler's pantry was immediately above Derrick's wine cellar.

There must have been a time when the cellar was common to both houses. He remembered now that there was no basement to Tommy's residence, a circumstance which struck him as peculiar when the fact was first brought to his notice.

While he was making his inspection the girl joined him. "That is the way we came in," she said. "Minns let us through your house quite a number of times."

At his questioning look she shook her head.

"No, we only once used that underground passage. Poor Minns!"

"But why on earth—"

"He knew Mr. Walter Derrick," she said quietly. "They were once fellow servants in Capetown."

Then Dick remembered the butler's confidence.

"Walter Derrick is really our friend upstairs," she went on. "You call him 'Cornfort.' The other Walter Derrick—"

"Is Herman Lavinski," said Dick. "I guessed that. I was certain of it to-night when I found him at the door after he had made his quick shoot up.' We're stupid fellows, both of us: myself for not arresting him, and he for imagining that I hadn't noticed that there were no wet footsteps on either step. It said as plainly as though it had been printed that he had not been out in the rain, and therefore could not have come in from the rain!"

There was another casualty besides Minns, he learned immediately afterwards. At the first faint sound of shooting the detectives in the mews had closed towards the garage door. Immediately after they did so the wicket door had opened and an excited voice had called them inside. Two men had hardly dashed through the opening before the door was closed upon them. Whilst one was searching for the bolt that unfastened the gate, they heard the sound of the machine moving.

At the end of the mews was a third officer, who had attempted to bar the way, and had been knocked sprawling for his pains.

"Walter is not at his hotel, of course. There is only one chance of catching him before he does a little more mischief, and that is to 'phone the Sussex police."

"Do you think he'll make for Keyley?" nodded Mary. "So do I I I have an idea he has everything planned. I've seen him twice creeping in a large motor-boat, but I've never been able to trace where he keeps it.".

And then Dick asked a question that had been puzzling, him ever since he had come into the case.

"Why on earth didn't you go to the police right away?"

She shook her head.

"That question is very easily answered. It was the one thing we couldn't do, although we could do it now. You don't realise that Mr. Cornfort, as you call

him, is an escaped convict. He was under life sentence in Rhodesia for murder."

Dick was staggered.

"But, my dear girl," he said at last, "he must be re-arrested."

"I think that is inevitable," replied this amazing girl.

The Sussex police were difficult to reach, and when they had spent three-quarters of an hour in getting through to the proper authority (there are two divisions to Sussex, and either would have been the wrong one) they learned that Keyley was not in the Sussex area. It was, in point of fact, in Surrey.

"We shall waste another hour before we reach the Surrey people," said Dick; "we will go on to Keyley."

By this time Bourke had arrived. The big man seemed singularly unimpressed when he learnt of what had happened.

"We shall want a fast car—" began Dick.

"I have it on the corner," said Mary. "My dear boy, how do you imagine I got to Brighton from Lowndes Square three minutes ahead of Tommy and you, and how do you suppose I've beaten your train time and time again?"

"Who drives?" asked Dick, and she smiled.

He had never moved so fast in his life as he moved that night. Mary sat at the wheel, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. The country seemed to fly past them. Once Dick stirred uneasily, but Henry's voice reassured him.

"My daughter is rather a good driver," he said.

"She has won three endurance trials in Africa."

In an incredibly short space of time they came to the lodge gates of Keyley, and Dick heaved a sigh of relief, for the last two miles of the journey had been made with the aid of the dimmest of head-lights.

"Anyway, he would have heard us," she said as they got down.

The three plain-clothes officers who also occupied the car were volubly thankful that their perilous journey was over. Silently and in single file they passed up the dark drive to the house, keeping close to the hedges that fringed the gravel path. There was no light in the house and no sign or evidence that it was occupied.

Dick was in no doubt that the man was here. He had stopped to examine the gravel on the path with the aid of his lamp, and had seen fresh wheel-tracks. Drawn up near the portico they found the car, its lights extinguished, its radiator still burning hot.

Then, as they stood talking in low tones, a light appeared simultaneously behind three shaded windows on the ground floor. The drawing-room, Dick noted mentally, and waited. Another light glowed in the semicircular transom above the front door. Dick waited, and saw the door open slowly.

Mr. 'Walter Derrick' stood on the doorstep. He was in his shirt-sleeves. One hand was heavily bandaged.

"Come in, please."

He was the jovial Walter that Dick had known the day he was introduced at Brighton.

"I saw your lights and I heard your engine. Have you got the decrepit Mr. Cornfort with you? You haven't? What a pity! Do I see Miss Mary Dane, or Miss Mary de Villiers? And my dear old friend, Henry, the chairman!"

He turned his back upon his visitors and walked ahead of them into the drawing-room.

"That pistol is quite unnecessary, de Villiers," he said with a portentous smile, but that admonition had no effect upon Henry. His long-barrelled automatic covered the man.

"Now I suppose you're going to arrest me? On what charge?"

He asked the question quite casually, as though it were a subject which barely interested him.

"Murder without a doubt will be one charge," said Dick. "There is also a charge of fraudulent impersonation, but I think we shall have you on the murder."

Derrick shrugged his broad shoulders.

"A blackmailer and a poor simpleton. An unworthy cause for an execution. There I fear you will have a difficulty, Inspector. If I am a murderer must I also be a bungler? I could have got you two or three times, Henry—apparently you credit me with a taste for the spectacular? The bomb—I presume you suspect me of that—would certainly' have been an excellent way of disposing of an unpleasant little party. Do you mind shutting the door? There's a draught."

One of the detectives, at a signal from Dick, closed the door. Another, Dick placed on the far side of the room near the windows.

"I am unarmed. As I say, de Villiers, this is sheer melodrama," said Derrick, glancing at the South African's automatic. "What happens now?"

Something had already happened to the man. He seemed to be in pain. His face was haggard, and his geniality was perhaps the hardest pose he had ever assumed.

"Are you hurt?"

'Derrick' shook his head.

"Nothing very much," he said airily. "What shall I get for all this? Seven years? After all, impersonation is a very small thing."

"I shall want you for the murder of Lordy Brown," said Dick, and the man smiled.

"No human eye ever saw me kill Lordy or any other kind of Brown," he said. "The fellow was a burglar in my house, he was armed. I had every justification for killing him, even suppose I shot him. I am going to suggest that you have no evidence that I killed Brown. I am also going to suggest that your friend Mr. Henry de Villiers and his daughter were also in the house that night and might be as guilty as I. I am sufficiently well acquainted with the law, Inspector Staines, to know that you haven't got sufficient evidence to hang a cat."

Dick knew this equally well.

"I salute you as my benefactor!" Derrick flashed a grin in Dick's direction. "That shot of yours did me a marvellous service. I note that you are a little baffled by my statement, but you will understand later. Have you any other charge to lay against me? Bomb-throwing—that you cannot prove. I simply state that I was not the culprit."

"There is one other little matter, Mr. Herman Lavinski," said Dick quietly, "and that is the Slough murder—a cashier shot in cold blood and his money stolen. There was a thumb-print on that pistol. A week after the killing you sailed for South Africa in the name of Cleave."

Again that crooked smile.

"Where is the proof against me there?"

"The proof is easily supplied—a print of your thumb will be quite sufficient evidence to convict you." The man was still smiling, and then slowly he unwrapped the bloody bandage from his hand.

"A lucky shot for me," he said, and Dick looked and winced.

His chance bullet had removed all proof.

CHAPTER XXII

Nobody has ever described the scene which followed the real Walter Derrick's discovery that his father had married again. The quarrel was a bitter one; there was money behind it, for Walter was extravagant. This extravagance had a curious cause. He had the same experimental mind as his father, but his pet experiments cost money, since they were devoted to the study of metallurgy, and particularly to gold recovery. He left his father's house never to see him again, and sailed for South Africa in the steerage. A year's wandering brought him to the Tanganyika area and to the most extraordinary adventure.

For eighteen months he prospected, living summer and winter in a tent, scraping enough from the ground to pay his 'boys,' and replace the horses that died like flies. And then chance brought him into the company of a wanderer who had sought this thinly populated region for quite another reason.

'Joe Cleave' this man called himself, and he made an agreeable companion. He was at first taciturn, a little nervous, and Walter Derrick had the uncomfortable impression, for no particular reason, that he was a fugitive from justice, but in his wanderings through Northern Rhodesia he had met several men into whose antecedents it was undesirable to pry.

Cleave was down on his luck, and once hinted that the Capetown police wanted him, probably for the robbery of silver for which Minns had been held responsible. This was one of the peculiarities of the man: it seemed that time and time again he escaped the processes of justice by the simple method of leading suspicion to innocent men. He was a murderer, a thief, a hold-up man, and, above all, a deadly gun-fighter.

He knew something about gold-digging, and apparently had been in Johannesburg for a period, and once spoke vaguely of the platinum mines in the Caucasus. Derrick discovered that he had a knowledge of several languages; but he did not allow his suspicions to interfere with the amity of his daily intercourse.

The two men came upon a patch of alluvial ground which promised to make them rich. Three months later led to a disillusionment. The gold which had been plentiful in the first washings petered out to nothing, and they were thinking of breaking up their camp and going their several ways, when Walter, ranging the veldt in search of food, was attacked by an old lion. He succeeded in driving the animal off, but not until he had been badly mauled in the calf, an injury which led to a permanent limp, a peculiar coincidence since his father was similarly afflicted. It was true that Lordy Brown had come to his aid and carried him back to camp. It was also true that Lordy had disappeared after three or four days, taking with him a small bag of gold that the two men had accumulated with such labour.

Derrick became seriously ill from his wound and delirious. It is probable that during this period of time he divulged his identity and told the interested criminal who was his companion the story of his father. It was certain that, whilst he was ill, letters to Derrick found their way into the camp, and one was undoubtedly from the old man. He had almost lost his sight, could scarcely hear, and, feeling the hand of Death upon him, sought a reconciliation with his only son. That this letter was read by Cleave admits of no doubt. It was whilst he was waiting for his companion to die that his scheme took shape.

He left the camp one night, believing his friend to be in extremis, and carrying with him as much of Derrick's goods as he could travel. He had a long tramp before him, and he needed money not only to get to the coast, but to make some sort of appearance in England. The ground had to be reconnoitred. He had to discover something about the old man, and mostly he had to be sure that, though Walter had babbled to him that he had no friends, this was substantially correct.

In this dilemma he reached the outskirts of a mining camp and found a prospector lying drunk by the side of the road. There was nobody in sight, and Cleave searched his pockets and was well rewarded, for the man had recently sold a number of claims to a Tanganyika syndicate. He was making his get-away when the drunkard became dimly aware of what had happened. The first intimation he had that his man was alive and alert was a pistol bullet that zipped past his head. He shot back, dropping the man in his tracks. But he had not realised that he was as near the little township as he was and that there were scores of people within earshot. He had hardly reached the cover of a wood before he was under heavy fire. He ran through the wood with his pursuers on his heels and flew in the only direction of which he was perfectly sure, towards the camp where he had left his dying friend.

With the fleetest of his pursuers not a hundred yards away he came panting into the tent and found Walter Derrick sitting up on the side of his bed fully dressed.

Derrick had no recollection of what happened. When he became conscious he was lying in the prison hospital on a charge of murder and robbery. A pistol was in his hand when the pursuers came up, there were two exploded shells, there was the booty that had been taken from the murdered man lying on the bed. Nobody had seen the face of the murderer...

Half-dazed, Walter Derrick found himself in a hot, stuffy court listening to a death sentence. He had been charged in the name of Cleave, a name that he accepted. He himself half believed that in his delirium he had been guilty of the crime, and wished to save his father's name from this ignominy.

It was in the second year of his imprisonment (the death sentence was commuted) that he began to piece together, the fragments of recollection. He

learnt, too, why he was called Cleave. On being asked his name on his arrest that was the one he gave. Probably he was calling for his lost companion, but the local sheriff seemed quite unaware that he had had a companion with him. In the meantime Cleave had made his way to the coast, leaving behind him a trail of burgled stores.

In Capetown he disappeared. Two years passed in the Central Prison, and then the real Walter Derrick gradually built up the shattered pieces of recollection. He was allowed newspapers (he spent a great deal of his time in hospital), and one day he read of his father's death in a newspaper, and underneath a photograph the caption: "Mr. Walter Derrick, who inherits an enormous fortune by the death of his late father."

He recognised the photograph instantly. It was Cleave. And then the whole dastardly plot became clear. He was in prison. It was impossible to prove his innocence. He tried to interest the prison doctor and the chaplain. The first was frankly amused and the second was maddeningly soothing, for in the gaol he was regarded as being a little crazy.. Indeed, it was this suspicion of madness which had saved him from the gallows.

For three months he plotted and planned. One stormy night, when the thunder did not cease and the lightning flickered incessantly, he dropped over the prison wall and made his way into the wilderness. It took him five months to reach Capetown, a hundred and fifty-three days of privation and terror. He was half mad, wholly exhausted, when one night he found his way into a beautiful Rondebosch garden and fell on the step of the only man who could help him.

It was Mary Dane who found him. She had been a nurse in a Capetown hospital and had recently left her profession to help her father in his rapidly growing business.

De Villiers was the greatest detective that South Africa had produced. Originally a detective-inspector in Kimberley, he had left the police force and opened his agency when his girls were young children. They carried the unconscious man to a bed, and Henry de Villiers would have rung for an ambulance to send him to the local hospital, but Mary intervened.

Four days later, a weak and desperate man told Henry de Villiers the story, told him everything, including the tale of his prison breaking. De Villiers was at first sceptical, but Mary Dane with her quick woman's intuition was assured that this wild wanderer spoke the truth. There was only one proof of his identity, and there was slender hope of securing this—the family book. He knew his father had it, knew dimly there was a concealed safe in the house, and that in the safe the old man kept such intimate documents as he possessed.

If the spurious Walter Derrick had found the secret hiding-place there was no hope. De Villiers considered the story and made a few inquiries through a

London agent. He himself went to the scene of the crime, questioned local natives, and discovered that Cleave had had an existence. He traced the murderer's progress southward, he checked dates, and then one evening:

"I'm taking a chance with you, Derrick. The doctor's told me to go on a holiday and I think this is the kind of holiday I want. It's going to cost me five thousand pounds and it will probably land us all in gaol. My fee will be fifty thousand pounds if we succeed, nothing if we fail."

In a most businesslike manner a remarkable document to this effect was completed. They came to England, and it was Mary who suggested the yellow bath chair. It would keep Derrick out of sight, and give these four people an excuse to be together. Jane, who was a year younger than her sister, was the night nurse, and it was Mary who designed her for a double.

"She was my everlasting alibi. Whenever I was likely to be seen in London, I made absolutely sure that she should be seen somewhere fifty miles away. It was she who danced at the Brighton ball—I took her place ten minutes before you arrived. Poor Jane! She loathed it. She is naturally nervous, and then the awful girl complicated matters by falling in love with Tommy! Oh yes, it was her ring I was wearing. That is why Tommy's fiancée was so affectionate by night and so cold by day. I like Tommy, but I hate being pawed by him! Poor dear, he was very hurt! I don't know' when Lavinski began to suspect we knew him—I rather fancy until somebody told him about the family book—"

"Old Inspector Endred was the culprit," said Dirk.

She Nodded.

"Even before then, perhaps? He may have recognised the real Derrick in the bath chair. He may have cabled to South Africa to ask for information about de Villiers. Probably Lordy Brown told him."

"You found Lordy Brown?"

She nodded again.

"He died soon after we got him to the house. When I heard him groan I was terrified. We did all we could to make him a little happy. He recognised me, of course, and asked me to send the money he had in his pocket to his wife, but he refused to tell me who had shot him. He had the old criminal's code of 'never tell.' Daddy asked him twice to make a statement, but he refused. So far as I could gather, there had been a quarrel; and I am sure, though Lordy did not tell us, that he was asked to come secretly to the house, where Lavinski was waiting for him, perhaps to bribe him to silence. When did you guess?" she asked.

"I half guessed," said Dick, "when Lavinski did not know that his father limped. On his return the old man must have been bedridden. He used to do all his business in what I call the office room, which I believe must have been the room where he had his clandestine meetings and his secret wife. And Lavinski knew nothing about her! That was the second jar to me. He invented her name, 'Miss Constable,' on the spur of the moment."

"What will happen to him?" asked Mary after a pause.

Dick shook his head.

"I don't know. It is going to be terribly difficult to convict him. The Public Prosecutor will not allow the charge of murder to go through; he thinks the jury would fail to convict, and after that we could not, of course, make any other charge. He will probably get a lifer."

She shivered.

"All my childhood has been spent in this atmosphere of detection, and I suppose I must expect it to continue all my life. And, Dick, that idea of our being married together, you and I and Tommy and Jane—we've got to give it up! Tommy won't hear of it. He's scared to death he'll get me by mistake!"

THE END